

# NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND IN HAMILTON PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A SURVEY OF LEARNERS, TEACHERS AND ESOL PROVISION

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## Introduction

There are many learners from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) in our schools. In 1994, there were reported to be over 46,000 NESB students in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education 1994a, p. 57) and by 1997 this number had risen to over 68,000 (Ministry of Education 1998, p. 93). The reason for this growing number - approaching 10% of the school population - can be traced to the changing immigration patterns over the past few decades.

While there have always been immigrants to New Zealand from non-English speaking backgrounds, the 1960s and 1970s saw a considerable influx of permanent residents arriving from South Pacific countries; during the 1990s, the number of immigrants from these countries diminished, although almost 6000 new settlers arrived in 1995 (Statistics New Zealand 1997) and by 1997 Pacific Island students comprised 7% of the New Zealand school population (Ministry of Education 1998, p. 34). More recently, successive governments have sought to attract immigrants from Asian countries, notably Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea; in 1987 the number of immigrants from Asian countries was 2635, while by 1995 this figure had risen to 17,537 (Statistics New Zealand 1997). In 1997, NESB students of Asian ethnic background comprised 5% of the school population (Ministry of Education 1998, p. 35). In addition, there were about 5500 full-fee-paying international students in 1997, of whom 72% were enrolled in Years 11 to 13 (Ministry of Education 1998, p. 36). Also in recent years there have been smaller, but significant, numbers of non-English speaking refugees admitted to New Zealand; the present quota is about 750 a year. In 1998-9 (Council for International Development 1999, p.11), refugees entered New Zealand from Somalia (215), Ethiopia (190), Iraq (128), Eritrea (47); and Sudan (33). The children of these 'quota refugee' families - and of hundreds of other refugee families entering New Zealand annually as part of the Family Reunification Programme - have added to the linguistic and cultural diversity of our schools.

Newly-arrived quota refugees - and their children - are given some English language tuition on arrival as part of their six-week orientation to the new country; there are also

various possibilities open to adults to develop their language skills once they are settled into their new homes - for example, by using their \$200 training grant or seeking help from the ESOL Home Tutor Service. With regard to immigrants seeking permanent residence, the principal applicants are required to achieve a measure of English language proficiency, as assessed by IELTS (International English Language Testing System); other adult family members are expected to achieve the same measured competence in English, or pay a bond which is partially refundable if they meet the standards within twelve months of arrival. However, there is no such requirement for their dependents under the age of sixteen, and many children of very limited English ability are being enrolled in our primary and secondary schools; in 1998, over 5000 of the total of 68000 were deemed to be at the level of 'minimal English' (Ministry of Education 1998, p. 93).

The limited English proficiency of many such learners presents difficulties in achieving one of the fundamental goals set out in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*.

Because English is the common language of communication in New Zealand, all students will develop the ability and confidence to communicate competently in English (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 11)

## The Survey

To explore some of the local dimensions of the problem, in September 1998 all the schools in the city limits of Hamilton were sent a two-page questionnaire, under a covering letter, to be completed by the member of staff with specific responsibility for ESOL provision in the school; within two months all had been returned. Data from the secondary schools were collated and analysed, but this article deals only with information from the 34 primary, intermediate and middle schools in the city. For the sake of convenience, unless otherwise specified all these schools will be referred to below as primary schools.

In the first section of the questionnaire, the schools were asked to provide the numbers of NESB students in the following categories: those with refugee status, non-refugees (Permanent Resident) and full fee-paying students. The second section sought information about the staffing of ESOL programmes, including the qualifications and duties of teachers and teacher aides. The third section elicited data about the nature of the ESOL provision - both withdrawal lessons and in-class support, including whether NESB students were taught individually or in groups, and whether the schools ran intensive programmes or whether the ESOL programme was more-or-less even throughout the year. The fourth section asked for an estimate of the approximate number of hours of ESOL support per week for average students in three categories of NESB learners: those who were at the stage of 'minimal English', those deemed to be well below the standard of

the age cohort, and those just below the standard of the age cohort. (Ministry of Education 1999b, pp 6 - 7).

Findings of the survey will be presented and discussed in terms of the learners, their teachers, and the ESOL provision.

