

## MLTAQ Conference 2008 Presentation:

### “ACSSO, Languages and the Languages Action Alliance”

– Rupert Macgregor & Phillip Mahnken - 2 October 2008

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#### **We have to work together to make it happen**

I take as my theme this quote from the presentation given by May Kwan earlier this afternoon – if we want things to happen, if we want positive change to occur, then we have to work together to make it happen.

May’s point echoes the famous challenge of John F Kennedy to his country and the world quite some time back: “If not us – Who? If not now – When?”

In a more perfect world, of course, the “who else” would and should include our political leaders and those who are ostensibly there to drive policy forward into cutting-edge action in each jurisdiction - But as too often the case evident over the past decade, those presumptive leaders are not striding boldly forward clearing the way ahead, but dawdling somewhere far behind where the real action should be.

So it is now more than ever important that we work together to help make it happen.

“We” being: *we the language teachers in all parts of the country* – together in partnership with *we the parents of Australia*.

On behalf of our children – your students: a shared responsibility and commitment to ensure they have access to a high quality language-rich learning environment from their earliest years – into and through the preschool, primary and secondary years of schooling – and beyond.

To make things happen, in a very real sense we have to re-imagine and re-invent the teaching of languages in our schools and their communities.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion, in reading the many and voluminous reports of reviews, forums and discussions about languages over the past twenty years, that an underlying mental model has been that of the past: a teacher in front of every class in every school: chanting their way through the conjugations of irregular verbs...

In a country this size, with 10,000 schools, 75 surviving indigenous languages, 200 imported languages, the challenges of supply and maintenance required to achieve such a model are simply unachievable.

The challenge is of the same order as Edmund Burke’s gibe in the 1780s, that the only way to ensure compliance with certain tax regulations would be to install a tax collector in every kitchen – a concept impossible of achievement as well as highly insanitary.

These days the tax collectors are out of the kitchens, and connected nationally and globally by powerful computers and a formidable array of modern technology.

Despite the absence of technology in my presentation this afternoon, it is totally and fundamentally the view of the parent organisations that the necessary reconception and reinvention of languages learning must essentially involve the intelligent and innovative use of the capacity and potential of the whole array of modern technology and its continuing rapid evolution.

As Arthur C Clarke observed, a sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic – and the magical properties of technology to redefine the scope and boundaries and processes of languages teaching and learning have been excitingly displayed in so many of the presentations throughout this conference.

My main purpose in attending such conferences is not to pontificate – but to learn and absorb. In this way the discussions at the ISQ May forum in Brisbane helped distil the joint policy position of ACSSO and the Australian Parents Council and the 2 June Proposal to Education Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Gillard on the key issues for successful implementation of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP).

Our basic conceptual model is of networked clusters of schools linked through technology. Clusters which can encompass the schools of a local area; clusters which can expand and interact to form wider clusters taking in a region, or become a network across the nation – and beyond.

A classroom sans frontieres. Bounded not by walls, but only by the outermost reaches of need, opportunity, imagination – and the magic of technology.

A local example to us is the location of the world leader in Sanskrit at the Australian National University in Canberra – whose master classes include participants located in New Zealand, the United States and elsewhere.

The presentations by Phillip Mahnken and by Greg Dabelstein show the versatility and adaptability of the technological options and opportunities. This is no one-size-fits-all or rigid Procrustean prescription to which we must adapt and limit our options. Rather, that we can mix and match the options very flexibly and adaptably to suit our needs.

Presentations featuring the work of the School of Distance Education in Queensland and the Open High School in NSW demonstrate that approach at a systemic level that is also encouraging – but with one reservation.

These are classrooms sans frontieres only up to a point. And that point is the State border.

This illustrates the extent to which our other mental model or mindset from the past is still conditioned by a commitment to different railway gauges. The trains stop at the imaginary line of the State border.

The educational equivalent of the different railway gauge is the different curriculum framework and associated coursework from State to State – in languages education in particular as absurd a 19<sup>th</sup> century survival as those past railway gauges.

Neither languages themselves, nor modern communications technology, stop dead and have to somehow change at the state boundary line marked on a map.

