Quality, Sustainable Chinese Language Programs

‘If you’re going to do it, you’ve got to do it properly’

Quality / 高质量 [gāo zhìliàng]
adj. general excellence of standard

Sustainable / 可持续发展的 [kě chíxù fāzhǎn de]
adj. able to be maintained at a certain level

One of the biggest challenges Australian schools face is the establishment and maintenance of effective, and durable, language programs. When the language in question is Chinese, these challenges are even more significant.

A team of researchers from the Chinese Teacher Training Centre (CTTC) at the University of Melbourne has studied the efforts of seven Victorian schools to shed light on the factors which result in quality and sustainability. Two of these schools have long and well established Chinese programs, three have programs which have been operating for three or four years, and two are just about to commence their programs.

The study examined the driving force or forces behind the initiative to set up Chinese, attitudes to and aspirations for language learning and for Chinese in particular, understandings about the nature of ‘quality’ as applied to a language program, and the factors considered to ensure sustainability.

One of the major aims of this work is to focus on sustainability and to frame thinking about quality in these terms. The notion of sustainability includes the capacity to endure, to last despite hard times, but also to have established a program that creates consistent and long-term educational and social value for all involved. In doing so, a quality program sustains more than just itself. It works reflexively — it is clearly sustaining for those involved.
Features of Quality and Sustainable Chinese Programs

Contextual Factors

The first and most obvious general characteristic of the Chinese programs in these schools is that they have been treated as special by all the key players in the institution. They have been activated, driven, resourced, monitored and nurtured in order to ensure success. And this pressurised activity, although in very different settings and situations, has operated within a set of common contextual factors, which are set out here. The evidence suggests that these factors comprise a number of dynamic elements at different levels of relationship to the school, with some more susceptible than others to school influence.

General public awareness is driven by public discussion and media interest. It raises consciousness and sets the stage for possible responses from schools. The White Paper ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ published in 2012, mentioned by several respondents in this study, is an example of this process.

There is considerable evidence of parent interest and involvement in these programs, sometimes expressed through the decisions of the school’s Board or Council, but also in meetings of comparatively large groups of parents to discuss new programs. This interest has been awakened through personal experiences of travel, doing business in the target country, or simply individual perceptions about current global circumstances.

Constructing the nature of the school’s identity is a very high concern of the school. Almost all participants in the study described their school explicitly as ‘a language school’ and this view is borne out strongly from the evidence of their curricular offerings. It means that there are several teachers of languages on staff, providing readily accessible experience related to language teaching and learning; and both students and parents have expectations that language study will be a component of the program. Offering a range of languages is seen as helping to fulfill an expressed desire to be keeping up with the front line of educational thinking and practice, and even to be leading it.

The Principals of both schools which have long-term programs were emphatic about the centrality of their Chinese programs to the fundamental identity of their school. One said: ‘We celebrate diversity at this school. … We respect bilingual learning … These are our values, these are our expectations.’ The other said: ‘We don’t have to justify [the Chinese program] any more. It’s established near the core of what the school does.’

In terms of understanding sustainability, the Principal at PEGS, who has been at the school for 30 years, noted that it was only about 15 years ago, 27 years after the program’s establishment, when this turning point was reached. Richmond West, which is consistently used as a poster school for bilingual education, still struggles for funds annually to maintain its program as it feels it should.

The Building Blocks

Begin the program early, and ensure the program has continuity

All these schools begin their Chinese program in their first year of enrolment, which in two cases is as early as Pre-Preparatory. As the program develops, students have the opportunity to continue with their study until the end of senior year.

Provide intensive, frequent teaching sessions, explore innovative approaches

‘If you give me just one lesson every week nothing’s going to happen. If we want to make it good, we need time and regular contact’. These schools include variant approaches to this issue. The bilingual programs at Richmond West and Auburn offer two days of Chinese per week. Almost all other programs offer at least 3 classes a week, in as close to immersion conditions as possible.

Enrich the program with supplementary activities

It is important that the Chinese language program provides memorable and engaging experiences for everyone. Activities include the chance for other students, staff and parents, as well as those involved in Chinese, to participate in overseas trips, to have contact with students at a Chinese sister school, to go on local excursions, to participate in culturally-based social activities, and to be involved in performances of music, drama and art.
### The Schools and Their Programs

#### Programs in preparation

**Overnewton Anglican Community College** (a large P-12 school operating on two campuses) will introduce Chinese in Preparatory year in 2014 on both its campuses, using a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to teach Science. The school currently offers Indonesian from Year 3 and German from Year 5. The Prep year was chosen because ‘the research tells us, even to start at Year 2 it’s not going to be as successful as it could be for all 168 Prep children … and we want to give this program the best opportunity we can.’

