

BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: ONE SCHOOL'S JOURNEY IN LEARNING LANGUAGES.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the professional learning in languages of a group of teachers at one school, and examines the impact on of a number of teachers undertaking professional learning together. The analysis of teachers' conversations and learning stories has given an insight into implementing second language learning in a school. These stories have given a clear idea of what is involved, what works, the work itself and how the students view their learning. They help us to begin to understand how the concept of a professional learning culture has the capacity to foster relationships that support teaching and learning in a school.

The paper is co-authored by Susan Heeps, the Deputy Principal of Pakuranga Intermediate and participant in TPDL (Teacher Professional Development in Languages), 2009, and Silvia Insley, the lecturer for EDPROFST 360, for which this report was originally written. The first person voice is that of the Deputy Principal, who writes from her own observation of the learning journey and we also hear the voices of the teachers and students involved. Evidence was gathered from learning conversations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The issues discussed are the development of a professional learning culture within the school, the impact on students' learning and the transference of shared learning and understandings. Reports from teachers and students attest to the benefits of collaborative professional learning within a school.

INTRODUCTION

Professional learning

The elements of effective professional learning and the way these have been successfully incorporated into TPDL (Teacher Professional Development in Languages) have been described elsewhere. (Insley & Thomson, 2008). In summary, sufficient time needs to be allowed to provide multiple opportunities to learn, external expertise needs to be engaged, teachers need to be engaged in the learning process, teachers' espoused understandings need to be challenged, teachers need to have the opportunity to work in a community of professionals, professional learning content needs to be consistent with wider policy trends and initiatives and school leaders need to be involved (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

The conversations and learning stories of a group of teachers involved in TPDL illustrate the impact of effective professional learning on a learning community within one school. They include the perspectives of six new teachers of Spanish: the DP / Curriculum Leader, who teaches Spanish to one class of a teacher not involved in TPDL and five first-time Spanish teachers and their students. All six teachers were learning Spanish at the same time as they were learning how to teach an additional language.

BACKGROUND

Pakuranga Intermediate School is a multicultural, urban Decile 4 School in Auckland. At the end of 2008 teachers were informed about TPDL as professional development that would enable us to develop and implement a teaching and learning programme for Learning Languages (Spanish), where none existed previously. As a result six classroom teachers plus the DP completed TPDL in 2009.

"We felt it was important to involve a group of teachers in order to establish and sustain language learning in the school. Past experience with new initiatives highlighted the loss to a school when those teachers with

particular knowledge leave. This can often devastate a school's ability to progress. We were also aware of the key elements of effective professional development and the support and encouragement that we could offer each other both personally and professionally if a group of us were involved". (DP)

"In the role of Curriculum Leader I was aware that we needed to address the inclusion of Learning Languages as the eighth Learning Area in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). In recent times, there has been a change in relation to the teaching of languages. A number of countries, USA, Great Britain and Australia all have, or are in the midst of developing, strategies to address the need for students to access more than one language. I knew that the school needed to move in the direction of helping our teachers to deliver a language. I was also keenly aware of the amount of time and effort that participating in professional development in a new Learning Area would demand particularly as the new Learning Area would require our teachers to become conversant with pedagogical approaches to learning languages, the alignment of Learning Languages with the Vision, Principles, Values and Key Competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), planning, monitoring and reporting on student progress in Learning Languages and finally learning a new language ourselves." (DP)

How could we as a school move forward, support teacher learning and build in a safeguard that would address the problem of sustainability? The idea of a professional learning community as worth pursuing as a means of promoting school and system-wide capacity, and building for sustainable improvement and student learning, is the model that has gained currency in recent times (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Timperley et al, 2007).

METHOD

The teachers that participated in the TPDL Programme (2009) have been teaching Spanish to approximately 180 students. It was a major development in the school and as such it was necessary to gather evidence about the successes and difficulties that the teachers and students had in order to evaluate its impact. As part of TPDL the DP undertook a learning inquiry into the impact of TPDL on the staff involved. The inquiry took the form of semi-structured interviews with all of the teachers on TPDL. In addition, students and one classroom teacher (not on TPDL) whose students have been learning Spanish were interviewed. The questions used to start the conversations were around the development of a learning culture within the school, the benefits of professional learning, what was beneficial, helpful and/or difficult and where to next. 8 students from one class were asked about their experience of learning Spanish.

FINDINGS

Data from the discussions with teachers highlighted three aspects of the professional development which contributed to its success. Firstly, that a culture of learning was developed; secondly, that learning was collaborative, and thirdly, that the learning was deep and transferable.

