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Intro / Project description

This project sought to find out how teachers of additional languages in the primary/intermediate school sector in New Zealand could support their students to develop their intercultural capability in the context of the *Learning Languages* curriculum area of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC). We defined 'intercultural capability' as learners' ability to relate successfully and comfortably to people from different cultural backgrounds, appreciating and valuing their own culture and uniqueness alongside the cultures and uniqueness of others.

Aims

We worked with five Year 7/8 teachers in four primary/intermediate schools. We supported the teachers in developing inquiry learning cycles that would provide their students with opportunities to enhance their intercultural capability through comparing and contrasting cultural similarities and differences and reflecting on what these meant for relating successfully to others. The students (all beginners) were learning a range of languages (Chinese, Japanese, French, te reo Māori).

Why is this research important?

Helping young learners to develop their intercultural capability has become both a significant learning goal and a major challenge. New Zealand is experiencing increasing cultural diversity among its population. People are increasingly required to inter-relate and work with others from a range of different cultural, religious and/or linguistic backgrounds or world views. Students in the 21st century need to be educated to engage successfully with this diversity. The *International Capabilities* report (Ministry of Education, 2014)¹ argued that learners need capabilities such as "global competence", "international-mindedness", and "cross-cultural competence" (p. 4). We built our study on the argument that the *Learning Languages* curriculum area is uniquely placed to become a key vehicle through which intercultural capability – in and for local, national and international contexts – may be developed.

Key findings

Prior to the first inquiry learning cycle we observed teachers' current practices in each school context and interviewed them about their beliefs about language learning. Once inquiries were underway, we observed classes, interviewed the teachers after each observation, and conducted focus groups with students at the end of the inquiry cycles.

At the beginning, teachers had a good understanding that a central purpose of learning an additional language was to communicate successfully in that language. However, it was evident that teachers had not given much thought to how to increase their learners' intercultural capability, and the importance of this capability when communicating with others.

We built the teachers' knowledge and understanding of principles of intercultural language teaching through two two-day hui that took place at the start of two inquiry cycles (July – November 2016 and February – June 2017). Teachers then implemented learning inquiries to help their students to develop awareness of their own cultures and to notice cross-cultural similarities and differences in and through a range of topics (e.g., eating and drinking, families, sports, schools).

Our observations and subsequent reflective interviews with the teachers revealed that the teachers were able to construct meaningful inquiry learning cycles that, in their view, both enhanced their students' understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences and motivated the students. One teacher commented towards the end of the project, "basing lessons in an authentic context, having a bigger picture, making lessons relevant to learners, allowing students room to explore, challenging their pre-existing ideas and asking for their point of view are all tenets of good constructivist teaching." Student focus groups also indicated heightened motivation for language learning and revealed that several students experienced learning gains in terms of coming to appreciate and value their own culture/uniqueness alongside the cultures/uniqueness of others. As one student commented, "it has changed me, how I see things differently."

The findings also indicated that teachers struggled with the question of how to reconcile exploring the culture with teaching and practising the language, particularly when facing limited time for language learning. This is a tension that requires further investigation.

Implications for practice

This study has confirmed to us that the development of students' intercultural capability in the context of learning an additional language is a worthwhile and achievable goal, albeit one that is incremental and requires professional learning and development support. We recommend that teachers of languages should include explorations of intercultural incidents through learning inquiries that engage their students in meaningful reflections on comparisons and contrasts across cultures.

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