Demand for the new course was driven by an awareness of the implications of the ‘Asian Century’ and a very clear ambition to become what the Principal called ‘a lighthouse school for languages. … Our vision is to put Overnewton on the map as a leading school for languages education in Victoria, if not Australia. We want it to be a school that languages teachers know about and aspire to be teaching in, and where the quality of the programs is second to none.’

Two teachers were employed full-time prior to commencement, one for a year and a half, one for six months, in order to prepare the new course with its particular demands. The teachers were supported in this by an on-going CLIL Committee which included key figures in the school. They met regularly, gradually building support for and integrating the new program into its workings.

**Auburn High School** is a new school opening in 2014 offering bilingual programs in Chinese and in French. In Year 7 Chinese will be used for teaching and learning Maths, Studies of Society and Environment and Creative Technologies/Arts. The bilingual program is for second language learners not just home speakers, and there will also be a quality regular stream for those who do not come to the school with some proficiency in Chinese already.

‘It has to be built from the ground up’, said the Principal. ‘But we are going to be serious about being a language provider. While languages have had a chequered history, we think a bilingual program provides a much stronger case for continuity over time.’ He has insisted that the program begin with two teachers so that they can support each other and is pinning his hopes on young teachers who are prepared ‘to have a go in a new way.’ He is acutely aware of the costs of all kind involved. ‘Do you really want it to succeed? Dollars are important, but there must be constant advocacy and support from the top and absolute resoluteness holding on to the vision. … This is uncharted territory, a fantastic place to be, riddled with issues, but so much opportunity!’

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1 The language and the content are new to the students and are learned together, each providing meaning to the other.
**Programs which have been operating for 3-6 years**

**Genazzano FCJ College** is a Catholic girls school offering Early Learning (3 and 4 year olds) – Year 12. It describes itself as a school with ‘a long tradition of offering students the opportunity to excel in the study of languages other than English’.

In 2013 the Early Learning Centre students have been immersed in either Chinese or Italian via the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) and they will continue their language in the Prep year in 2014. Meanwhile, since 2011, students in Years 5-6 have been able to choose between Italian and Chinese, and at Year 7 all students choose two languages from French, Italian, Japanese, Latin and Chinese, maintaining both in Year 8 and choosing at least one in Year 9. French, Italian, Japanese and Latin are offered as electives at Year 10 and in Years 11 and 12. Chinese will be offered at Year 10 in 2015 and by 2017 from ELC-12.

The Principal explained the school had added Chinese ‘based on common sense more than anything else — an appreciation of the importance of China in the world’. And she is determined that it will be successful. ‘Mandarin will not ever be threatened…. Our task is to help it thrive and develop’. It is with this intent that the program is patiently being expanded progressively over a number of years.

Student interest is being built through a sister-school program which includes reciprocal visits open to any student and involving groups from other school activities such as music and sport.

At Kurnai College (a secondary school operating on three campuses in the Latrobe Valley) interest and capacity was first built through personal contacts with China and Chinese visitors. A Senior Teacher spent some months teaching in a Chinese school and two-way visits of teachers and officials from this sister school followed, along with enrollment of international students from China in the senior years. These contacts have developed Kurnai staff and students’ cultural understanding and engendered an interest in the language these visitors speak. As well, the Principal believed that Kurnai students should ‘have the chance to tackle something hard’.

The school currently offers German in Years 7-12, but with the full support of the Head of Languages, herself a German teacher, plans have already been made to expand the program by offering Maths and Science in Year 7 taught in Chinese using a CLIL approach, as well as starting a CLIL program in two primary feeder schools. A teacher of Chinese who also teaches Maths is available, and a German teacher has retrained in Chinese, which has enabled them to meet the demands of expansion.

**St Catherine’s School**, another Early Learning - Year 12 girls school, begins languages education in term 4 of the pre-Preparatory Year. French is introduced to the 4 year-olds, continuing as part of the curricular offering to Year 11. French is introduced to the 4 year-olds, continuing as part of the curricular offering to Year 12. At Years 7 and 8 students had to take either French or Japanese, and since 2011 Chinese has been added to the list. The school trialled several approaches to re-structuring the secondary curriculum to ensure acceptance of Chinese from all members of the Languages Department. At Year 9 languages study becomes elective. Currently only French and Japanese are offered at VCE level, partly because Chinese has not been going long, and partly because even those who enjoy it are deterred by the unfavourable situation for non-background learners in Year 12 assessment.

