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Building national capacity in language teaching: Designing effective immersion programmes for 'short term' New Zealand teacher sojourners

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Background

As in many countries today, pressures to internationalise and interculturalise the education system are strong drivers of educational policy. This has also been the case in New Zealand. Two important policy statements from the New Zealand Ministry of Education that support this agenda are:

- - The addition of the Learning Languages strand to The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) (Ministry of Education, 2007a) with the expectation that all New Zealand students in Years 7-10 will be able to learn a language additional to English and Maori by 2010.
- - The International Education Agenda (Ministry of Education, 2007b) which states that New Zealand students need to be 'equipped to thrive in an interconnected world' and that 'New Zealand receives wider economic and social benefits (from the internationalisation of its citizens)'

In particular, the introduction of Learning Languages (Years 7 - 10) as a curriculum area in its own right has resulted in a growing demand for language teachers of languages other than Māori and English. A recent Educational Report Office (ERO) report considering schools' readiness for the full implementation of the new national curriculum this year (2010) noted:

'The majority of secondary schools and a growing number of primary schools were already offering students opportunities for learning a second or subsequent language. The most commonly stated challenges in both primary and secondary schools were finding and/or retaining suitably qualified staff and building the capability and confidence of staff in teaching a language' (ERO, 2009).

The Ministry of Education has two key professional development initiatives in place to raise the standard and amount of language teaching in New Zealand. One is the Teacher Professional Development in Languages Programme (TPDL) (for a comprehensive evaluation of this programme see Harvey, Conway, Richards and Roskvist (2009)). The other mechanism is the funding and support of immersion experiences for teachers (Language Immersion Awards, or LIAs).

Research Questions

A time honoured way of increasing teacher proficiency in languages teaching has been to send teachers to countries where the teaching language is spoken for a period of time. The expectation is that just by 'being there' osmosis will work its magic and teachers will return with improved language, culture and language teaching skills, concomitant with the amount of time they were away. While this uncritical view is that language and culture immersion experiences are inarguably beneficial, Ehrenreich (2006) observes that the empirical literature does not always support this stance. Moreover she makes the point that the field of evaluation of teacher language and culture immersion sojourns is characterised by a relative dearth of research. Indeed, on the basis of her research looking at the experience of German foreign language student teachers living and working in English speaking countries as German language assistants Ehrenreich (2006) states:

'The findings of [the] study show how both the experiences of the assistant year itself and its evaluation are subject to a whole range of internal and external factors, making a clear cut assessment of its educational and professional impact on teachers' lives impossible' (p. 195).

Ehrenreich's research indicates that more work is required on the evaluation of language teacher overseas professional development sojourns, and that studies probably need to be of mixed methods design to capture a diversity of perspectives.

New Zealand language teachers have, for a number of years been able to avail themselves of various methods of gaining language and culture immersion experiences through awards offered by a number of granting bodies especially those from receiving countries (e.g. Japan, France, Germany, China). From 2005, the New Zealand Ministry of Education took a greater role in coordinating existing awards and also funded additional awards (LIAs) through the Growth and Innovation Framework (Clark, 2002).

The efficacious design of immersion programmes is an important element in ensuring that teachers gain the most from their time away from the New Zealand classroom. We know that just one month away from New Zealand in a country where the teaching language is spoken can have a profound effect on teachers and their students. This paper will discuss a number of features reported by sojourners that benefited their learning during the sojourn as well as things that could have been improved in order to maximise their time overseas.

Methods

This paper draws on a recently completed national evaluation study commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education and carried out in 2008 and 2009 (Harvey, Roskvist, Corder and Stacey, 2010 [forthcoming]) to consider the results of the LIAs on language teaching practice and outcomes for students. The paper considers one aspect of the study, the design of short term (one month) sojourns for language teachers. Research participants include fifteen of the original fifty five respondents to a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative questionnaire sent to all (long term and short term) New Zealand returnees since 2005, in late 2008. Further, the paper draws on the detailed experiences of six one month sojourners who were part of a qualitative study (n=10) analysing pre and post sojourn experiences through interviews and classroom observations. Quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative survey data was entered into digital files and manually coded for significant themes related to the key research question. The interview and observation data was recorded in note form and transferred into electronic transcripts by the researchers. Data was analysed in terms of the key research themes. Analysis was gradual, incremental and initially tentative so that premature explanation and conclusions were avoided (Tolich & Davidson, 1999).

Frame

This research is informed by key literature on language acquisition, intercultural competence, teacher immersion experiences and teacher professional development (Ellis, 2005a & 2005b; Erlam, 2005; Gibbs & Holt, 2003; Crozet & Liddicoat, 1997; Dornyei & Czizer, 1998; Harmer, 2002; Byram, 2007; Ehrereich, 2006; Timperley et al., 2007).

Research findings

The research analyses teacher perceptions of their one month language and culture sojourns to consider how best such in service professional development experiences might be structured to maximise teacher learning and outcomes for students. There is a relative dearth of research in this area and the before and after (sojourn) interviews and observations in particular offer some close and important insights into teacher experience and practice. These will inform key recommendations for the structuring of future short term language immersion sojourns.