Therefore, an essential starting point and enabling element is a national curriculum, nationally consistent array of coursework, and a nationally consistent set of standards and assessment framework.

If NALSSP is to happen effectively, that also must happen to enable and support it. And it cannot just happen for the focal foursome languages of NALSSP – but for every language.

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When we turn to look at the efforts of ACSSO in the field of languages education, and the activities of the recently formed Languages Action Alliance, we turn from the broad over-arching issues of national policy and practice, to activities geared to a far more local and micro level.

To that extent, this closing session will be something of a counter-poise to the opening keynote address by Lia Tedesco – whose focus drew on her work with the Ministerial Council (MCEETYA) Working Party on Languages Education, the initialisation of high-level action research projects and her direct involvement in forums at the higher levels of policy formulation.

ACSSO too, through its national representational role and interaction with the Federal Minister and the Federal Department, necessarily must engage at these levels.

But it must always ensure that its engagement is shaped and informed by the views, needs, expectations and concerns of the parents and families in each and every school community across the country. Hence the range of its ongoing processes of local consultation, interaction and research.

It must always be our concern that the levers of political activity are efficiently and directly connected through an interlocking system of cogs and sprockets in ways that result in tangible benefits and improvements in every school, every classroom, every community – for every student and their families.

Lia outlined a sometimes bewildering array of process activities and disparate forums churning and ramping away - a policy factory with machinery whirring and clanking and spinning in all directions. Various of these machines have been banging and clunking away busily in a variety of process activities– fuelled by an investment of several millions of dollars – to progress the National Plan 2005-2008.

I guess my focusing question would be along these lines: With all that investment - that commitment of scarce time and expertise and money - for all that frenetic activity, for all that throughput – the forums and papers and working groups beavering away in all directions... With all of that – To what extent has all that made any perceptible difference and improvement to the context and work and capacity of any school – any language teacher and the work they do and the ways in which they do it? In what attributable ways has it changed and improved each of your working lives – and the opportunities of your students?

In all of this, that is necessarily the eternal acid test.

For example. Mention has been made in these proceedings of the National Languages Seminar held in May 2002. As it happens, I have a copy of those proceedings with me today.

In themselves, they make very optimistic reading. Through their recommendations (agreed by all the jurisdictions, other systems and key stakeholder groups) they envisaged a range of improved outcomes, including that, by the year 2012:

- A common national core structure of six languages operating jointly across all jurisdictions plus opportunities for any or all others
- 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 competence and skills related to a language
- incentives should be in place to encourage continuing language study in Years 11-12.

One participant noted: "If this program is enacted, this seminar will be looked back on as seminal in the development of students' education in the future. It is the biggest step forward languages has ever had".

Sadly, despite all the enthusiasm and commitment, little change resulted.

In pretty well every subsequent year, right down to the recent (19 September) Forum on Asian Languages and Studies in Melbourne, a similar national Forum has been convened. Each has produced similar discussions, similar published proceedings and similar communiqués.

Through these six years, how much have things changed, developed, improved in each school and community around the country? To what extent has all this turbulence and churning in the stratosphere been translated into positive and beneficial change on the ground?

The recent report (published March 2008) of the "Investigation of the State and Nature of Languages Education in Australian Schools" suggests things have changed very little.

The report also raises other concerns that need to be addressed. These include the extent to which stated and published policy or targets on languages in various jurisdictions do not translate into activity, action or outcomes in school communities.

Also the extent to which no consistent, complete and reliable set of data are collected or available to inform policy

- in respect to student enrolments in languages by year levels or by languages, either locally or globally, in any year or year on year.
- In respect of language teachers in terms of numbers actively in the profession, those coming in, those leaving, either by language or in total, with a similar lack of demographic data as to age profiles as a guide to future turnover and needs.

As that celebrated philosopher Sherlock Holmes famously put it: "It is a capital error, Watson, to theorise without data". And it is certainly a worry to consider the extent to which languages education policy is being developed without a firm underpinning of reliable data, either in terms of current provision or future needs.

