

# ESL – A Major Equity Program

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**As the budget session of Federal Parliament approaches, there are fears that the Commonwealth is about to turn its back on its long-standing commitment to educational equity and cut the funding of English as a Second Language provisions in schools.**

For the last sixteen years, the Commonwealth has combated the educational disadvantage which children of non-English-speaking background face in Australian schools by funding the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Now, on the eve of the 1986/87 Budget, there are fears that the Commonwealth is about to turn its back on this long-standing commitment to educational equity. In the wake of a cut to the 1986 allocation for ESL, rumours abound that the Commonwealth is considering cutting out the major element of the special ESL program altogether. This would throw on to the overburdened State systems the responsibility of securing some measure of equity for a group of children already deeply "at risk" in Australia's schools.

The Ethnic Affairs Commission wishes to highlight just what is at stake. In this article, we draw on the opinions of educational researchers and teachers to stress the crucial role that ESL provisions play in NSW schools. We also underscore a fact that is accepted by every responsible authority: that ESL programs are desperately under-funded. There is also considerable evidence that lack of English is a source of major disadvantage that follows students through the education system and into the job market.

## ***The Commonwealth and ESL***

Why does the Commonwealth assume the direct responsibility for ESL in schools?

Firstly, because there is a long-standing Federal responsibility in matters concerning immigration and migrant settlement. In addition, the ESL program helps to make concrete the ideals of equality of access, equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes in education to which successive Federal Governments have committed themselves for many years. In the words of the Commonwealth Schools Commission: "The Commonwealth is the guardian of equity across the nation".

The ESL Program is divided into two elements, one targeted on a per capita basis at new arrivals, and the other providing funds for general ESL provisions. It is the second element (worth \$22.3m to NSW Government and non-Government Schools in 1986) that is rumoured to be under threat.

## ***The Crucial Role of ESL***

It is universally accepted that competence in English is the key to full participation in Australian society. Few would question the need for **special** language provisions to assist children who have a non-English-speaking background.

To any who might, Professor W J Campbell in his report on ESL provides a reply:

It is true that aspects of the home and informal learning environments are very influential in the development of proficiency in English, but mainly when accompanied by regular and intensive language use, and by active involvement on the part of the learner. A second language does not seep through the pores of the skin as by osmosis.

Not only does Campbell provide a convincing educational rationale for ESL in schools: he goes on to make it clear that serious commitment to multiculturalism entails a serious, **permanent** commitment to a comprehensive English as a Second Language Program:

Acknowledgment of the changed nature of the Australian society should mean that the ESL Program is not an isolated and temporary appendage to the education systems, ready to be lopped off in certain circumstances, but an integral part of the curriculum.

A recent survey of 480 key personnel in the Sydney Catholic education system revealed overwhelming support (90-98 per cent) for the view that specialist ESL teachers are an indispensable resource.

Many respondents pointed to the vital principle of equity underlying ESL provisions: "It is essential that these children are not disadvantaged because they don't have an English-speaking background. Our program provides enrichment and extension for those children through curriculum areas in the security of a team teaching situation." (Primary teacher).

Another primary teacher challenged the Government to stick to the principles it has so long espoused: "I think if we are serious about improving education and being concerned for the individual, then we need to put the money up front for programs such as ESL which support and work towards this".

A similar view was exhibited at the recent Schools Commission Conference on "**ESL in Mainstream Education: Access and Equity**". Most of the recommendations of the conference were predicated on the premise that mainstreaming does not imply the disappearance of specialist ESL teachers.

Everyone agrees that English is essential to educational success and full participation. Few doubt that special provisions are needed. Authorities are unanimous in criticising the

current level of funding as quite inadequate. Yet the hard-won achievements of sixteen years are stilt to be set at risk.

## **Cuts would be Disastrous**

The Federal Government cut ESL funding for 1986, reducing the General Support Element by 4.1%, despite the advice which Canberra received that the Program cries out for **more** support. The Commonwealth Schools Commission, for example, in its recent Report on Specific Purpose Programs, had this to say about the achievements and deficiencies of the ESL Program:

The provision of English as a second language tuition throughout Australia, despite the significant advances made, is still characterised by a shortage of adequately trained specialist and classroom teachers, a lack of appropriate resource materials, inadequate diagnostic tools and frequently a shortage of accommodation or sub-standard accommodation in which to provide these services.

The third Campbell report pointed out that the ESL Program does not come close to meeting the needs of its "target" group. Tight budgets drain funds away from students of higher proficiency, even though help is essential for many if they are not to be overwhelmed by the complex language tasks facing them after Year 10.

The Ethnic Affairs Commission attaches the gravest importance to the prospect of a further reduction in ESL funding, and has received submissions reflecting widespread community concern from ethnic community organisations, parents, teachers and students.

Barbara Fitzgerald, Multicultural Coordinator of the NSW Teachers Federation said:

It's a shoestring program. If there are any more cuts it will create chaos in the schools. The effects on schools with high numbers of migrant children are unimaginable. It will be a return to the bad old days of the 50s and 60s, when the burden fell on classroom teachers who didn't have the specialist training or resources to cope.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that the ESL program cannot sustain further cuts, it seems likely that this will be done in the name of economic rationalism. Although the EAC believes that the principal issue is one of equity, there are strong economic arguments for supporting the ESL program at current levels.

**Reducing The Risk**, the study on migrant youth unemployment by the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, identifies low English language proficiency as a significant contributor to youth unemployment.

A vigorous ESL program in schools can play a vital role in increasing the participation and retention rates of children of non-English-speaking background in education. The pay-off, long term though it is, will surely come in the form of shorter dole queues, and reduced need for ESL components in labour market programs.

## ***Disadvantaged***

The EAC has long been concerned that children who have a non-English-speaking background may suffer persistent disadvantage in the school system.

Educational researchers have suggested that this disadvantage may stem from various sources, and, ultimately, from the inability of the education system to address the special needs of different groups of students. For example, those assessment procedures which are still used, may require further modification to eliminate cultural bias. A strongly mono-cultural Anglo-centric school environment is likely to impair the ability of children of non-English speaking background to succeed at school. In addition, a lack of specialist language teaching will probably result in these children falling behind in all subjects and consistently underachieving throughout their school career.

Recent research seems to bear this out. A study by Dr. Barbara Horvath for the EAC shows that some children who have a non-English-speaking background are placed in low streams in NSW

schools more often than their counterparts of English-speaking background. In the seminar held at the EAC to discuss Dr. Horvath's findings, participants were strongly of the opinion that the category "NESB" is often a surrogate for much more significant factors such as poor proficiency in English or recency of arrival.

It is worth bearing this argument in mind in the current political/economic climate in which welfare and equity programs of all kinds are under heavy attack. Claims that specific purpose education programs are a burden that we can no longer afford have been conveniently bolstered by a spate of recent research studies that purport to show that "ethnic disadvantage" in education and other areas is a myth.

This is not the place for a thoroughgoing analysis of such an issue. What we can say here is that the broad category of "ethnicity" is not a helpful one in such research, as it masks uneven patterns of severe disadvantage between subgroups, and of polarisation within them.

The EAC believes that the need for specific purpose provisions, particularly ESL, targeted at Australians of non-English-speaking background is as strong as ever. Reducing ESL funding cannot be condoned on any grounds.