### **Numbers and background of the learners**

In the 34 Hamilton primary schools surveyed, there were 725 students (6% of the total school population) deemed to be in need of ESOL assistance - taken as being at or below the Ministry of Education's (1999b) assessment benchmark (112) for funding purposes.

Of the 725 students, almost 75% were designated as the children of permanent residents, rather less than 20% were identified as refugees, and the remainder were fee-payers. The number of NESB learners enrolled varied from 1.5% to over 10% of the school roll. There was also variation in the proportions of learners in the different categories: some schools had no refugees, while others had significant numbers. The school with the highest proportion of NESB learners also had the highest number of refugees (25, of whom 23 were Somali) on its roll. Likewise, there was an uneven distribution of fee-payers: schools like the one just mentioned had none, while another primary school had eight. No information was sought - or obtained - about the decile ratings of the schools in the survey, although this is quite certainly a significant issue.

The ethnic background of these students was also diverse. Most of the permanent residents came from various Pacific Islands, as well as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea; significant numbers of refugees were Somalis and Iraqis; the fee-payers tended to be Korean and Taiwanese, but there were also learners from Mongolia, Kiribati and Fiji. There were distributional differences. In the school already mentioned with 25 refugees, 30 of the other NESB learners were Tongans. On the other hand, one intermediate school had 43 NESB students (out of a total roll of 445) with the following ethno-linguistic backgrounds: Mongolian, Somali, Arabic, Korean, Hindi, Fijian, Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese), Farsi, Japanese, Tuvalu, and Kiribati.

### **Implications**

Clearly, the label 'NESB' brackets children of considerable diversity, whose only point in common is their perceived linguistic deficiency. The NESB learners in Hamilton's primary schools come from many ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Evidently, teachers and schools with such diverse cultural groups have a clear responsibility to look into ways

of narrowing the cultural gap in order to promote effective learning. This is recognised in *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*, which recommends that:

the prior knowledge, first language, and culture of each student should be respected and incorporated in English programmes (Ministry of Education 1994b, p.15).

However, the formulation of appropriate policies for NESB learners is considerably complicated by the very diversity of backgrounds and the uneven distribution of these learners among, and within, schools. For example, the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* states:

students whose mother tongue is a Pacific Islands language or a community language will have the opportunity to develop and use their own language as an integral part of their schooling (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 10).

Such principles might be applied where there are reasonably large and homogenous linguistic minorities in a school, such as in the primary school referred to above with the Somali and Tongan learners. However, effective incorporation of either the language or the culture, or both, of homogenous groups of NESB learners would need staff specifically attuned to their linguistic and cultural resources. It is difficult to see how the Ministry's recommendations could be effectively implemented in schools, common in Hamilton, which enrol learners from a wide variety of ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Very often, there are only one or two NESB learners with the same first language in a mainstream class. The survey also revealed that there is a shortage of teachers speaking Asian languages - or indeed any foreign languages - in our primary schools. Clearly, there is a need for schools to recruit teachers who - if not themselves members of these communities - are at least culturally and linguistically sensitive to them. Furthermore, schools need to ask, and find answers to, questions such as those posed in the recent handbook from the Ministry of Education (1999a, pp 11 ff):

- \* What is the cultural environment in which this student lives, has lived?
- \* Do the parents or caregivers understand and use the English language?
- \* How much does the family know about NZ schools and the education system?
- \* Can the adults read the information available from the school?
- \* How far is the family able to participate in the life of the school?

It was noted above that a large number of these learners are children of refugees, and an understanding of the often traumatic background of many such children has come to be recognised, not least through the efforts of contributors to journals such as *Many Voices* (for example, Cochrane *et al* 1993) and the work done by agencies such as Education Advisory Services and Refugee and Migrants Services. What is less commonly appreciated, however, is the likelihood that many other immigrant children may be suffering from psychological shock - perhaps even trauma - for a long time after their arrival in this country. Sometimes these children have been little prepared by their parents before they come, and neither they nor their parents find it easy to cope with the new linguistic and cultural demands placed upon them; the children may suffer from anxiety, reduced self-esteem and a lack of motivation - as well as ability - to integrate into their new

society. Moreover, many young Asian learners are not living in their normal family context; often the father continues to work and live in their country of origin, placing additional psychological and emotional stress on these children. There are also students in Hamilton - typically, but not exclusively fee-payers - both of whose parents are absent, the children living with (distant) relatives or with local Kiwi homestay families; the latter may help promote their linguistic and cultural development, but it may hinder their emotional maturation. In short, the linguistic issue assumed by the notion of NESB may obscure deeper psychological implications.

