



ENGLISH as a SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAM
ISSUES PAPER

*Prepared by the Community Advocacy For
ESL Education (CAFEE) Network*

English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs
Issues Paper

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE 2:	Purpose and Acknowledgements
PAGE 3:	Introduction
PAGE 4:	The Queensland Context
PAGE 7:	Individual Case Studies: The Student Voice in ESL
PAGE 9:	Conclusion
PAGE 10:	Recommendations

PURPOSE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following issues paper was developed by a Working Group of the Community Advocacy For ESL Education (CAFEE) network. An extensive State wide consultation process was completed involving community representatives from a range of non-government services, ESL teachers, students, and school personnel. The purpose of the issues paper is to raise the profile of the ESL Program through general distribution to respective State Government departments, Ministers, and politicians. CAFEE will endeavour to seek a response from the State government relating to the issues raised and recommendations detailed.

Thank you to Jessica Rodriguez (Peace Centre), Roger Marshall (Glenala State High School), Zia Song (Inala Community House), and John Bamborough (Youth Affairs Network of Queensland) for their hard work and commitment. A special thanks is extended to the many young people who contributed to the issues paper but whose names cannot be mentioned because of confidentiality requirements.

INTRODUCTION

The global environment is one in which change, the ability to adapt, knowledge, and competitive edge form the foundations of a healthy economy. Micro-economic reform in Australia during the past decade has emphasised the importance of strengthening the domestic realm so as to equip local communities to compete globally. In this context, education is perceived as the institution critical to the development of a workforce that is internationally competitive.

The National Board of Employment, Education and Training in its 1992 report '*A Stitch in Time ~ Strengthening The First Years of School*', recognises basic literacy, numeracy, problem solving ability, self confidence, self respect, and commitment to the workplace as work skills needing to be strengthened among students. Successive Federal and State government education policies reflect the desire to put a framework in place through which the above-mentioned factors can be addressed. Equity, efficiency, and effectiveness have been heralded as the policy framework principles most relevant to the pursuit of educational excellence. The purpose of the ESL Issues Paper is to explore the educational and policy context as it relates to non-English speaking background young people in Queensland.

THE QUEENSLAND CONTEXT

On the evidence deduced from wide consultations in Queensland it is suggested that ESL Programs are neither efficient nor equitable, and therefore ineffective. ESL Programs are designed to assist NESB young people to sufficiently develop their English language skills as they integrate into the education system. What should ensue from participation in ESL Programs for NESB young people is the maximisation of their scholastic potential. There is a lack of any profile for ESL Programs in the strategic plans, policies and political platforms of successive State and Federal governments. There is also a lack of research on outcomes for NESB young people, a lack of data on their participation in schooling, and a lack of documentation on unmet ESL demand.

The Federal Government provides funding for ESL Programs across Australia, and each respective State tops up this core funding depending on need. In other large States such as New South Wales and Victoria, State governments contribute on a dollar for dollar basis to enable an effective and efficient program delivery. Inadequate State funding in Queensland for the ESL Program often means that assistance is limited to those accessing the service, which can result in poor educational outcomes for ESL students. Additionally, unsolicited pressure is placed on ESL teachers.

Federal and State budgetary constraints also mean that funding for ESL students ceases after a three-year period. This is an alarming situation given that the decision to cease funding after three years is not based on any sound educational or pedagogical reasons. It is widely recognised for example, that it takes two years to develop social communicative skills in English, but a further five to seven years to be academically competent at a comparable level. The identified need in schools is far greater than current levels of funding can accommodate. Successive ESL Reviews at State and Regional levels have continued to highlight the inadequacies of resourcing for this program (*Review of ESL Support for Students of Non-English Speaking Background in Queensland State Schools, 1995, and Metropolitan West Region Review of English as a second Language. Department of Education, April 1994*).

What are the possible implications of a poorly resourced ESL Program for NESB young people in Queensland? At a broader level, there will be a particular group of young people, in this instance those with English as a second language, who are not equipped with the skills and self-belief to enter the workforce on an equal footing with their peers. This form of disadvantage is often carried throughout the life span of those it affects. On a more micro level, individuals may harbour feelings of resentment at not being given the opportunity to maximise their potential. Feelings of isolation and disempowerment could naturally ensue.

This scenario is concerning for the community as a whole. Experiences of life, structures and society all inculcate individuals and assist in shaping their attitudes to the communities they live in. It follows then, that negative experiences in education precipitated through institutional disadvantage will reflect the way in which individuals feel personally and about the people and places they live and work. This is clearly unfair. Not just on the individual, but on the community as a whole.

If successive State Reviews of the ESL Program have consistently highlighted the inadequacy of resourcing in this area, then it could be suggested that the current state of affairs within the ESL Program are well known. This form of institutional disadvantage necessarily needs to be named and challenged. The lack of ESL policy and the lack of ESL State funding is systematically disadvantaging young people, and in the process is perpetuating the postcolonial white superiority complex. Why are we as a society, so reticent about affording all people, irrespective of culture and locality, equal opportunities? To do so would be to value all people and culture, which is a mind-set some government and policy developers in Australia have failed to fully embrace at present. The unfortunate flip side of the coin for NESB young people is that their life chances are severely constrained because of it.

The Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT), recently distributed a survey among relevant stakeholders on the needs of refugee children. Twenty-eight ESL teachers and fifty-eight primary schools replied to the survey sent. A number of clear and alarming trends are apparent through responses received to survey questions. For instance, of major concern are the seemingly widespread incidents of racism and prejudice within school settings. Mainstream teachers are also concerned about their time being consumed when they have to provide what they view as additional assistance to NESB students. Teachers seem to view this as mainstream resources being taken up in trying to meet the needs of NESB students. Mainstream teachers also feel unequipped to deal with many of the problems encountered by NESB students. Even ESL teachers believe that there are inadequate hours available to assist NESB students, and often profess to assisting after school time. It is also recognised that where one ESL teacher has to service a large number of schools alone, their effectiveness is limited.

The trends deduced from the QPASTT survey all point to the inadequacy of funding for ESL Programs, manifesting in feelings of resentment among the general school population. It seems that NESB students' cultural beliefs and backgrounds are not being validated as valuable and positive. Rather, they are viewed, and therefore probably feel, like a burden on the broader school environment. However, it could be argued that it is actually the State government who is the burden on the broader school environment given they consistently refuse to adequately fund ESL Programs to levels comparable with other large States. This is indicative of institutional disadvantage as the distribution of services is inequitable, and therefore creating an air of volatility within the whole school environment, and especially for NESB students.

Milpera Special School is an intensive English language centre for secondary aged students who are newly arrived to Australia. Students travel from all over Brisbane to attend Milpera which plays a pivotal role in their settlement and introduction to Australian school life. However, the State government does not provide grant monies to Milpera Special School. Currently the majority of the funding monies for management and operations of the school are provided from the Federal allocation before it is divided between the Regions. The State government provides for the maintenance of facilities. This is a small price to pay for the critical role Milpera plays, and one could, with some validity, ask the question why management and operational costs associated with Milpera are not met in line with all other schools within the State? Milpera is after all, a State school!

Milpera has also identified immigration visa category types as problematic because not all of them allow for young people to access ESL Programs. There may be some changes if and when the new Queensland allocative model is finalised and implemented. The temporary student category 457 may then be included in the general support component of the programs according to the most recent Commonwealth guidelines. However, without dollar for dollar funding the situation in Queensland will be exacerbated by the fact that a small amount of money will need to be spread more thinly. Also, what happens then to those young people with visa categories 300 and 309 that do not allow them equal access to ESL Programs, but who may possess insufficient English language skills. Quite often these young people become 'ghosts in the system' whose issues are left unattended and even unidentified. Young NESB people in this predicament often leave home early to secure employment as a means of augmenting family income. Young people in this situation then become particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the workforce and are also susceptible to long-term unemployment problems. Even if they do not leave school early and complete their education, young people will still be disadvantaged due to poor education outcomes precipitated by insufficient English language skills. Again, these young people will be severely disadvantaged in the employment arena.

The scope of issues associated with the ESL Program have led to the establishment of the Community Advocacy For ESL Education (CAFEE) network. This Group comprises of representatives from a range of areas such as the community sector, students, and ESL teachers. The central objective of CAFEE is to secure better educational outcomes for ESL students by encouraging the State government to accept responsibility for the Program and match Federal funding on a dollar for dollar basis. A number of CAFEE members have consulted with current and former ESL students about their views on the Program and experiences of school life. The following compilation of individual case studies directly represent their views.

INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES: THE STUDENT VOICE IN ESL

Responses from 16 NESB young people were received. Country of origin breakdown comprises of the following:

• Vietnamese:	4
• Former Yugoslavia:	1
• Colombia:	1
• Samoa:	2
• Chile:	8
TOTAL	16

An analysis of the responses received is as follows:

- Fourteen young people said that no person in their family could speak English proficiently when they first arrived in Australia.
- Five of the young people claimed to have explicitly experienced incidents of racism in the school environment. While the remaining eleven did not clearly state racism as an issue, an analysis of their responses indicates race related issues as prevalent. For instance, one young person said that their teacher was impatient with them because of language difficulties. This is a subtle form of racism because prejudice is being expressed through a lack of acceptance relating to language issues encountered. On the other hand, one young person claimed that the school environment was generally supportive of their needs, and as such, they had received significant peer support relating to language difficulties. This, claims the young person, made their school experiences positive and enhanced their overall life chances. Interestingly, seven of the young people state that they needed more support from teachers and peers. One young person actually said that they left school early because of a lack of support from teachers and peers.
- Three of the young people stated that they had particular difficulty in learning the English language because of their age when first arriving in Australia. Each said younger people find it easier to learn English, and that this is not considered in the methods of teaching with older students.
- Two young people said that they experienced feelings of isolation. Again however, an analysis of responses indicates that most respondents were isolated at some time, even though they have not explicitly named and identified this as isolation.
- Fourteen of the young people responded to a question asking them about their future prospects given their experiences in the education system. Five of the young people stated that their future looked bleak. Six said their future looked OK. Interestingly these six respondents primarily arrived in Australia at a much younger age than the other young people.

