

CHRISTINE BIEBRICHER

The University of Auckland - Faculty of Education and Social Work, New Zealand

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES - A SOLUTION TO SUSTAIN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NEW ZEALAND?

Abstract:

The study is set in New Zealand where primary school teachers are not trained in teaching foreign languages in their classrooms, but where those teachers find themselves in increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural teaching contexts. Learning Languages became a new curriculum area in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) with the expectation that all schools offer language programmes for students aged 11 to 14. In 2015, the Ministry of Education launched a contestable fund for schools with the aim to develop students' proficiency in a second language and to encourage a multi-lingual New Zealand (Parata, 2014). Priority was given to collaborating primary (years 1-8) and secondary (years 9-13) schools which led to the formation of clusters combining both school sectors. Based on the Ministry's understanding of professional learning communities (Ministry of Education, 2006) which adopts Stoll et al. (2005)'s definition, the so developed language clusters can be regarded as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), in which 'a group of people motivated by a shared learning vision, support and work with each other [...]' (Stoll et al., 2005, p. 5). The explorative case study examined in depth one of those PLCs which received Ministry funding from 2015-2017 to develop Asian language learning. It consisted of six primary and two secondary schools. The study investigates the contexts and collaborative structures of the PLC on a pedagogical, managerial, operational and leadership level, each school's pedagogical approach for teaching an Asian language, and if the language was sustained across the cluster beyond the Ministry's funding period. Pertinent documents within the cluster were analysed and interviews were conducted (3 principals, 13 teachers, 1 coordinator) straight after the funding had ended and towards the end of the first year without funding.

Initial findings suggest that having a PLC increased language learning as well as collaboration between individual teachers. They also show teachers' and schools' very different approaches to sustain language teaching beyond the funded PLC period.

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Keywords:

professional learning community, language teaching, language learning, school collaboration