### **Qualifications and duties of teachers and teacher aides**

Of the 34 primary schools surveyed, 14 had one teacher with ESOL qualifications, and one school had two designated ESOL-qualified teachers; two mainstream teachers in other schools were currently following a course. Most of these teachers had followed, or were following, a course at the local Polytechnic. The ESOL teachers were assisted by some twenty teacher aides, a few of whom had the same qualification, or else had undertaken other forms of training (such as courses organised by the ESOL Home Tutor Service). In the other twenty schools, responsibility for ESOL provision varied: sometimes one or more mainstream teachers took charge; in other schools the Assistant Principal or Special Needs teacher was identified; sometimes a teacher aide was identified, and occasionally no information was given as to who was responsible. Thirty-two teacher aides worked in these schools, of whom only one was reported as having an ESOL qualification. (Schools which employed ESOL-qualified teachers had an average of 31 NESB learners; schools without specialist teachers had an average of 17.5 NESB learners.)

There are two basic ways of providing systematic ESOL support: either by withdrawing the learners from the mainstream for ESOL tuition, or by helping these learners when they are in mainstream classes. On the whole, ESOL-qualified teachers appeared to spend most of their time in ESOL withdrawal lessons, and the teacher aides in schools with such teachers also spent a significant part of their time assisting in withdrawal teaching. In schools without ESOL-qualified teachers, it appears that it was the teacher-aides who withdrew NESB learners for ESOL tuition.

Other duties included enrolment, assessment and attendance at parent-teacher conferences. Almost all the ESOL-qualified teachers reported that they took a full part in the enrolment and assessment of the NESB learners, and most also attended conferences between teachers and the parents of NESB learners. It was very difficult to tell from the data what happened about the enrolment and assessment of the NESB learners in the schools without ESOL-qualified teachers.

## Implications

That a number of teachers in Hamilton's primary schools had received specific ESOL in-service development is noteworthy, and the course provided by the Polytechnic is clearly serving local needs. The programme has recently been extended from a four-course certificate to an eight-course diploma. Students can still exit the programme after the first four courses with a Certificate in TESOL; or they can complete all 8 courses in order to gain a Diploma in TESOL. The diploma has been accredited by NZQA, and although it is undertaken in a minimum of 2 years it is equivalent to a year's full-time polytechnic graduate diploma. Many teachers, in addition to those with whom this report is directly concerned, have benefited from the course: information from the programme coordinator indicates that about a hundred people have followed the programme, many of whom work in the secondary and private schools in Hamilton, or outside the city limits. In addition, many teachers in Hamilton have attended seminars organised by the local Education Advisory Services.

However, the survey indicated that by no means all of the teachers responsible for ESOL provision had received any substantial training in this area of expertise - and this applies also to the very many mainstream teachers with ESOL learners in their classes. This reflects the point made by Kennedy and Dewar (1997) that many teachers currently working in schools have received very little information about NESB learners during their years of training. Providers of pre- and in-service programmes for mainstream teachers urgently need to address this issue.

Given the growing numbers of NESB learners in schools, it seems evident that more specialist ESOL teachers should be recruited and, where employed, provided with appropriate professional development. Precisely what form that development should take depends on what is considered to be the proper role of ESOL specialists. It was noted above that their main responsibility at present lies in the planning and teaching of language lessons to groups of learners in withdrawal classes. While this work - and that of in-class support to these learners - is essential, there are other areas of responsibility for ESOL teachers. Perhaps the most important of these is the enrolment of NESB learners in the school. More than any other member of a school's staff, ESOL teachers have expertise in eliciting information from, and giving comprehensible advice to, NESB parents, as well as pupils. Another key role is that of diagnosing the initial and developing linguistic competence and educational needs of the NESB learners, working alongside the mainstream teachers to implement the Ministry of Education (1999b) assessment guidelines. A third key role for ESOL teachers occurs in parent-teacher conferences; it was noted above that many ESOL teachers take an active part in this work and - again - may apply their skills in inter-ethnic communication.

