Chapter 14

Some Final Comments and Questions
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This exploratory study of the programmes and support provided for non-English-speaking background (NESB) students in New Zealand schools, the fieldwork for which was undertaken in November 1995, has highlighted many issues and raised many questions.

It was evident from information obtained during the study that a problem in the past (and, perhaps, in some schools a problem still) has been the ad hoc nature of the development of programmes and support for NESB students: that is, schools have had to learn how best to meet the needs of their NESB students largely by ‘trial and error’. A participant from one school, for example, who had experienced this (very unsatisfactory) ad hoc development process commented as follows:

“We’re actually getting there. I think we have travelled a long way this year, we really have. The fact that we have got so much done in such a short period of time is nothing short of miraculous. It has taken six years to get this far, as long as I have been here, and I just gave up thinking we would ever get this all together and finally it has all come together. There’s a purpose to living after all! I might even stay!” [Classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

As well, it appears that not all schools’ administrators have been fully committed to, or supportive of, the provision of programmes and support for NESB students in their schools.

“[A firm commitment to ESOL staffing] was always a problem until quite recently. [Our present principal] has made big improvements. ESOL used to be staffed by anyone who had a free period. Well, that was useless. But now it is more cohesive [with the establishment of the ESOL Department]. [ESOL teacher, secondary school.]

Schools in the study felt that they had moved well past the most difficult aspects of the problems identified above. However, an ongoing issue, seen to limit everything they were doing or hoped to do with and for their NESB students, was that of a perceived shortfall in resourcing — both staffing and funding — in the ESOL area. Although a significant increase in ESOL funding was announced in the June 1997 Budget, it would seem that the adequacy of resourcing levels will need to be carefully monitored in coming years. This would especially be the case if schools pursue talked-about objectives such as providing bilingual programmes

1 For this school, staff participating in a professional development contract for assisting NESB students proved to be the turning point for the better.

2 In the June 1997 Budget it was announced that there would be $5,739 million over three years for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This was: “To increase the maximum per student rate of ESOL funding over time, potentially up to a maximum of $1,500 (GST inclusive) per student over three years by 2000/2001. Students will attract ESOL funding for a maximum of three years only.” The rationale for the initiative was stated as: ‘Increased immigration has placed significant pressure on existing ESOL funding. This initiative will provide a significant increase in per student funding.” [From a Ministry of Education document, June 1997.]
for NESB students, something that is increasingly occurring in other countries (eg, Australia and the United States), and providing more language and support programmes for NESB parents/caregivers with the twin aims of helping them to cope more comfortably in New Zealand society and to become more effectively involved in their children’s education.

A clear message from the study was that of the importance of first language maintenance. To provide NESB students with effective opportunities to maintain and foster their first language suggests a strong need for more bilingual teachers.

“There needs to be more people who are qualified [specifically for working with NESB students] — more bilingual teaching staff.” [ESOL coordinator, intermediate school.]

It was felt, too, that, as well as the obvious benefits for first language maintenance, employment of bilingual teachers with backgrounds and/or second language learning and other experiences similar to those of their NESB students would help NESB students settle better in our schools and communities.

“We have a bilingual teacher who is excellent with the Chinese students. We are looking to get a Korean bilingual teacher next year and they [bilingual teachers] are the ones responsible for the initial interview [ie, when the student and parents first arrive at the school].” [ESOL coordinator, secondary school.]

However, the availability of suitably trained and qualified bilingual teachers in a small country such as New Zealand is a problem, and one unlikely to be solved in the short-term.

Other issues related to teacher recruitment and retention raised in the study included an identified need to recruit teachers with the ‘right attitude’ to schools which cater for NESB students: that is, to ensure that the teachers who are employed are happy to work with NESB students and see them as an exciting, interesting challenge rather than as ‘a nuisance’ or an added burden. As well, it was felt that suitable teachers of NESB students are those keen to undertake specific training in the teaching and learning of these students, and who are willing to develop an understanding of other cultures and at least a basic knowledge of and facility in the languages of their NESB students.

