

# **THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: ONE SCHOOL'S JOURNEY IN LEARNING LANGUAGES.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports the development of a professional learning community within one school, where a group of teachers undertook a professional development in languages, Teacher Professional Development Languages (TPDL). The teachers' conversations and learning stories provide an insight into implementing additional language learning in a school. These stories give a clear idea of what is involved, what works, the work itself and how the students view their learning. They illustrate how a professional learning culture can support teaching and learning in a school.

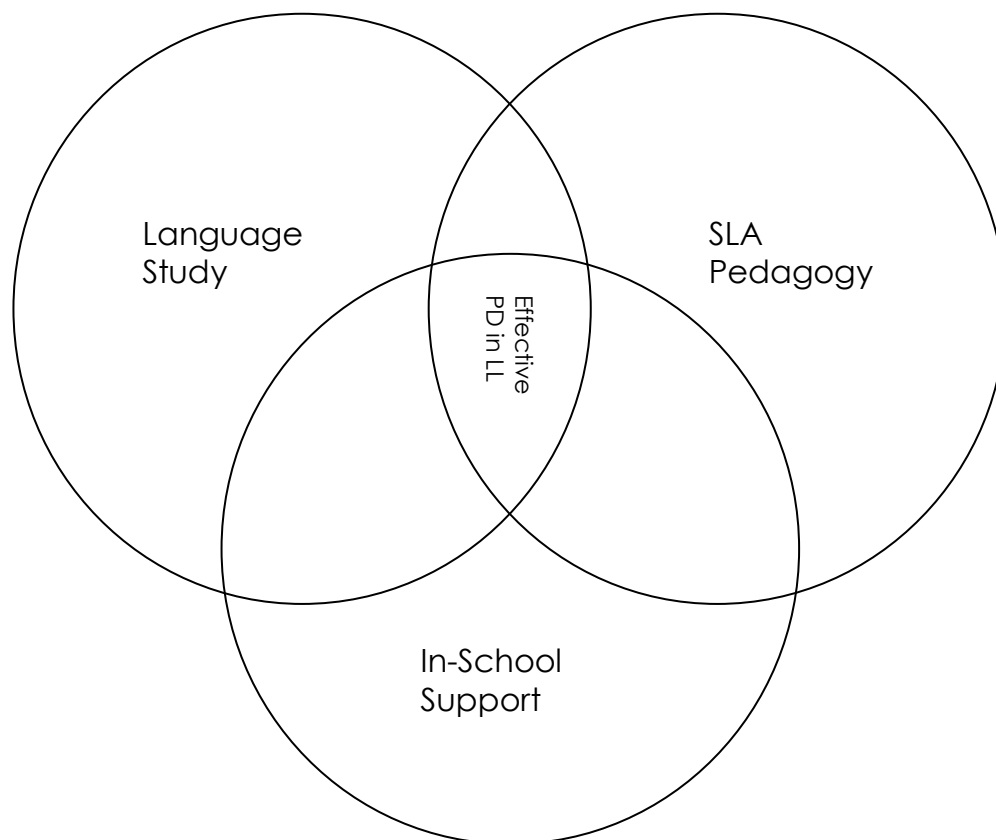
Evidence was gathered from learning conversations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The issues discussed are the development of a professional learning culture within the school, the impact on students' learning and the transference of shared learning and understandings. Reports from teachers and students attest to the benefits of collaborative professional learning within a school.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The introduction of Learning Languages as a new learning area to be offered to all students in Years 7 – 10 by 2010, has meant that many teachers (Years 7 – 10) have needed to undertake professional learning not only in SLA pedagogy, but also in learning an additional language. To cater for these needs a professional learning programme was initiated in 2005. The Teacher Professional Development in Languages (TPDL) is a Ministry of Education funded programme to support schools to cater effectively for Learning Languages. Over the past five years, over 150 teachers nationwide have participated in TPD. TPD comprises three interrelated components: language study, pedagogy and in-school support (See Figure 1, below). Teachers commit to TPD for one year.