Certainly a more robust and reliable means of projecting future needs would assist public policy to focus its mind more firmly, clearly and productively upon the need to draw upon Australia's unique language potential – the expanding numbers of fluent native speakers of those languages already available in our community, who are also competent in English and who thus require only the incentive and acquisition of teaching skills to form the cadres of languages teachers for the future.

It is also strongly the view of ACSSO that our determination of future needs of capable languages teachers who can operate comfortably within the scope of a modern technological environment - the classroom sans frontiers – must also be informed by a far broader concept of languages learning through a languages-rich environment throughout a young person's formative years, from early childhood through preschool, primary and secondary in a seamless progression.

The work of people such as Fraser Mustard of Canada – recently working as "Thinker in Residence" in South Australia to help reconceptualise the approaches and programs relating to early childhood in that State – clearly demonstrates the importance of the very early years in the neural development of the child in relation to language capacity

both in terms of mother language and also the ability to achieve proficiency in one – or more- other language.

At a time when the national government is trying to get us thinking beyond the short-term or the next election, to a long-term horizon of 2020, it is important to consider that the students who will be in the Year 11 and Year 12 cohorts in 2020, will be in playgroups or pre-schools this year or next year.

That if we can ensure – as part of a currently planned rethink of resourcing and structure of early childhood education within a national policy framework under development – we provide a language-rich environment starting in those first years, and building progressively forward through bridges into and through primary school and on into and through secondary school, then we can reasonably ensure that by 2020 the whole landscape has changed. That languages are embedded firmly and fundamentally into the learning of every young person – as one of the eight key learning areas in practice rather than in theory.

## **ACSSO**

The role, purpose and major current activities of ACSSO are summarised in the attachment.

We have sought to be actively involved in the continuing debate around languages education since the cessation of NALSAS and the work on the development of a National Statement and Plan, in 2002-2003.

Throughout this period to the present time, and continuing, we have sought to provide substance to our commitment to the cause of languages education, in a variety of what we hope are practical and useful ways.

- A "Directory of Resources on Languages Education" – shaped on our very successful "Directory of Resources in Literacy and Numeracy"- a basic collection of information and advocacy materials on languages, research papers, background materials including raising children bi-lingually.
- National website <http://www.languageseducation.com> which is based in structure and initial content on the Directory and regularly updated
- National E-Newsletter "Languages Education News" which goes out at least monthly to all schools and some thousands of individual subscribers
- Australian Website for the International Year of Languages because none of the appropriate national agencies was interested – at: <http://www.languages2008.org.au>
- Australian Poster for the International Year of Languages in conjunction with UNESCO
- Translation of our basic literacy leaflet "*Literacy-Parents make the world of difference*" into now 18 other community languages in recognition of their significance in our society
- Development of the new leaflet "*It is important to keep your first language*" promoting maintenance and recovery of original language and raising young people bilingually in that and English – initially published in English and now also in 13 other major community languages.

More recently, because of our commitment to all languages as important, not just a select few, and the even more vital importance of establishing a language-rich learning environment for children from the earliest years for maximum positive development of linguistic and cognitive skills and associated neural pathways establishment and consolidation, we have sought to work in conjunction with Michael Clyne and an expanding network of other individuals of like mind, in the establishment of the Languages Action Alliance (LAA)

### **Languages Action Alliance**

As indicated, the Alliance has been envisaged and established not as a formal organisational structure, but as a network of people who are linked by a similar commitment and approach to the importance of languages learning in the lives of all young people, and the importance of establishing that learning environment from the earliest possible point – and maintaining this as a core ongoing aspect of their learning and development.

Its primary focus mirrors and seeks to contribute to the current focus on the importance and needs of early childhood learning and care which forms a key aspect of the present government's rethink of education at all levels.

Appropriately, the Alliance was launched at a public forum on 31 August 2008 at the University of Melbourne dealing with the benefits and practical aspects of raising young children in more than one language from as early as possible – which, significantly, drew a capacity crowd of some 400 people.

Also launched was the initial iteration of a Website for the Alliance:

<http://www.lingo.org.au>

Because the Alliance is envisaged as an expanding network whose activities and operations will be shaped by the needs, expectations, priorities and aspirations of its widening membership, the Website is also in essence an evolving blog, whose structure and content is infinitely flexible and will evolve and develop in a variety of directions as the network itself evolves and develops.

