Understanding how teachers learn

Linking teacher learning to student achievement

How can teacher learning be promoted in ways that result in improved outcomes for students?

That’s the question the Ministry of Education asked Professor Helen Timperley at The University of Auckland to answer about learning and development for teachers.

“We know that what teachers learn does not necessarily translate into teaching practices that impact on student learning and we need to understand how to be more effective in helping teachers to do that,” says Professor Timperley.

“If we understand how teachers learn – and it’s a far more complex process than simply attending a course – then we can understand how this impacts students’ learning and, therefore, their academic achievement, and that is particularly important for those students in New Zealand who do not achieve as well as others.”

There is an emerging knowledge base about how to promote teacher learning in ways that positively impacts on a variety of outcomes for students and this is where the University began its work.

The research team used a technique called Best Evidence Synthesis iteration, or BES, developed by the Ministry of Education.

“BES is a very effective tool that enabled us to identify and bring together, evaluate, analyse, synthesise and then make accessible, all the relevant information on teacher learning in New Zealand and the rest of the world,” says Professor Timperley.

“It’s a very systematic approach to revealing what works, so that we can illuminate how different policies, contexts, resources, and practices impact on teachers’ learning.”

BES aims to deepen our understanding of what works in education, how context is significant and what the evidence suggests can make a bigger difference to optimising outcomes for students.

“If you think of building a house, then you can appreciate what BES is trying to achieve. We have a plan, we develop a framework, we add to that framework and the result is a house.”

The team “built its house” by firstly identifying some 80-plus characteristics (the framework) of professional learning that were likely to impact student learning. These characteristics were then used to analyse nearly 100 relevant studies from New Zealand and internationally.

The result is that the Ministry of Education now has a framework for teacher learning and development that can serve as a guide for both policy and practice. The BES also identified gaps that need addressing, particularly around catering for student diversity and areas such as ICT and mentoring. The results have also attracted international interest at policy and practice levels resulting in a variety of requests for further information and publications.

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The need to strengthen both responsiveness and outcomes for New Zealand’s diverse student population

Professor Helen Timperley

Professor Timperley specialises in policy, organisational and professional learning that promotes improved outcomes for students. She has published more than 40 academic articles internationally and in New Zealand in her specialty areas. She has also written six books for educational professionals on similar topics and led large research contracts with a focus on making a difference for students. She is in demand at international conferences and events to talk about how research can impact on policy and practice.

The challenges

- The need to understand more about the relationship between teacher development and the associated impact on students' social and academic outcomes
- Identifying what works and what doesn't work in professional learning, as it is crucial for future education decision-making at policy and practice levels
- The need to strengthen both responsiveness and outcomes for New Zealand’s diverse student population, particularly those Maori and Pasifika students who are not benefiting as well as some others from our education system

Benefits

- Confirmation that teacher development can have a significant impact on student outcomes, but the approaches used and the context of that development is crucial
- What teachers learn is more important than any particular approach designed to promote that learning
- Extended learning opportunities for teachers are not necessarily effective
- More evidence is needed in many areas, particularly for Maori-medium (language) and Pasifika students, and in areas such as ICT and mentoring beginning teachers.

Delivery

Through Best Evidence Synthesis, we:

- Established a framework of characteristics of professional learning that are likely to impact student outcomes
- Examined the teacher learning context and how it sits within the wider social context

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