

Leveraging languages

Multilingualism as an asset, not an issue.



A quick guide for schools



Australia is the 6th most linguistically diverse nation on earth, yet often our multilingual students are viewed from a deficit perspective.

A significant proportion of the students in most Australian schools speak languages other than English. However, Australian schools tend to exist in **The Anglobubble**, a place where if it's not happening in English, it's not happening (Hajek, 2013).

Students who have one, two, three or more languages in addition to English are often viewed from a deficit perspective, as opposed to being viewed as skilled linguists and intercultural communicators. This is to the detriment of the student and the school.

We have declining literacy levels and burgeoning wellbeing challenges in Australian schools.

What if one solution was there, right in front of us, waiting to be noticed, waiting to be leveraged to enhance students' academic results and wellbeing?

What if simply acknowledging and leveraging our students' multilingualism could make a difference?

It can.

And it can be as simple as your school deciding to talk about it, celebrate it (not just on Harmony Day) and encouraging all staff and students to develop their intercultural understanding skills.





Why should schools care?

1. Boost school-wide performance

Schools who prioritise value multilingualism see improved academic outcomes across the board for all students (Bourne, 2013; Creese & Blackledge, 2010, as cited by Moloney, Harbon & Oguro, 2024).

2. Boost NAPLAN results

Australian research has shown bilingual cohorts outperform monolingual peers to a statistically significant degree on NAPLAN reading and writing (Fielding & Harbon, 2020)

3. Enhance student cognitive function

Multilingual students score higher on standardised tests, intelligence tests, have increased creativity, focus, cognitive performance, attention span, empathy and open-mindedness (Moloney, Harbon & Oguro, 2024).

4. Support and include all students

Students with disability and learning difficulties make academic gains through languages study, the benefits of which spill over into first language literacy (Genesee, 2015).

5. Boost wellbeing

Helping multilingual students to see their language skills as valued allows students to experience a greater sense of wellbeing and integrated identity at school (Moloney, Harbon & Oguro, 2024).



10 simple ways to get started

1. Burst through 'The Anglobubble'

Examine staff and student mindsets toward languages. Are they existing inside 'The Anglobubble'?

Did you know that 90% of the world's population does not have English as their first language and 75% of the world's populations does not speak any English at all.

2. Normalise multilingualism

Make using and learning other languages the norm – if there is an existing language program in the school, all staff can learn very basic phrases to use with students in all classes. If there is no existing program, choose a language significant to the school community and have staff and students learn one new phrase or word each week.

3. Shift the expectations around the purpose of language learning

Help monolingual staff and students to see themselves as ‘emerging multilinguals’ (Fielding, 2021). Let go of expectations around ‘becoming fluent’ and instead place value on any cultural or linguistic understanding that is gained.

4. Leverage the linguistic repertoires of staff and students across all areas

Value the existing linguistic repertoires of multilingual staff and students. Encourage students to write notes or annotations in whichever language suits them, encourage staff to share their experiences of language learning, ensure all staff are embedding the General Capability of Intercultural Understanding – not as a box ticking exercise, but because it’s richly enjoyable and beneficial.

5. Celebrate the skillset of EALD students

Do not view students with additional languages from a deficit perspective. They have language skills that are generally far superior to monolingual English speakers.

6. Don’t exclude students from Languages

Do not deny students with disability or learning difficulties the chance to be involved in language study. All students can benefit from language and intercultural learning. Plus, it goes against the principles of inclusion to be excluding these students.

7. Embed Intercultural Understanding across the curriculum

This General Capability is not just the responsibility of Languages teachers. There are rich opportunities in all subject areas to foster interest in other cultures and promote a sense of belonging for all students.

8. Reframe cultural comparisons

Avoid ‘otherising’ different cultures. Make comparisons with a wide range of reference points, not always using English or Australia as the ‘base’ or ‘norm’. White, Anglo-Australia shouldn’t be positioned as ‘the norm’.

9. Focus on commonalities

A key premise of Intercultural Understanding is focussing on similarities, not just differences.

10. Facilitate interaction

Intercultural understanding can only be achieved if we are interacting with people who are different to us. The process must go beyond reflecting on our own thoughts about ‘other cultures’.



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