Because of its early childhood focus, one shared aspiration is to highlight information about services and resources in that field; and explore the possibility of building what would in essence be a national "directory" of multi-lingual playgroups, child care centres, preschools and kindergartens – a process which would also be intended to empower, encourage and enable local groups of like-minded parents to establish new groups within their local service framework.

Also, as a threshold project, the Alliance is undertaking research into the views, needs and priorities of parents of young children in relation to languages learning, by means of a Survey that is available on the Website. The intention here is to provide at least some preliminary data and information on a field where there is little information and no research, which will be both useful in itself and shape more comprehensive research in the future.

The Alliance seeks to establish and develop an inclusive national conversation that will give the community itself a dynamic and tangible role in changing the context and driving the processes of change in relation to languages.

### **To make real and actual the theme of this presentation:**

- **We are all in this process together**

- It is up to us to work together to make it happen.
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**Key References:**

**ACSSO (2008)** – *Proposal to Deputy Prime Minister Gillard –The Key Strategic Elements for Implementation of the National Asian Languages & Studies in Schools Program* (2 June 2008) – at: <http://www.languageseducation.com/acssso080602.pdf>

**Mustard, J Fraser (2006)** – "*Early Child Development and Experience-based Brain Development: The Scientific Underpinnings of the Importance of Early Child Development in a Globalized World*", Brookings Institute, at: <http://wwwFOUNDERS.net/fn/papers.nsf/0176625ce34a8895852566360044448b/ffd85f82d2b8d06e8525710e0071c3dd!OpenDocument>

**Mustard, J Fraser (2007)** – "*Early Childhood Development: The Building Blocks of Successful Societies*" Public lecture in Adelaide March 2007 – at: <http://www.valuesineducation.org.au/pdf/mustard070317.pdf>

## ABOUT ACSSO – The Australian Council of State School Organisations

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) was established in 1946 as the national peak body representing the interests of the families and school communities of the some 2.2 million students who attend Australia's 12,000 public schools, preschools and kindergartens, and also deals with issues affecting their access to appropriate high quality tertiary education.

ACSSO provides research-based input to the Australian Government and its agencies and operations on proposed policies and actions in the education area, plus a range of information and support services to State and Territory affiliate organisations and their membership networks across the country. Our functions are increasingly diverse and extensive, and include in particular to:

- o conduct, commission and publish research on educational issues
- o lead and facilitate public debate and discussion to establish the strategic directions and priorities for education
- o provide an interactive information service to government and to schools and their communities
- o ensure that community needs and priorities are reflected in education decision making processes
- o develop and manage a range of initiatives and community projects to improve the effective involvement of parents and families in student learning and development.

ACSSO maintains close and positive liaison linkages with our colleagues of the **Australian Parents Council (APC)**, and increasingly develops, designs and conducts action research and community projects in partnership with APC. Major current focus elements for ACSSO include:

### Communication and Information Services.

- Progressively continuing development of the main ACSSO Website at <http://www.acsso.org.au> as a source of information on an expanding range of educational issues and priorities.
- Publishing a range of free electronic newsletters and information distribution services including:
  - o **Australian Education Digest** – weekly summary of current issues affecting education
  - o **Public Education Voice** – quarterly newsletter
  - o **Values News** – Articles on values in action in schools & communities – monthly through 2008
  - o **Languages Education in Australia** – Monthly information bulletin launched March 2007.
  - o **Ensemble**: Music Education in Australian School Communities. Monthly.
  - o **International Education News Round-up** - monthly

The current range and scope of our information distribution includes: 7,000 primary schools, 4,000 secondary schools, 4,500 preschools and kindergartens and some 4,000 individual subscribers

**Values Education.** ACSSO maintains a national web based resource (<http://www.valuesineducation.org.au>), conducts workshops and focus group research, and contributes to national forums and policy development. The Website also provides opportunity for a wide range of guest columnists to present a variety of viewpoints on important current issues with a values focus.

