

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Enriching English language skills for future generations

Professor Margaret Somerville and a team* of researchers from the University of Western Sydney have been granted funding from the NSW Department of Education and Communities to investigate the English language skills of Australian children from non-standard English backgrounds, as well as language backgrounds other than English.

'In increasingly complex school environments, some students from diverse language backgrounds struggle to learn Standard Australian English in school', Professor Somerville says. 'These students are usually recent migrants, refugees or Indigenous Australians, and their limited Standard Australian English skills mean they consistently fall behind in grades and school participation.' This study aims to identify techniques to support these students by understanding how existing language skills – such as the language spoken at home – are used in different contexts, and if they can be used to increase understandings of Standard Australian English in school settings. In addition, the research team will investigate ways to improve teacher practices in diverse teaching environments.

Six schools from Greater Western Sydney will be recruited, with two teachers from each school being trained as co-researchers. They will use group activities such as progressive brainstorming to help students document their everyday language practices. Each student will produce a "language map" showing how and where they use different forms of language. Drawing on the language skills revealed in the language maps, class activities that aim to build understandings of using language for a range of purposes will be created and trialled.

Classroom programs like these, which are tailored to the unique skills of the students, aim to re-engage disaffected children with learning, improve



Photograph by Margaret Somerville

their social skills, participation in activities, and increase their educational and future employment opportunities.

Project Title: Building on children's linguistic repertoires to enrich English learning

Funding has been set at: \$121,530

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