## TPDL

### Teacher Professional Development Languages, Years 7-10



*Figure 1. The three interrelated components of TPDL*

In my role of DP and Curriculum Leader, I was aware of the need to address the inclusion of Learning Languages as the eighth learning area in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) and the need to support teachers to deliver a language programme. At the end of 2008 staff at Pakuranga Intermediate, a multicultural, urban Decile 4 school in Auckland, were informed about TPDL as professional development that would enable the school to develop and implement a teaching and learning programme for Learning Languages (Spanish), where none existed previously (see Insley & Thomson, 2008). Past experience with new initiatives had highlighted the importance of involving a group of teachers in professional learning, as a school can lose particular expertise if teachers with specialised knowledge leave. These factors convinced me of the importance of involving several teachers in this enterprise. As a result, a total of seven teachers undertook to learn Spanish, learn second language acquisition methodology and teach Spanish to our classes. These teachers comprised five generalist classroom teachers of Years 7 and 8, one specialist IT Teacher and I, the Deputy Principal. We all completed TPDL in 2009.

The teachers and I were aware of the key elements of effective professional development. 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). I was also aware of the support and encouragement we could offer each other both personally and professionally if a group were involved. In the role of Curriculum Leader I was aware that of the need to address the inclusion of Learning Languages as the eighth learning area in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). The school needed to move in the direction of helping 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 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 themselves. The goal for the school was therefore to support teacher learning and build in a safeguard that would address the issue of sustainability. Building a professional learning community as a means of promoting school-wide capacity and building for sustainable improvement and student learning (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Timperley et al, 2007) was the model that the school decided to pursue.

## **METHOD**

The teachers who participated in the TPDL Programme (2009) introduced learning Spanish to 180 students. Because this was a major school-wide development, it was important to gather evidence of the impact of TPDL on the staff involved. I undertook to do this as my learning inquiry task for TPDL. The inquiry took the form of semi-structured interviews with the six teachers on TPDL. I also kept a file of my thoughts during the process. In addition, eight students and one classroom teacher (not on TPDL) whose students had been learning Spanish were interviewed. The questions used to start the conversations were around the evaluation of the effects of collaborative professional learning within the school. Teachers were asked, what was beneficial, helpful and/or difficult in the professional development, and where to next. 8 students from one class were asked about their experience of learning Spanish. All the interviews were taped and transcribed. I also kept a file of my own thoughts on our learning journey throughout the year. These data were analysed with the help of Silvia Insley, the Professional Director of TPDL. The teachers were shown the final copy of this report so that they could verify that their reflections had been interpreted accurately and that they had been quoted accurately.

## **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. Quotes from the interviews and my file entries are provided as evidence.

### *A culture of learning*

Developing a professional culture of learning requires not only a commitment to learning from both individual students and teachers but also and more importantly a commitment to learning “as a valued activity in its own right.....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). The teachers on TPDL were learning about teaching Spanish at the same time as they were learning and teaching Spanish. This two-fold learning helped them to reflect on the nature of teaching and 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, File notes)

“My son has seen that it is possible to study as an adult and that teachers are in fact lifelong 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 TPDL, 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 dependent 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 of professional learning is developed through shared enterprise, expertise and experiences (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p.95). The teachers who embarked on TPDL identified the collaborative nature of their learning as a contributing factor to their ongoing commitment to their professional learning. The teachers shared what was happening in their lessons, both successes and failures. They also shared insights from their personal lives, 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.

“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, File notes)

“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, 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)

The teachers had exemplified and personalised what the experts say.

### ***Deep and transferable learning***

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

“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 is an intellectual as well as pragmatic endeavour. 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, File notes)

“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 from 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 to 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 someone taught me and I can share that learning to someone 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)

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Overall teachers and students were positive about their collaborative learning journey, the time commitment involved in such an undertaking, and the benefits that accrue from collaborative learning.

“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 [the students] 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 *silla* 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 not only added value to the teachers’ ability to teach a language but also enabled them to see the importance of fostering a professional learning culture. “They [the teachers] are beginning to talk together about the need to have deep principled knowledge that informs their practice”. (DP)

“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 with each other. 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; File notes)

"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; File notes)

Shared professional learning forced the teachers on TPDL to rethink the need to evaluate teaching and learning in the light of shared understandings based on research. As they refined the practice of functioning as a professional learning community, they realised the importance of deepening their knowledge and skills, working and learning collaboratively with colleagues, and continuing their learning journey to ensure the sustainability of teaching and learning Spanish at their school.

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