**National Conference.** ACSSO presents a National Conference on education issues. Melbourne October 2006 with the theme: *“The Schools We Need – and How to Get There”*; October 2007 in Darwin *“Top End – New World: Making Connections and Building Communities – Local and Global”* The 2008 Conference will be held in Brisbane 20-21 October: *“Parents & Schools as Partners”* More information at: <http://www.acsso.org.au>

**Studies of Asia.** ACSSO, APC, with the Asia Education Foundation, conducted a national scoping study to explore the attitudes and expectations of a range of Australian parents in respect of

studies of Asia and appropriate future directions for these studies in schools. The Report is published on both the ACSSO and APC Website: and we are working further with AEF to progress its recommendations.

**Languages Education.** This important area has been subject of numerous periodic reviews, reports and recommendations from at least 1993, with little significance following apart from the negative 2002 decision to discontinue the national Asian Languages programme. ACSSO has

- established a national web-site resource at <http://www.languageseducation.com>
- undertaken a major national research project to explore the attitudes, views, expectations and priorities of parents, families and school communities in respect of effective language education. The report of that national research was released as a community discussion draft in April and as a final in July
- published the second edition of a "*Directory of Resources on Languages Education*" as an information resource for parents, teachers and school communities.
- Launched (21 February 2008) the Australian Website for the International Year of Languages 2008, at <http://www.languages2008.org.au>
- Launched the second stage of a project to support families raising children bi-lingually, "*It is important to keep your first language*" – leaflets in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Greek and Italian
- Launched the Australian Poster for International Year of Languages 2008 in conjunction with UNESCO

**Music Education in Australia's Schools.** ACSSO has been actively involved in the national Review and is working closely with the Australian Music Council, the Australian Music Association and other stakeholders to explore effective ways to progress the review's findings and recommendations. <http://www.ensemble.org.au>

**Literacy Education.** ACSSO contributed to the recent Review, continues to discuss the issues, findings and directions with government from a parent and student perspective; and in conjunction with APC has developed support resources for schools: -

- **"Literacy – Parents Make the World of Difference"**. Information leaflet to raise awareness of parents of their role in the literacy skills development of their children from earliest ages onwards, and of the simple practical ways in which they can become involved. Leaflet available in English and ten (10) community languages – over 6,500 orders filled and some 1.85 million distributed. In 2007, another seven (7) community language versions will be added; and additional versions with a focus on indigenous communities will be developed in conjunction with the States and Territories.
- **Directory of Family Resources on Literacy and Numeracy.** Developed by ACSSO/APC in 2004 to meet an obvious lack of any consolidated list of available resources in Australia and overseas that assist parents and families in supporting the development of their children's literacy and numeracy skills: greatly expanded second edition was published end 2005.

**Family – School Partnerships.** ACSSO/APC worked closely with DEST to facilitate the development of the draft **Family-School Partnership Framework**; and co-ordinated action research in sixty-one selected schools around the country to provide case studies that will assist and encourage other school communities to develop innovative and sustainable approaches to partnership. The Rudd government has now (February 2008) announced four-year funding to ACSSO and APC to establish and operate a national **Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau**, working with school communities to build sustainable parent-school engagement for the benefit of young people's learning and personal development.

**Families Matter.** This is a resource for families and schools working in partnership to support the well-being of young people. An external Evaluation shows the benefits achieved with participating school communities, including Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. We are currently exploring with the Department of Health & Ageing and DEEWR the appropriate forward directions for the further development of Families Matters. A spin-off pilot on drug education is currently proceeding with a cluster of schools in Queensland.

**Visual Education & Visual Literacy.** A major national Review will report in 2008, and ACSSO and APC are members of the National Visual Education Roundtable set up to plan the implementation of the review's recommendations...

**The Great (Inter) National Homework Debate.** In April 2007 ACSSO issued a Discussion Paper, calling for national research on the issues and the development of consistent national guidelines as a framework for participative policy setting in schools: a call picked up by media across the country. ACSSO is planning national and comparative international research in 2008 to provide a firm basis for policy development.

**International Linkages.** ACSSO has evolving contacts with international parent organisations in New Zealand, UK, across Europe, USA and Canada, to promote the sharing of information and explore ways in which research and inquiry in areas of joint interest can be participatively progressed, and provides research input to international newsletters and education discussion forums.

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