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Exploring teacher views of multi-level language classes in New Zealand secondary schools

Karen Ashton*

Institute of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explores teacher views of multi-level teaching in the language classroom.
- Teachers feel multi-level classes devalue language learning and teaching.
- Teachers do not feel supported and have not received professional development.
- Teachers report negative impacts on workload, wellbeing, learning and achievement.
- Benefits include learners supporting one another across year levels.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores New Zealand teacher views of multi-level language classes, an increasingly common practice where learners at different curriculum and year levels are combined into a single class due to declining learner numbers. Findings from exploratory qualitative surveys and interviews show that the majority of teachers do not feel supported within their school and have not received professional development for this significant change to their practice which they feel devalues language learning. Teachers feel that multi-level classes are hard work, increase their workload, and negatively impact on their well-being, student learning and assessment grades.

1. Introduction

Carr's (2005) comment that whenever two or more language teachers are together in Australia, the problem of multi-level classrooms is likely to come up, could also apply in New Zealand, where the issue of multi-level classes is 'highly topical and prevalent' (Badenhorst & East, 2015, p. 64). However, while for Carr (2005, p. 31) 'multi-level' refers to an increase in the diversity of students in terms of proficiency, background and experience (de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010), in New Zealand, due to declining learner numbers, teachers face the additional challenge of having learners at different curriculum and year levels combined into a single senior secondary class. Aside from brief acknowledgement in the literature that it is an increasing trend and concern for New Zealand secondary school teachers (McGee et al., 2013; Oshima, 2012; Scott, 2014); a practitioner-led, single classroom case study (Badenhorst & East, 2015); and informal anecdotal evidence of the type Carr mentions above, this remains an under-researched area. There has been no research into how New Zealand teachers are experiencing teaching multi-level classes, the impacts on their role, and what they see as the main challenges and benefits. As Bridges and Searle (2011, p. 415) comment: 'Teachers need to be given the opportunity to describe their realities of the teaching world, and how it impacts on them'.

1.1. Context

In New Zealand, multi-level classes, the combining of two or three year levels into a single class, is a consequence of declining

* Institute of Education, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand.
E-mail address: k.ashton@massey.ac.nz.

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numbers of foreign language learners. As Ward and East (2016, p. 52) comment, there is a 'cost of having low student numbers in a class' and combining classes across curriculum and year levels is seen as way of saving on money and teaching time (McGee et al., 2013). New Zealand has five years of secondary education, years 9–13 (year 9 marks the beginning of formal language learning for the majority of students who choose to learn a language), and it is in the senior school (Years 11, 12 and 13) where multi-level classes are now commonplace.

Government statistics reveal that the number of learners at secondary school in New Zealand taking a second or foreign language (languages other than English) has dropped to its lowest since 1933 (Asia New Zealand Foundation & New Zealand Association of Language Teachers, 2016; Education Counts, 2017a; Tan, 2015). Despite survey findings that 'more than 90% of [New Zealanders] believe it is valuable to learn another language' (Blundell, 2016, p. 25), in 2014 just one in five secondary students, or 20 per cent, were enrolled in a second or foreign language (Education Counts, 2017b, 2017a; Tan, 2015). Similar concerns about declining numbers of language learners at secondary level have also been expressed in other contexts (see for example Hagger-Vaughan (2016) and Vidal Rodeiro (2017) who report on this situation in England, and media reports in Wales (British Council, 2015) and Australia (Munro, 2016)).

In New Zealand, while learning areas such as English, Maths, Physical Education, Science, Social Sciences, and Technology are considered core and are compulsory, the so-called 'eighth learning area' of Learning Languages is not. Furthermore, learning a language is not supported by a National Languages Policy (McGee et al., 2013; Oranje & Smith, 2017; The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013; Waite, 1992a, 1992b). A Ministry of Education spokesperson has stated that the Ministry 'is not considering the introduction of a national language policy' or making learning a second or foreign language compulsory (Blundell, 2016, p. 29).