From the above, it is clear the issue of appropriate professional development for teachers needs to be addressed by principals and Boards of Trustees in broader terms than merely the planning and execution of language lessons; and indeed this issue, strongly supported by the Ministry of Education (1999a, p. chapter 7), is firmly addressed in local training courses. Consideration, too, needs to be given to the proper recruitment and effective training of teacher-aides, whose support is so valuable in this area of education.

### **ESOL Provision in the schools**

All of the schools surveyed provided withdrawal lessons; most did this on a one-on-one basis, but also taught small groups of up to six pupils. Only in four schools were groups larger than six taught. One reason for such small groups is that many schools had only a few students; for example, ten schools had fewer than a dozen NESB learners, sometimes with different levels of English competence. Schools with more NESB learners would have had timetabling difficulties organising larger groups of learners with similar levels of English competence. Evidently, a group of about six learners would be large enough to provide enough interaction between teacher and learners, and among learners themselves, and small enough to enable their work to be effectively monitored in the limited time available.

All schools, except three, reported that they provided in-class support to NESB learners. Most did this both on a one-on-one basis and in small groups. Those that indicated otherwise (either one or the other, but not both) tended to be schools with only half a dozen or so NESB learners on the roll. Mostly, it seems, it was teacher aides who provided in-class support, while the specialist ESOL teachers tended to spend their time teaching English in withdrawal lessons.

The schools were asked to estimate the number of hours per week of withdrawal lessons and in-class support provided to a typical student in each of the three categories referred to above: those whose English was 'minimal', those whose language competence was deemed to be well below the cohort, and those just below the cohort. NESB learners deemed to have 'minimal English' received, on average, just over three hours a week of withdrawal ESOL tuition. The range of provision among the schools varied from half an hour in one school to nine and a half hours in another; the most common number of hours given was two and a half in primary schools, and five in middle and intermediate schools. NESB learners in the second category were provided with an average of just over two and a half hours a week, and those in the third just under two hours a week.

The estimates for in-class support varied quite considerably among the schools. As noted,

three schools stated that they did not provide this support at all, others indicated between half an hour and five hours, some schools simply indicated 'variable'.

### **Implications**

The survey indicated that few Hamilton primary schools organised intensive transitional programmes - for example, at the start of the school year - to induct new learners into the language and culture of the schools. In addition to the inevitable problems of funding, available staff and other priorities, there are logistical reasons why such transitional programmes are not commonly in place. Chief among these is the fact that NESB students do not always enrol at the start of the school year: for example, in one intermediate school surveyed, thirty NESB learners came up from local primary schools on the first day of the year, but seventeen new learners were subsequently enrolled at the rate of approximately two a month. They were immersed in the mainstream within a week of their arrival, and subsequently given withdrawal language tuition, usually alongside learners who were already in the school. In such circumstances, it is simply impracticable to organise coherent programmes to induct groups of new learners, even though the need for such induction is generally recognised (Heney 1996, Kennedy and Dewar 1997, Barnard 1998a).

Perhaps the most important finding of the survey was the very small number of hours of focussed ESOL tuition actually provided in withdrawal classes: on average, about three hours. Assuming that the school week comprises about 25 classroom hours, students with minimal English are in the mainstream for 22 hours - therein receiving incomprehensible input. Those in the other categories - whose language skills are below, or well below, their cohort - generally received even less language tuition.

In these circumstances, it is reasonable to question whether the result of the current practice is a matter of immersion or submersion: are the NESB learners swimming or drowning?

### **Recommendations from the schools**

In the final part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to make one or two recommendations as to how their ESOL programmes might be made more effective. Respondents in six schools had no recommendations to make; those made by the other respondents fell mostly into three categories - resources, time and training.

Seventeen of the 28 respondents recommended more funding, in terms of increasing the

present allocation per NESB learner from the Ministry and in topping-up by Boards of Trustees. Several suggested the employment of trained ESOL teachers instead of teacher-aides; other suggestions for the use of funding included the provision of more resources for the NESB learners, more intensive support for slower learners and for those whose level of English is just below that of their cohort. Five schools reported that they had no room designated for ESOL provision, and needed one. Other recommendations ranged from the need for specially-adapted curriculum related materials for NESB learners and self-study programmes (books, tapes, worksheets) to the need for a computer and internet facilities in the classroom.