Developing a culture of learning

"PD in this Learning Languages has been different to other PD. In this learning area we have not been able to play the "expert" with the students. An important part of the learning has been the students watching us as we encounter new learning and the demands that involves. We have shared with students how we are starting to think about learning in new ways. The students have been very supportive of our learning. This has meant that they see that we value learning ourselves and are engaged in the process just as they are. They are interested in the concessions we make to enable us all to learn. They see our disposition to develop. This has been encouraging". (DP)

"My son has seen that it is possible to study as an adult and that teachers are in fact life long learners".
(Teacher)

"The opportunity that has opened up for the students is far greater than I first realised. Listening to how they talk about their learning and seeing their interest has been a constant source of motivation and commitment."
(Teacher)

“They [students] have all participated really well, a couple of them ... have been doing their own Spanish learning and they look up stuff at home on the web, on the internet or practice at home and I know that in their reading books or in books sometimes when they write to each other they might leave Spanish comments.” (Teacher not involved in TPD, whose class was taught Spanish by the DP for one hour per week)

“A number of students want to *use* (teacher’s emphasis) their language and develop their competency. They have accessed other sources and are not so dependant on the teacher. They are not waiting to be spoon-fed. They are seeing Spanish as a communication act rather than as a subject.” (Teacher)

“The opportunity for them [students] to become expert alongside us has seen some students voice their desire to teach others what they know.” (Teacher)

“It’s cool because the teacher is learning at the same time as us and when we learn new words she does as well.” (Student)

“The enthusiasm of my students has been very motivating.” (Teacher)

Learning collaboratively

“A culture is a shared enterprise and professional learning is at its most effective when it is done collaboratively. This means that a professional learning culture requires a communal dimension in which professional learning is both a formal and an informal process of sharing expertise and experiences as a professional learning community (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p.95).”

“As a group (TPDL teachers), the teachers supported each other. This fostered and enabled commitment to their learning for the benefit of the students and teachers”. (DP)

“Learning the language with colleagues has been the biggest benefit. I find it’s been really good bonding time. Sharing ideas with each other and supporting each other because we are all going through the same thing.” (Teacher)

“[TPDL has been] a great opportunity to meet with teachers from other schools and discuss best practice. It has been a great opportunity to socialise with teachers from this school and learn together. We are all starting from the same place and that has given a sense of equality but also a little friendly competition. The support from other teachers within the school has been invaluable. It is important that someone else is aware of the difficulties you face and can also share the triumphs.” (Teacher)

“Having other colleagues undertaking the same studies - sharing, building relationships, discussing the everyday stuff that drives you mad, checking out ideas, being able to draw on the experiences of others, having a laugh, and surviving the year as a group in general.” (Teacher)

“I have been very self-motivated to learn, however the support of working with my colleagues has been very important.” (Teacher)

“Having the DP go through the same course, because she has a better understanding of what we are actually going through rather than ‘imagining it’. Experiencing it for herself, it’s easy to know what you are needing to help others through”. (Teacher)

Teachers were collaborative. They felt comfortable sharing about what was happening in their lessons, both successes and failures. They shared best practice. They were also more willing to share the insights that their personal lives brought, such as memories of how their own children acquired language, their own language learning experiences and the varied cultural backgrounds that they had. The sharing and collaboration were important as they helped teachers understand where their personal theories came from and how those theories

worked with professional knowledge to inform teaching and learning. The teachers had exemplified and personalised what the experts say:

“A professional learning culture is one which engages with learning in many different contexts. It is not simply the students’ learning or an individual teacher’s learning, but rather it is a commitment to learning as a valued activity in its own right. Creating a culture of learning for students is an important part of this work, as is having a supportive environment in which to develop as a professional, however nothing can create a professional learning culture if this is not found in the practice of teachers themselves and their disposition to developing their professional learning.” (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p.93).

Deep and transferable learning

“A professional learning community involves teachers working collaboratively together to identify and work with the issues and challenges raised by teaching and learning in individual or shared contexts. Such collaboration involves dialogue about issues and problems related to teaching and learning and to students’ progress (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p.96).”

Working in a new curriculum area made the teachers more acutely aware of previously held and new understandings about teaching and learning. When the Spanish teachers talked together they moved beyond conversation about the day to day pragmatics.

“We are starting to talk about deeper things concerning teaching and learning. We are asking “What does the curriculum require of me?” We are making connections with other learning areas, developing our own Key Competencies as well as that of the students. We are thinking about how teaching an intellectual as well as pragmatic endeavour is. We are re-thinking ourselves, being reflexive and reflective. The role of theory is better appreciated. It is acknowledged that during pre-service training and early in your career, theory is undervalued. Once the pragmatics have been taken care of, the role of theory and principled knowledge becomes more apparent”. (DP)

“Personally it [TPDL] gave me the opportunity to inquire into my own practice and to apply tested theories which has helped to develop my own theories about teaching and learning. I am more informed and I do feel more empowered to contribute to and initiate professional discussion generally”. (Teacher)

“When reflecting on the TPDL programme it has been very beneficial in improving my teaching practice in language teaching and across all curriculum areas. It has further developed my interest and understanding in how to develop an authentic learning culture in my class”. (Teacher)

“Having the Ellis Principles to draw on has been of great strength and helped me have more of an understanding of how my teaching impacts the students”. (Teacher)

“It is great for me to keep my mind occupied on an intellectual level; I do enjoy reading about new theories and considering how they apply to me and my classroom. The longer that I have been teaching the more I find I rely on best practice and I find myself referring to professional readings to either support my practice or to provide me with ideas for change.” (Teacher)

Teachers also talked about transfer of skills and attitudes developed through professional learning to other curriculum areas.

