

NZJTW



NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL of TEACHERS' WORK

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ISSN-1176-6662



Developing Praxis for a Few Non-English Speaking Background Students in the Class

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 1, 31-33, 2005

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INTRODUCTION

Few studies have focused on mainstream teachers of non-English speaking background (NESB) students (Franken & McComish, 2003); and there have been no studies internationally that have looked at teachers with just small numbers of NESB students in their classes. However, it is known that this situation is the reality for teachers in most parts of New Zealand (Franken & McComish, 2003). The current study therefore aimed to provide some insights into how teachers go about developing praxis for small numbers of NESB students in a mainstream class and the factors that influence this process. *Praxis* refers to teachers' working theories and practices which may, to some extent, be idiosyncratic and creative, but it is also likely that teachers' praxis will reflect normative ways of thinking and acting within a particular social and cultural context (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Topez, 2003).

While little is known about teachers with small numbers of NESB students, a survey by Cameron and Simpson (2002) identified that teachers in Auckland seemed to be more skilled and comfortable with NESB students than those in an earlier Hamilton study (Barnard, Campbell, Campbell, Smithson, & Vickery, 2001) where there were fewer NESB students. Cameron and Simpson suggested that this disparity was due to the greater availability of in-service courses in the Auckland area. However, the current study shows that the causes are far more complex than this.

THE STUDY

The inquiry was carried out in four different school settings over the course of a year, one each term. In each school, teachers with responsibility for the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme were interviewed to provide background context, but the major focus was placed on a year 1-2 class teacher and a year 5-6 class teacher. These teachers were interviewed individually at the start of a term. Class observations then took place, interspersed by individual reflective discussions at the middle and end of each term, drawing predominantly on critical learning and teaching episodes from the setting.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

The results of this inquiry revealed that teachers' selection of roles and teaching strategies with the NESB students was significantly influenced by dynamic interaction that occurred across their various contexts: the educational community in which they related to parents and colleagues, the class in which they encountered the NESB students, and the reflective domain in which they were influenced by their past knowledge, experience, confidence and stress.

Power imbalances, the school's organisational structures, and perceptions of cultural distance made it more difficult for class teachers to access pertinent knowledge. For example, those with expertise in teaching NESB students were often teacher aides, or senior teachers who were not allocated time to support class teachers. In addition, many teachers found it hard to establish the sort of in-depth relationships with NESB parents that would have enhanced their knowledge to enable greater integration of minority cultures with the mainstream curriculum. Furthermore, while reflective discussion and whole-school approaches were found to facilitate the development of relevant praxis, not all teachers were obliged to work with NESB students since there were not many of these students in the school.

Those teachers in the study who had not received relevant professional input, resorted to praxis based on their existing first language development pedagogy. Thus, strategies utilizing larger text structures, that might have facilitated the more effective transfer of first language skills and knowledge for older students, were under-utilized. As Hogan, Rabinowitz, & Craven (2003) point out, even experienced teachers can be reduced to the level of novices when faced with unfamiliar situations. In contrast, teachers who had sustained and positive prior experiences with NESB students reported higher levels of confidence and generated more effective teaching strategies.

Teachers' confidence tended to be strongly influenced by their prior background, experience and knowledge, as well as the positive or negative nature of their early experiences with NESB students. It is significant that all but one teacher reported considerably less teaching confidence when working with the NESB students although all teachers had high levels of confidence in their general teaching. In addition, teachers tended to be oriented towards working with small groups and the whole class, so they experienced increased stress when endeavouring to meet the needs of just one or two NESB students in the class.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

While NESB students lingered in the class teachers' peripheral attention, it was difficult to foreground the needs of these students amidst the many other demands in their busy classes. This dilemma was further enhanced by the fact that there were just a few NESB students in the classes. As a result of the insights from this study a number of important recommendations have been made for the professional development of teachers as well as for wider school and educational policies.

Productive reflections on NESB students were increased by regular teaching interactions with these students. Engaging in collaborative problem solving was also found to help foreground the NESB students' needs in the teachers' conscious attention. Across-school efforts that enhance these opportunities may possibly increase in-house dialogue, collegial ownership of

issues, and collective support for positive change. Furthermore, the establishment of compulsory pre-service education courses in the learning and teaching of NESB students will increase the current knowledge base in schools, ensuring that future teachers have adequate knowledge and confidence to enable them to generate effective praxis for the NESB students in their classes.

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New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2005

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