While schools are required to offer students the opportunity to learn a language, unless a school chooses to make it compulsory (and this is left to the discretion of the school), the Ministry of Education states that it is 'up to students, and their parents, to decide which of the many options available at school to pursue' (Tan, 2015). The head of student achievement at the Ministry of Education is even more direct stating that: 'The drop in numbers in senior secondary can be attributed to the choices students make about which subjects will be most useful to them in the future' (Tan, 2015). However, decisions about subject choice can be influenced by factors other than student and parental preference. As East (2015) notes, if language learning is not perceived to be of value at school level, this 'can lead to curriculum decisions that effectively diminish the place of languages in the curriculum' (Ward & East, 2016, p. 45). According to a recent survey of New Zealand language teachers, the perceived lack of value placed on language learning within schools and in New Zealand society more broadly was a 'major concern' for teachers (Ward & East, 2016, p. 59).

1.2. Teacher workload

Teaching is ranked as a highly stressful occupation because of time constraints and heavy workload (Klassen et al., 2013; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). As Bridges and Searle (2011) report, research in many parts of the world shows that teachers perceive their workload as increasing and that they are being asked to 'do more with less' (Dinham & Scott, 2000, p. 392). Studies across New Zealand, Australia and the UK have found that for a substantial number of teachers, workload is the most significant aspect associated with teacher job satisfaction (Bridges & Searle, 2011; Butt & Lance, 2005; Dinham & Scott, 1998, 2000; Rhodes, Nevill, & Allan, 2004). When teachers are not involved or responsible for decision making they can feel powerless to say no to decisions which increase teacher workload (Tsang, 2016). Increasing workloads can also bring about the perception that what teachers do is not valued (Dinham & Scott, 1998) and can therefore impact the morale and well-being of teachers (Bridges & Searle, 2011; Tsang, 2016).

Workload issues are also said to impact on the quality of teaching as heavy workload and a lack of preparation time can divert attention and energy away from students (Dinham & Scott, 1998; Klassen et al., 2013) and a teacher's ability to respond to students individually (Badenhorst & East, 2015; Reyes & Imber, 1992).

It has been suggested that teacher stress is reduced if they are supported by colleagues in working towards a common goal such as lesson planning and that these benefits can be sustained long-term (Wan, 2017; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). This kind of teacher collaboration also offers 'the potential to raise teacher confidence' (Rhodes et al., 2004, p. 78). Without this sense of community and institutional support, it has been argued that teacher burn-out and retention issues are more prevalent (Acheson, Taylor, & Luna, 2016).

1.3. The challenge of multi-level teaching

Changes in the diversity of the population of learners pose a significant challenge to their teachers (Carr, 2005; Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2017; Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). The cited benefits of differentiated teaching are to maximise individual student learning growth and potential (Tomlinson, 2000, 2005), which seems at first glance to align well with multi-level teaching. However, in the multi-level classroom the task is more complex as teachers also need to adequately prepare students for the curriculum and assessment requirements at each year level. The issues highlighted above regarding workload are, therefore, likely to be exacerbated in the multi-level class.

In one of the few studies in this area in a foreign language learning context, Strasheim (1979, p. 423) comments that 'the multi-level class exacts a heavy energy toll'. In particular, planning in this environment simply takes more time (Carr, 2005; Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979; Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003; Strasheim, 1979, 1989). While multi-level classes provide students across ages and year levels with the opportunity to interact and learn from one another (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003), Treko (2013, p. 250) states that 'perhaps, it is honest to suggest that there are more challenges than benefits'. As a consequence, Strasheim (1989) and Hunter and Barr-Harrison (1979) report that positive thinking about multi-level teaching is not common and that teachers become frustrated because of heavy workloads and time pressure. Teacher frustration may be noticed by students which can lead to further student retention issues, a concern echoed by Badenhorst and East (2015) in the New Zealand context. For beginning teachers, the challenges in managing diverse classrooms are said to be particularly significant as they are still establishing themselves in the classroom and their teaching practice (De Neve & Devos, 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017). This is a cause for concern given the high attrition rates among beginning teachers (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011).

According to the literature, professional development for teaching diverse learners needs to combine theory and practice and be tailored to the realities of classrooms for teachers to see the relevance to their own practice (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Professional development here refers to the process of ongoing learning and development before and throughout a teacher's career (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). While pedagogy is not the focus of the current study, one issue is that much of the existing literature has focused on mixed-ability classes