Eight respondents mentioned the need for more time - for various purposes, such as structured collaboration between ESOL and mainstream staff (and other staff at schools), release time for ESOL teachers to develop their programmes more effectively, time for initial (pre-mainstreaming) programmes, time to organise a buddy-system throughout the school, time to establish good relations with NESB parents, and simply more time for withdrawal lessons.

Ten respondents stated that more training was required - especially for teacher aides, most of whom are largely untrained. Some suggested more coverage of the needs of NESB learners in pre-service programmes was needed, as it was felt that new teachers did not know how to deal with NESB learners; others indicated that more in-service courses were required for practising teachers, notably in the area of assessing NESB learners.

## Conclusions

Like the majority of the respondents cited above, we believe that there should be more resources to meet the needs of NESB learners. The present level of Ministry funding is markedly higher than that which was available until 1998, but it is still insufficient. The amount provided by the Ministry barely covers the cost of the work done by teacher aides. Greater attention needs to be paid to the costs and benefits of employing specialist ESOL teachers. Boards of Trustees also need to undertake a proper needs and resource analysis and thereafter make adequate funds available for essential facilities, equipment and materials. Also, boards of schools which receive long-term fee-paying students or short-term study groups urgently need to address the issue of how best to utilise the income derived therefrom (Dale and Robertson 1997, p. 221-223; Barnard 1998b, p.110).

The issue of time is closely bound up with funding. However, the present authors would advise school principals and their boards to consider very carefully the question of effective time management. It is reasonable to suggest that ESOL provision in many schools

is less effective than it might be because of inadequate staff time allocated for information-gathering, consultation and collaborative planning. These matters should be covered by the formulation and implementation of NESB policies in schools: the Ministry's recent Handbook (1999a, chapter 3) provides some guidance as to how schools can start to develop appropriate policies.

The survey reflects the national picture that most teachers responsible for NESB students have not received any special training, either pre- or post-experience. The professional development of teachers needs to take into account the appropriate roles for ESOL specialists and their mainstream colleagues. A matter that was not directly addressed in the survey was the extent to which ESOL teachers serve to advise their mainstream colleagues as to how the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by NESB learners might be catered for in the mainstream. It would be illuminating to conduct in primary schools attitudinal surveys such as those recently carried out in secondary schools by Lo (1998) and Johnston (1999) to compare (and contrast) their respective attitudes and understandings.

The present authors feel that the call for effective training for teacher aides, as well as teachers, reflects the heavy reliance placed on them in ESOL provision. They are, of course, cheaper to employ than teachers - the present remuneration in most schools is about \$10 an hour - and real investment in their training would undoubtedly benefit the schools and individuals concerned. An issue that also needs to be investigated is the management of the work of teacher aides. The survey showed that heavy reliance was placed on such ancillary staff in ESOL provision, even to the extent that they appeared in some cases to have been teaching NESB learners perhaps without the degree of supervision normally expected. Clearly, there is a need to establish the respective roles of ESOL and mainstream teachers vis-a-vis teacher-aides in ESOL provision, and set out clear guidelines for the supervision and evaluation of their work.

It is necessary to carry out school-based research into ESOL provision. On the basis of such investigations, schools would be able to make informed decisions about the balance between withdrawal tuition and in-class support. There is a further need for longitudinal research in our schools into the implications of age, gender and sociolinguistic background on the development of cognitive-academic language proficiency. This, after all, rather than communicative competence, should be the primary aim of ESOL provision.

The limitations of this survey need to be noted. Firstly, the information derived from the questionnaire provides merely a 'snapshot' of local circumstances at a specific time; secondly, information sought on the questionnaire might not have always been clear to the informants; thirdly, the circumstances of the survey did not permit follow-

up of interesting or ambiguous information - it merely raised further questions. However, it is hoped that this article will provide teachers elsewhere with some comparative information to relate to their own experience and thereby stimulate discussion of issues of current professional concern.

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