

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Increasing language participation in secondary schools: Cabramatta High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study focuses on how classroom practice and school factors encourage language participation at Cabramatta High School. This is one in a series of case studies looking at classroom practices and language participation in NSW government secondary schools.

Background

Cabramatta High School is a large coeducational secondary school located in south-western Sydney. It has approximately 1,400 students. The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA¹) value below average, and 96% of students come from a language background other than English (LBOTE) (My School 2016). The school gains results above similar schools across most domains in NAPLAN.

Cabramatta High School was previously a languages high school² and has a strong history of teaching community languages. It also has an Intensive English Centre which provides intensive language instruction and support to newly arrived students with little or no English. Cabramatta High School was the first school in NSW to introduce community languages including Chinese, Vietnamese, Serbian and Khmer³ into its curriculum. The school states that a highly professional workforce, a supportive leadership team, and a close relationship with the local community are key to their successful language programs.

In Year 7, students participate in taster courses in Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese and French. In Year 8, students choose one of these four languages to study for the whole year. In Years 9 and 10, students are given the opportunity to choose either Vietnamese or Korean as electives. Senior students can enrol in Japanese Beginners, Vietnamese Continuers, Chinese Background Speakers or Chinese Heritage for the HSC. Students who are interested in languages that are not currently offered at Cabramatta High School are encouraged to attend either the Saturday School of Community Languages or the NSW School of Languages.

Classroom practices

The classroom practices that appear to be particularly relevant at Cabramatta High School to ensure high participation rates in languages include the use of tailored teaching resources and practice, and the use of technology to engage students with languages.



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

2 Languages high schools are public secondary schools which have been designated as languages schools by the NSW Department of Education. Languages high schools provide specialist language education in combination with the NESA core curriculum.

3 Serbian and Khmer are not currently being taught at Cabramatta High School due to changes in local demographics (Serbian) and difficulties in securing teachers (Khmer).

Tailored teaching resources and practices

Many of the resources that are used for teaching languages at Cabramatta High School are designed by the language teachers specifically for their students. This is primarily because of the difficulties teachers have had finding teaching resources for community languages such as Vietnamese⁴, and for less commonly taught languages such as Korean⁵. The principal also acknowledged this issue. For example, there is not a textbook available in Australia that is suitable for teaching Vietnamese at high school level.

Whilst the languages faculty at Cabramatta High School does not necessarily choose to make their own resources (i.e. it is circumstantial rather than by design), the result is that their students receive more tailored teaching and this appears to be beneficial in terms of language engagement and participation. For example, the Vietnamese teacher recently designed an interactive, computer-based phonics database to teach her students the Vietnamese alphabet. As part of this process, she asked her students to think of pictures that could represent the sounds and she had different students record each of the different Vietnamese tones to go with the alphabet. Not only did this assist the teacher to design a new resource for teaching, it also actively involved the students in their own learning and tailored the resource to their particular set of circumstances (i.e. the students' background and knowledge). It is also easier for teachers to differentiate for the specific types of students they have at their school when they make their own teaching resources. For instance, many of the Vietnamese students come from Vietnamese families but do not speak Vietnamese at home, whereas others speak Vietnamese at home and have been learning Vietnamese since primary school. This means that each language class must cater for a wide variety of student abilities.

Most of the language teachers at Cabramatta High School are background speakers and this also contributes to the tailored teaching practices at the school. For example, teachers at Cabramatta High School often focus their teaching practice on cultural activities, particularly in the junior years. This is because the teachers, coming from similar backgrounds to the parents, know that parents, and often grandparents in particular, want their child to learn not only the language of their local community, but also the culture. According to the principal, Asian parents also often see language teachers as being more prestigious if they are background speakers, and are therefore more likely to encourage their child to study languages if they know the teacher is a background speaker.

Use of technology in the classroom

The use of technology is another classroom practice cited by Cabramatta High School as a key factor in encouraging and motivating students to study languages. Every classroom at Cabramatta High School has a smart board and data projector. The school also supports any teachers who want to buy laptops or iPads for their classroom. The language teachers said that they see technology as a vital component of teaching languages at Cabramatta High School. For example, many of the school's students have never been to Korea, China or Vietnam and the school does not generally offer excursions to these countries due to many of the students' families being unable to afford the cost of an overseas excursion. Technology can make up for this lack of personal knowledge, by enabling teachers to show students images and audio from Korea, China or Vietnam, which assists with students' knowledge and understanding of local culture and language.

The language teachers at Cabramatta High School also said that they encouraged their students to use apps such as online dictionaries and translation tools to help with their language learning. The Japanese and Korean teachers stated that they used apps as a tool to teach their students the different scripts and vowel and consonant sounds. Technology is also utilised at Cabramatta High School to provide teaching resources for community languages, for example, the computer-based phonics teaching resource produced by the Vietnamese teacher. The students stated that they used technology in almost every language class and that they found it useful, fun and engaging.

School-based practices

While tailored teaching resources and practices and the use of technology were identified as important factors contributing to language participation at Cabramatta High School, some school-based practices also appeared to be significant in increasing participation in languages. These school-based practices included placing value on the importance of language learning; and collaboration with the local community.

Valuing the importance of language learning

At Cabramatta High School, considerable value is placed on languages and the importance of engaging with the broader world outside Australia. For instance, in 2016 the school led and assisted charitable endeavours in Kenya (via their sister school), in Samoa (via their friendship school) and in Ethiopia (assisting disadvantaged people). The school also hosted the winner of the Sydney Peace Prize (including holding cultural diversity performances), held a Harmony Day and funded a Bollywood dance program.

4 There are currently only two other high schools in NSW that teach Vietnamese – Bonnyrigg High School and Tempe High School.

5 More teaching resources have become available for Korean over the last few years, but there are still not the same number of teaching resources available as for more popular Asian languages such as Japanese.

The value placed on languages is also evident in other ways: the principal and languages faculty ensure that language classes continue to be offered by combining classes or running small classes; and the principal ensures that only the highest quality language teachers are employed at the school. The school also celebrates students' success in the study of language. For example, students who study languages at the Saturday School of Languages or NSW School of Languages are recognised at the school for their achievements. The students at Cabramatta High School stated that they were aware of the value that is placed on languages at the school and that this is a factor in their language participation.

Collaboration with the local community

Cabramatta High School works with its feeder primary schools and the local community to ensure that languages, particularly community languages, continue to be offered and taken up by students at the school. The school's commitment to working with the local community is evident in the school plan, which has 'productive and authentic community relationships' as one of its three strategic directions.

All three of Cabramatta's local primary feeder schools (Cabramatta Public School, Cabramatta West Public School and Lansvale Public School) offer Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer,

and Cabramatta High School works closely with these schools to ensure the continuity of language education. For example, in 2016, the languages faculty at Cabramatta High School organised a professional learning day for both their own language teachers and those from the feeder primary schools to go through the new NSW and national language curricula and align their curriculum understanding. This assisted students with a stronger provision for transition from a primary to secondary school setting, in regards to their language acquisition.

Cabramatta High School is also responsive to its local community in terms of the languages that are offered at the school. For example, Khmer and Serbian were previously taught as there were a number of students from these backgrounds at the school. Korean and Japanese are currently taught at the school as many Asian students, despite not being from these backgrounds, are very much into Korean and Japanese culture, such as K-pop and anime. In the future, the school is looking to offer Arabic and Samoan languages to complement the changing demographics within the school community. The principal and the languages staff feel that this supports what the local community wants from the school and that students are more likely to enrol in languages if the appropriate languages are available.





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