A keen advocate for languages, and backed very strongly by parents and the School Council, the Principal was adamant about St Catherine’s commitment to the Chinese program. ‘This school doesn’t mind small classes. We want to build towards a solid stream [up to 10 students] in Years 11 and 12. … It’s a foolish thing to introduce something as important as Chinese language and let it die. We need to be braver than that.’

But these ambitions are tempered by patience as well. The teacher of Chinese said: ‘It will take time to become a substantial program. You can’t expect an instant miracle.’

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2 Immersion in the target language using gesture, stories, drama, music and other activities.
Longer term programs

Richmond West Primary School has had a bilingual Chinese-English program operating for two days a week for 27 years, driven originally by a large cohort of Chinese-speaking students from East Timor. 72 percent of its current students have a language background that is not English, a significant number of them being from Sudanese or Vietnamese backgrounds.

The program is fully bilingual from Prep-Year 3 and this will continue through the top three levels in the coming three years. It is a central feature of the school — ‘not an add-on, not at the margins’, the Principal insisted. He noted that: ‘Parents are very strong advocates [of the program]. The School Council, sometimes prompted by the Principal, push it along. … They’re very proud of it.’ The program has survived turnover in the school’s executive group, while a keen eye is kept out for succession planning in terms of suitable teaching staff.

The teachers who operate the program began as relatively inexperienced but have built effective repertoire and resources over the years. All staff are involved in the bilingual program’s planning meetings. The same structures and the same strategies are used right across the learning program. ‘You can’t have two separate programs. … It’s one of the real successes of what we’re doing,’ The Principal noted that financial resources remain an issue for the school. ‘Good programs cost money. … But we celebrate diversity at this school. … we respect bilingual learning … These are our values, these are our expectations. If you want to come to this school, this is what we offer.’

Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School (PEGS) offers Kindergarten-Year 12 education for girls and boys on four campuses. Its Chinese program has now been running for 42 years. It commences in Prep, continuing through the primary years for all students. The primary program has a strong emphasis on culture with a comparatively small amount of language taught. The Principal noted that having 900 primary students doing Chinese gives the secondary program a very strong base. Another strength is the long tenure in the school of the Principal, the Head of Chinese (and Head of Languages), and several of the Chinese teachers including the primary teacher. As the Head retires at the end of 2013, a new leader in Chinese has been appointed, but she, too, is long experienced at the school.

At Year 7 the study of an Asian language and a European language is compulsory. Chinese is one of the options, along with French, German and Indonesian. Last year more than 170 students chose Chinese. From Years 8-10, the study of one language is compulsory and students are encouraged to take two. A high proportion continue with Chinese. At Years 11 and 12 PEGS commonly has some 30 students enrolled in VCE Chinese as a second language. Very few students at the school have a home or heritage Chinese background.

The Chinese teaching program is enriched by a Chinese orchestra, a Confucius Classroom and a very active relationship with a Chinese sister school which includes an annual visit. The program has had what the Principal described as ‘a very strong teaching team with an outstanding leader’ and a cache of additional resources which have been accumulated over a long period and are constantly refreshed. ‘If you’re going to do it, you’ve got to do it properly,’ he asserted. There has always been strong support and public advocacy for the program from the school’s administration. The Principal suggested that: ‘The mood … has turned over time. We don’t have to justify it any more. It’s established near the core of what the school does. It’s taken for granted that it’s here. … Most of all, the kids enjoy it. It’s appreciated across the whole school community.’
The Tripod

Quality, sustainable programs are accorded strength and consistency through support at three points:

The Champion

The champion is the person with the vision, the commitment and the authority to share, activate, drive and monitor a new initiative. They promote the idea, shape and participate in the initial exploration, judge what is possible while still being prepared to take risks, search out and employ suitable staff, engage consultants and other outside assistance.

In this study the role of ‘champion’ has been taken everywhere by the Principal.

The commitment to success of the person in this role was absolute. ‘We want to be a lighthouse school for languages and this is the way we’re going to do it. We’re going to introduce compulsory Mandarin for every child that comes into the school.’ ‘It’s a foolish thing to do to introduce something as important as Chinese language and let it die. We need to be braver than that.’ ‘There is no doubt we’re able to hit more buttons [with the Chinese program]. I am completely confident about that.’ ‘I see a key component of my job is to make sure that this program is maintained and operates as best as it possibly can.’ ‘I have no doubts about what we’re doing at all. None.’

