

Grassroots educational innovation at Benowa State High School

The Early Years ... 1984

Benowa's second principal, Ken Gilbert, came back from Canberra with a 'good idea' to do something with French at a school level such as putting up bi-lingual signs. After a conversation with the French teacher, Michael Berthold, the idea of students being taught in French was born and the French Immersion program began. None of us involved in the early days could have envisioned the innovative and exciting educational experiment that would evolve at our school which earned the name of 'The French Immersion Program'. There were many cynics who predicted that it would not be supported, not produce results or just fizzle out as so many educational good ideas do. At first its parameters and goals were unclear. We knew the system was successful in Canada but Canada was a bilingual country.

In the same year I was appointed Head of English and worked to support the program as I could see it catered for the gifted and talented students (who in those years were generally ignored) as well as industrious students who wanted to learn to speak another language in a more meaningful context than I had when I was at school. To cater for the first class of enthusiastic and gifted students who signed up, I made sure that they advanced a year in literary skills and knowledge of literature to compensate for the temporary loss of subject content knowledge in social sciences, science and mathematics while the foundations of a new language were being taught. Because of the higher learning expectations of these students by their teachers, by the time they re-entered mainstream in years 11 and 12, their English as well as French was generally better than that of other students. More importantly, they had developed good habits of regular study and the willingness to ask their teachers for help.

The Consolidation Stage

After Mike Berthold had fought the battles for the young program and won over the cynics, Nicole Davies took the program into its mature stage. She polished the rough edges of the brave new experiment, clarified its goals and demonstrated the high level that could be achieved with gifted and dedicated students who wanted a challenge. By now teachers' children (including my own) signed up to do the new program. Her team had the formidable task of translating the content of four or five subjects and packaging the information in such a way that the content as well as the language skills was taught. By now, the program under Nicole's guidance received recognition from all over Australia and also from France.

Here is a summary of why I believe the students in French immersion have a steeper trajectory of learning than those in main stream:

- They learned that there are more benefits to meeting the challenge of learning in French than the obvious one of the acquisition of a second language. They were also being prepared to take on challenges in life and learning that risk-taking does have benefits.
- Doing homework was linked to a real and tangible benefit e.g. understanding tomorrow's science lesson or surviving in and enjoying a month in a French speaking foreign country.
- Language learning seems to make the brain more receptive to all knowledge. Soon the French Immersion students were getting better results than mainstream students who were being taught in English!

It was a joy to teach a Year 8 or year 9 French Immersion class every year from its inception until I retired in 2008. I was always proud to be associated with this 'good idea' that grew into a very good educational program which has consistently produced results for the participating students.

Sharon Crone – HOD English [1983 – 2007]