



Building Demand - What Works

The Study of Asian languages

>> from parents and community

Building Demand: engaging parents and community

Parental Polyglots

Parental Polyglots is a project of the Association of Independent Schools, New South Wales. It offers beginner Asian language courses to parents, taught by their child's teacher or another qualified teacher, with the aim of increasing parental support for language learning and, by extension, to increase the number of students choosing to study and Asian language as an elective subject. In 2011, 14 schools taught Asian languages to parents under the *Parental Polyglots* banner.

Through National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) funding, the courses are free of charge to parents, the only stipulations being that parents make a firm commitment to participate and that the Asian language studied is one taught at the particular school.

A key feature of *Parental Polyglots* is that it exposes parents to contemporary language teaching methods. It also allows a richer dialogue to take place at home as parents become more conversant with their child's language learning experience.

The perceived need

Parents have a major influence on the choice of their children's elective subjects. Generally, those who were not familiar with Asian languages are unlikely to encourage their child to study one. Misconceptions about language learning, fear of failure and lack of information about the benefits of being Asia literate were some of the factors that emerged from the initial parent survey. Of the cohort of parents who completed a *Parental Polyglots* course, some did have existing, positive attitudes towards learning an Asian language. Of the large group that did not, however, some were quite apprehensive. Typical comments were:

'Previous experience was at school — not enjoyable.'

'Hesitant because of my age. It is easier when you're young.'

Attitudinal changes

The *Parental Polyglots* project aimed, therefore, to dispel such poor perceptions through a positive, personal and practical

Teaching Asian languages to parents increases their support for those languages in schools

Research shows that parents often make final decisions about whether students study Asian languages. *Parental Polyglots* (funded through NALSSP) provides beginners language courses to parents, and post-course surveys show changes in attitude towards Asian languages as appropriate subjects for students.



Parental attitudes about their children studying Asian languages change when parents themselves are learning those languages, using contemporary teaching methods.

About AEF

The Asia Education Foundation provides teachers, education leaders and school communities with innovative programs, curriculum resources and networks to support the achievement of Asia literacy for every young Australian.

AEF is a joint activity of Asialink at the University of Melbourne and Education Services Australia. It receives core funding from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

AEF leverages funding to support Asia literacy in Australian schools from a broad range of government, philanthropic and corporate partners in Australia and Asia.

experience of learning an Asian language in the 21st century. After their course, parents were asked about changes to their attitudes. Typical comments were:

'Much more fun and accessible than I anticipated.'

'Still nervous, still difficult, but am enjoying a brain challenge.'

'Much more positive. It's good to learn in a group with the same teacher my children have.'

Asked to nominate the best things about their language courses, typical comments were:

'Learning that culture is even more intrinsically linked with structure of Japanese language.'

'Wonderful to look through a peephole at another culture.'

'I feel a sense of breakthrough in finally understanding how to learn Japanese.'

Benefits for students

Finally, when asked about benefits in terms of their children's learning, responses were also very positive:

'I now have tips and ideas on how to help with homework.'

'Broader understanding. Learnt how the school goes about teaching.'

'Being able to converse with my children in a language they are studying.'

'We have exchanged a few phrases and argued over some!'

Conclusion

Parental Polyglots is a relatively small project. Nevertheless, it provides evidence that parental attitudes about their children studying Asian languages change when parents themselves are learning those languages, using contemporary teaching methods.