“There have been many benefits to the language course. It has given me an appreciation for teaching ESOL students and for the English language. Without this experience I would have continued being blissfully unaware of how difficult the English language is to learn and the impact it has on our ESOL students! In addition, I see daily benefits of from students as they too are gaining a greater understanding about the English language when they are relating it to Spanish”. (Teacher)

“When reflecting on the TPDL programme it has been very beneficial in improving my teaching practice and language teaching and across all curriculum areas. It has further developed my interest and understanding in how to develop an authentic learning culture in my class. It has also made me more aware of how to effectively teach grammar and writing in English”. (Teacher)

“The experience of learning alongside the students has given me a whole new understanding about how to teach. I am keen to take up a leadership role to help sustain what has happened. I think all our teachers would benefit. It’s given me the confidence to apply for a Language Immersion Award despite the difficulties that would mean in organising my family”. (Teacher)

“I’ve got more confidence. It makes me want to learn another language.” (Student)

“I feel OK ... because some one taught me and I can share that learning to some one else.” (Student)

“I’d really like to go to another class to teach Spanish. I’d start off with the basic stuff like we did.” (Student)

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Overall teachers and students have been positive about their collaborative learning journey this year, despite acknowledgement by the teachers of the time commitment involved in such an undertaking.

“I would do it again in a heartbeat. I feel that the positives of this course far outweigh the negatives and consequently would do it again in a flash”. (Teacher)

“I think we have come a long way and I want to see what has happened sustained. I would be interested in managing the process next year. We need to consolidate our learning, make a place for the resources, and have dedicated language meetings. A budget for resources and further P.D. is needed”. (Teacher)

“The opportunity that has been opened up for the students is greater than I first realised. Listening to how they talk about their learning and seeing their interest has been a constant source of motivation and commitment.” (Teacher)

“I would do this again although only if there were others involved too. I think it is important that the level of commitment is recognised within the school and that the professional development is valued. [We need to] make sure the ideas in this course are explored deeply and understood completely before moving on to another area”. (Teacher)

“Yes [I would recommend this to others] because I really enjoyed learning a second language and being able to teach it was rewarding. I must admit that at times it was really stressful especially when we are being assessed formally (assignments and tests). It would be good if the same kind of support can be given next year to teachers who would like to take on teaching a L2. It would be a shame to lose the buzz that happened this year at school, during workshops and classes”. (Teacher)

“I have improved lots, I mean at the beginning I could only say some kinds of words like chair is scilla and rojo is red but now I can start making communication with others..... and that is a very good thing.” (Student)

“I could only say a few words but now I can hold a conversation.” (Student)

“I know that I can learn a language because I thought it would be really hard and it would take some time but slowly step by step we have learnt so much... The time spent was worthwhile.” (Student)

Involvement as a group in TPDL has not only added value to the teachers' ability to teach a language but has also enabled them to see the importance of fostering a professional learning culture. They are beginning to talk together about the need to have deep principled knowledge that informs their practice.

“Teachers’ own perspectives are important however the expert view of a facilitator has been essential. Our In-school facilitators were credible because of their expertise and their knowledge. This meant that their insights and observations were able to inform our practice in tangible, useful ways. Their evaluation of progress at different points, were like “inquiry” for progress, next steps rather than end points. The feeling was that the TPDL In-school facilitators were participating in our journey and were providing much needed scaffolding and encouragement. Although we have shared meaningful dialogue with them we are not yet at that level in our own learning conversations. We tend to focus on more pragmatic constraints such as organisational details, release time, getting to lectures and talking about resources. This is because we are in a new venture that requires obtaining significant domain knowledge. However if we want deeper understanding of the theories of second language learning (Ellis, 2005) we will need to attend to this”. (DP)

“Next year will be better because right now we are only a step or two ahead of the students. As we have come to grips with what the students can do in learning Spanish, we have become aware of how they learn and what they are capable of.” (DP)

The involvement with TPDL has made the teachers rethink the need to evaluate programmes in a more meaningful way, by collaborating together in the light of shared understandings as well as shared resources (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). As they have refined the practice of functioning as a professional learning community, they have realised the importance of deepening their knowledge and skills and working and learning collaboratively with colleagues. They are committed to continue this learning journey to ensure the sustainability of teaching and learning Spanish at their school.

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