

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Increasing language participation in secondary schools: Burwood Girls High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study considers how classroom practices and school factors are encouraging language participation at Burwood Girls High School. This is one of a series of case studies looking at classroom practice and language participation in NSW government secondary schools.

Background

Burwood Girls High School is a large, comprehensive girls school located in the inner west of Sydney. There are approximately 1,200 students enrolled at the school with 70% from a language background other than English (LBOTE) and 1% Aboriginal students. The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA¹) value above the state average (My School 2016). Burwood Girls High School gains results above, to substantially above, the state average in every NAPLAN domain, and gains results close to, or above, similar schools in NAPLAN. The school has a commitment to a broad curriculum and encourages students to pursue a wide range of subjects, including a wide choice of languages. A focus on Asian and Aboriginal cultures is also embedded across the curriculum.

Burwood Girls High School teaches Japanese, Italian, Chinese, Indonesian, French and Korean face-to-face, and actively encourages students to take other languages through either the NSW School of Languages or the Saturday School of Community Languages. In Year 7, students undertake a taster course of all six languages and a unit on Asia literacy. Students then select a language to continue in Year 8 to fulfil the mandatory curriculum requirement of 100 hours. All languages offered in Year 7 are also available in Years 9 and 10. In Years 11 and 12, Beginners and Continuers courses are offered in all languages, and [Language] in context and [Language] and literature courses are offered in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. In Year 12, Extension courses are offered in Chinese, French, Indonesian and Italian.

Students in Year 8 at Burwood Girls High School are three times more likely to nominate languages as one of their favourite subjects than Year 8 students at other schools, and two and a half times more likely to state languages are one of the three subjects at school that they learn the most in (Department of Education [VALID] data 2016).



¹ ICSEA is a measure of school socio-educational advantage created by ACARA.

Classroom practices

Burwood High Girls School has a number of languages on offer and a number of teachers teaching these languages. This makes it hard to pin down the classroom practices that increase participation. Nonetheless, there are particular classroom practices that seem to be common across the languages faculty. These are: high expectations, and motivating students through excursions and cultural exchanges.

High expectations

Burwood Girls High School sets high expectations for both students and staff. It clearly and consistently states in its school purpose statement and rationale that all students are expected to learn as much as they can and to set 'higher standards'. In the languages faculty, these high expectations can be seen in the classroom through the focus on challenge, and the incorporation of student voice into teaching and learning.

Language students at Burwood Girls High School are encouraged to take part in activities that encompass challenging and new ways of learning. For example, senior students who undertake the Japanese Continuers course spend time, as part of their studies, teaching Japanese language and culture to a Year 3 class at one of the local feeder primary schools. In another example of challenge, Korean language students were recently encouraged by their language teacher to participate in Australia-wide speech and writing competitions organised by the Korean Cultural Centre in Sydney. Students at the school won many of the prizes on offer.

The incorporation of student voice into teaching and learning is also embedded in the languages faculty at Burwood Girls High School. Students are encouraged to speak directly to teachers outside the classroom and this feedback is then incorporated into practice. For example, students who are deliberating whether or not to continue with their language studies are invited to informal interviews with the Head Teacher, Languages. This provides an opportunity for students to give feedback on their language learning experiences and to ask questions about concerns they may have about continuing to study languages. It is also an extra opportunity for students to hear feedback from teachers. These interviews also assist the faculty to ascertain why some students choose not to continue to study languages and to make changes to teaching practice as appropriate.

Motivating students through excursions and cultural exchanges

Another feature of languages classroom practices at Burwood Girls High School is the focus on excursions for students, and cultural exchanges with students and visitors from different countries. The school has a very strong focus on cultural awareness and immersing students in the language they are studying. This is partly as a means of raising awareness of other cultures, but also to motivate students with their language studies. The students at Burwood Girls High School spoke of how much they enjoyed excursions and meeting students from other countries.