The Facilitator

This person, commonly the Vice Principal, Senior Coordinator or Head of Languages, takes on enabling the vision to be translated into practice. They build teaching and support teams, ensure timetabling supports the program, check that there are funds for required resources, that suitable rooms and access to ICT infrastructure are available, provide or agree to opportunities for professional learning, encourage co-planning, make sure that language staff are aware of and involved in mainstream school activities, talk with parents, negotiate staff concerns and constantly consult and are consulted by the Principal.

The Teacher/s

Several Principals spoke of the way they had chased and found the right person to provide their Chinese program. This is clearly a core piece of the process. Many of the teachers of Chinese in these programs are comparatively inexperienced and have been asked to take on quite new ways of working. In most of the schools none of the teachers had had formal training for their current role as innovator, and among other things, they are distinctive for their willingness and capacity to learn.

There was also considerable alertness among the Principals to making sure the teachers don’t ‘die on their own’, in most cases by having more than one teacher of Chinese to collaborate with. As well, most of the schools have made a deliberate effort to build and maintain supportive teams of colleagues.

Other staff also play an important role in ensuring the success of the program. First and foremost has been the willingness of established languages departments to admit a newcomer, one potentially threatening the success of their own language and even perhaps their jobs. Support has been generously offered in these schools in the form of proffering advice, mentoring young, often new teachers, sharing ideas and resources, discussing individual students and approaches to class management, joining in social activities and promoting the new language with students and parents.

Not least, students support the quality of a program by participating willingly and actively and sustain it by continuing to enroll in it.
The Operating Principle

Always consider the program as developmental

Sustainability does not mean immutability; to the contrary in fact. Another consistent view adopted by the Principals in their role as champion was that an essential part of nurturing the program was to monitor it carefully, and ‘If it’s not working, do something different’. Those just starting out were prepared for the possibility of adjustment. ‘If it’s not as good as expected after two years and the school wants to stop it, or change it back to ordinary LOTE or a different kind of program, we are prepared for this. We know we are taking on something full of challenge.’ The flexibility in this approach was widely considered an essential aspect of sustainability. ‘You have to be prepared to change and adjust if that’s what the on-the-ground experience is telling you.’

Even the oldest programs are referred to as being in a constant state of development: new resources, new ways of trying things, new staff, new activities, improvements to resources, participation in new external programs — all ways of keeping what is offered fresh and lively, and effective.

Dynamics of a Quality, Sustainable Chinese Program

General Public Awareness

PRINCIPAL (CHAMPION)  FACILITATOR (OPERATOR)

Begin program early  Sufficient time and frequency  Enriched with supplementry school activities

STUDENTS

TEACHER (PRACTITIONER)

OTHER STAFF

Parental Influence

School’s Identity
The Essentials of a Quality, Sustainable Chinese Program

The essentials of a quality, sustainable program that have emerged from the study are a constantly functioning, constantly self-monitoring combination of the following.

- A clear, deep recognition by the Principal of the educational importance of language learning and regard for Chinese as a language abundantly able to effect this development.
- Relentless championing of the program by the Principal in all spheres of engagement inside and outside the school: promoting it to all stakeholders; moving it into the mainstream school profile; protecting it, and even privileging it where deemed necessary, with respect to money, time and staffing.
- Hardworking, flexible, intelligent teachers, willing and interested in working regularly beyond their comfort zone, undergoing formal and informal re-training, and reconsidering deeply held, often hitherto unexamined assumptions.

- An enthusiastic, energetic and able person at senior level (such as a Deputy Principal or a Head of Languages) who can work between the other two levels: appreciating the demand on the teachers and able to engage with them over the nitty-gritty of their day-to-day matters, including supporting them in team building with other staff; and also capable of working with the Principal to get parents and staff on side with the program and with its special aspects, such as a China sojourn, special school events, and changes to what have hitherto been routines and norms.

In five of the seven programs studied, the above features were augmented by a researched understanding and conviction in the Principal that the demands of language learning, and of Chinese in particular, mean that an early and more intensive provision of time on task in engaging activities is essential to achieve the desired level of success.

‘Quality’ and ‘Sustainable’ are not outcomes, but comprehensive strategies

This study was undertaken by Jane Orton, Mara Pavlidis, Sophia Ainalis and David McRae. It forms part of a set of research investigations into the nature of school programs for the teaching and learning of Chinese conducted by the Chinese Teacher Training Centre (CTTC) at the University of Melbourne.

This report and those on earlier studies and other research projects can be downloaded from: http://education.unimelb.edu.au/cttc/research/publications

The CTTC is available for consultancy to support the development and maintenance of quality Chinese programs.

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