The individual case studies analysed for the purpose of this issues paper reveal some alarming trends and issues relating to NESB young people accessing ESL Programs. A third of the young people have experienced incidents of racism. The same third also indicate levels of hopelessness relating to their future prospects. The lack of support and empathy afforded to NESB young people is clearly disadvantaging them in the long-term.

Also of some concern is the anecdotal evidence supplied by an ESL teacher in relation to a Vietnamese student in Year 10. This student claimed the ESL teacher, had progressed through to Year 10 with English language, literacy and numeracy skills of such a poor nature that they could only be described as extreme. What is just as alarming is that the school had failed to detect the scholastic problems being encountered by the student. Incidents of this nature indicate that there should be a means of assessing ESL students who seem to have learning difficulties. Early intervention is advisable because the current two year waiting period for assessment prevents students from accessing learning difficulty support when they most need it. Early intervention in the area of English language development should naturally occur from an early age for NESB students who require access to ESL assistance. However, the inequities in funding between the primary and secondary sectors of the ESL Program prevent effective early intervention from occurring in the area of English language development.

A young Vietnamese person from Sunnybank State High School currently studying in Year 12, had this to say about their experiences of ESL (comments are not edited): *"Since I came Australia in 1992, I know nothing much about English. I felt bored in lunch time at school because I can't talk to anybody. And without E.S.L. helps, I may still be sitting in a corner and doing nothing but watch people talk. For me personally, I reckon E.S.L. is a very important education system for every NESB student. Without E.S.L., none of the NESB students would be able to catch up their study. Learning English for NESB people is very difficult and they do really need a lot of help and care during learning time. And we do need a education system like E.S.L. help us all the way through our study."*

CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, these experiences assist in shaping the young person's attitude toward Australian society generally, and their communities more specifically. It could well be deduced from the case studies that we are not valuing cultural diversity and that the education system is not equitable or fair. We are often keen to acknowledge Australia as a multicultural nation, but are slow to embrace this notion through policy designed to reflect a 'fair go' for everybody, irrespective of cultural and/or linguistic diversity. Again, this dimension of Australia's multicultural ethos must be recognised and named as a form of institutional disadvantage. Seemingly, the whole school environment needs to engage in a consciousness raising exercise to enable a clear picture to be developed of this form of disadvantage and its inherent impacts on the people it severely effects. The ensuing section on Recommendations will also detail further strategies that will assist in addressing the significant issues associated with ESL Programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The State government resource a broad “whole of school environment” anti-racism campaign designed to raise awareness pertaining to the many forms racism can take and its devastating effects on young people. The State government endorse overtly professional development opportunities for classroom teachers to assist in the implementation of such a campaign.
2. The Queensland State government increases its contribution to the ESL Program to equal that of the Commonwealth government in recognition of the ESL Program being a permanent feature of our education system.
3. Education Queensland establish a State ESL Reference Group to develop an equitable formula for the distribution of improved ESL funding.
4. Education Queensland support Milpera Special School in its name change to Milpera State High School and develop a funding plan to pay baseline staffing allocations out of State funding.
5. Education Queensland support Milpera Special School with a yearly grant for the management and operations of the school, in line with all other schools within the State.
6. The Queensland State Government initiate a process of negotiation with Federal agencies to review immigration visa category types to ascertain the impacts these have on NESB young people who require assistance in the area of English language development.
7. The vast majority of students from diverse backgrounds are already literate in their first language. They require language teaching to transfer this learning into their second or third language. Education Queensland must therefore acknowledge that ESL is a different program to literacy, and that the needs of NESB students are also very different.
8. The State ESL Reference Group in developing the formula for funding distribution also take into consideration the inequities that continue to exist within the program between primary and secondary locations, and continues to redress them. The State ESL Reference Group also review the issue of travel and associated costs as it relates to NESB students accessing ESL services as a matter of urgency, especially in rural and remote locations.
9. Education Queensland announce publicly the place ESL will assume within its strategic plans and policies.
10. ESL Programs and services offered to NESB students should be an integral part of the evaluation and accountability practices of all leading schools and closely monitored at a District level.
11. School Based Management and school decision-making bodies have not acknowledged the need for NESB parents to be represented. Through translated information, Education Queensland should assist schools in informing all ethnic communities about the changes within the structure of education, and in particular, the need for School Councils/Advisory Bodies that are representative of the school population.
12. Accountability practices at a District level must include a fully representative School Council.