All Year 8 students at Burwood Girls High School go on a language excursion to deepen their cultural understanding of the language they are studying. Depending on the language, students may go to a cultural centre, visit a restaurant and/or go to a movie. Once students are in Years 9 and 10, they continue with excursions but focus more on using the language. For example, students may be offered the opportunity to go on overseas study tours or to take part in more local excursions, such as visiting a local Korean restaurant and reading the menu and ordering their food in Korean. Overseas study tours are offered by the school on a regular basis to Korea, China, Japan, New Caledonia, Indonesia (Bali) and Italy.

Burwood Girls High School also has sister school relationships with schools in Japan, China and Korea and offers a popular student exchange program, including hosting several students from overseas schools every year. In 2016 alone, Burwood Girls High School hosted and participated in exchange programs to France, Korea, Italy, America and Japan, and education groups from Japan, Korea, Indonesia and China visited the school. For example, Burwood Girls High School recently hosted Indonesian students from Jakarta for six weeks. These students spent time with the Years 9 and 10 Indonesian classes teaching them language and cultural skills. Students reported that their favourite event all year was 'buddying up' with the Indonesian students. In addition, the school often has overseas delegates visiting who spend time with the language students. For example, delegates from one of the provincial education departments in Indonesia recently visited Burwood Girls High School and, as part of their visit, spent time interacting with senior students studying Indonesian, giving them the chance to practise their language skills with native speakers. The students enjoy these activities and are often encouraged to continue studying languages as a result.

School-based factors

While high expectations, and excursions and cultural exchanges were identified as important factors contributing to language participation at Burwood Girls High School, some school-based practices also contribute to participation in languages. These school-based practices include student choice and cultural diversity awareness.

Student choice

One of the distinct features of Burwood Girls High School is the principal's commitment to student choice. Students are strongly encouraged to study subjects that they enjoy and feel they can do well in. They are given a wide-variety of subject choices ranging from dance to religion to design and technology. In terms of languages, Burwood Girls High School is one of the only public high schools in NSW to offer six languages from Year 7 through to Year 12. Students are also actively encouraged to study languages through the NSW School of Languages or the Saturday School of Community Languages. The principal believes that offering choice creates a positive atmosphere in the school – students are aware that they can pursue what they are interested in and that they will be supported to do so.

As a consequence of offering so many subject choices, class sizes are often smaller than in other schools. This is particularly the case in the senior school, and in subjects such as languages, music and dance. For example, in 2016, one of the Extension language classes had only two students. For Continuers classes, classes as small as five are run if need be. In other schools, there must often be at least 10 students for a languages class to run, and even then it will often be a combined class or run off timetable. The language students at Burwood Girls High School said that they enjoy having small classes as they feel more supported both by the teacher and each other than they do in larger classes, and that this makes them more likely to continue with their language studies.

Cultural diversity and awareness

Burwood Girls High School places a strong emphasis on cultural diversity and awareness. For example, in 2016, the school celebrated Diwali, held a Lunar New Year celebration, held events as part of National Unity Week, held an International Day, and performed in the annual PACFEST and Pacifica festivals. It also supported overseas charities including children's homes in Ghana and Bali, a vocational training project for girls in India, Oxfam programs in Asia and Africa, and a school for children with special needs in Samoa.

A focus on Asian and Aboriginal cultures is embedded into the curriculum. For example, an Asia literacy program is in place for Years 7 to 10. As part of this program, students learn about and experience the cultures of China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, India and Indonesia. The Asia Literacy program is embedded across languages, visual arts, technological and applied studies, human society and its environment, dance, music and English programs. The school also has a Tiddas girls group which leads initiatives to raise awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within Burwood Girls High School. All Aboriginal students and other interested students from Years 7 to 12 are invited to participate. In Year 10, students visit Uluru as part of the school's Aboriginal cultural program.

While these activities do not necessarily directly relate to students studying languages, by creating a culture that celebrates and values cultural awareness and diversity, students become more aware of the value of languages and the opportunities that studying languages can offer them.



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