According to schools in the study, the retention and recruitment of teachers with knowledge, skills, and experience in the teaching and learning of NESB students is difficult when there are uncertainties about resourcing allocations. Resourcing uncertainties mean that schools cannot always guarantee for the following year [or even, on occasion, the following term] how many ESOL staffing hours will be available or if there will be any at all. This is a situation many teachers find untenable. As a result, they are likely to seek and take up a position in another school (and many teachers with skills and experience in teaching NESB students are sought after) which can give a better guarantee of ongoing work. While it is of A clear message from the study is the importance of first language maintenance. Uncertainties about resourcing allocations can make it difficult for schools to retain ESOL teachers.
course good that NESB students will continue to benefit from these teachers’ skills and experience, albeit in different schools, it raises the issue of ‘better off’ versus ‘less well off’ schools. In general, better resourced schools with high levels of backup and support from their communities will more readily attract (better) teachers than less well resourced and supported schools. This leaves the latter schools in a vulnerable position: some participants reported that staff changes at different times in their schools had left them without any staff member who possessed specialised knowledge about NESB students, a situation which had caused significant regression in the nature and scope of their programmes and support for NESB students.

Putting aside the issue of resourcing, a partial solution to the potential loss of ‘key’ ESOL staff in the school, according to some participants in the study, was that of having all staff from the school participate in a professional development contract for assisting NESB students. All participants in the study who had participated in such a contract were extremely positive about the value of the experience in terms of knowledge and skills gained and the spirit of cooperation and sharing that it had engendered among staff and recommended that all schools with NESB students should make it an undertaking to participate. There is an issue about the extent to which such contracts are available, however. As only a small number of professional development contracts relating to NESB students are let each year, and are centred in only a small number of locations, this raises the question of whether consideration should be given to increasing the number of contracts in any one year to allow more schools, in a greater number of locations, the opportunity to participate.3

Participation in a professional development contract for assisting NESB students appears to be one potentially very important source of support for schools with NESB students on their rolls. Another source of support valued by participants in the study was that received from such organisations as the teacher advisory/support services, the Correspondence School, and the Refugee and Migrant Service. However, participants also stated that as much as they valued the support that they received, these organisations were unable, due to lack of staff to meet the demand, to provide as much support and advice as many participants felt they needed or would have liked. As with the professional development contracts, therefore, consideration should perhaps be given to strengthening the ability of organisations such as those mentioned above to provide support for schools, in order to alleviate the increasing burden on schools and teachers to cater for a very wide range of student and community needs4 and thereby also help provide improved educational and other outcomes for the students and their families and communities.

3 As detailed in Footnote 1 in the previous chapter (page 264), however, steps have now been taken to help address this issue.

4 The following comment from one primary school principal sums up the experiences of many in the study: “The pastoral care [that many NESB – and other – students and their families need] is actually a drain on human resources”.
A further important source of support for teachers in meeting the needs of NESB students is that of in-class support from teacher aides, bilingual members of the community who provide interpreting and tutoring assistance, and volunteer helpers (usually parents/caregivers). There were many comments from participants in the study to the effect that such support was invaluable and was often an integral part of the programmes and support that schools were able to provide. This reliance on (for the most part, untrained\(^5\)) support persons raises a number of questions. For example, as teacher aides, bilingual tutors, and volunteer helpers often take on a teaching role with students on a one-to-one or small group basis, it could be asked whether they should receive some formal training, and, if so, what would be the implications of this for the teaching profession and for the amount teacher aides would then need to be paid once training had been undertaken. Related questions are that of whether volunteer helpers should receive some degree of reimbursement and whether paying (more) for the support provided by such people would mean that it was no longer viable for schools to make use of this type of support.

Another issue concerns that of parental involvement in schools, especially in relation to working with students in the classroom. Such involvement raises the question of the extent to which schools can or should expect to depend upon parental support. This is potentially an issue for consideration by government, as without parental input (and, as noted above, the input of teacher aides and other support people) for NESB students, in particular, the pressure on (some) schools’ teaching staff would be much greater. This has obvious implications for staffing levels, class sizes, and resourcing generally. As well, there is again the issue of ‘better off’ versus ‘less well off’ schools referred to earlier with the result that it is likely that some schools will always be better able to access parental help than others because of the nature of their communities. For example:

“We have parents that support the school community but to try and timetable the parents doesn’t work. We’ve tried, we’ve gone along that path many times. We’ve found that you can’t set up programmes and rely on voluntary assistance. It falls down all the time.” [Deputy principal, primary school.]

Another, and equally important, aspect of parental involvement in schools is that of the extent to which parents/caregivers take an active role, outside of school, in their children’s education (eg, by encouraging or overseeing homework completion, talking with and reading to their child). Schools in the study reported considerable variation in parental input in this area but all recognised that encouraging parents/caregivers to take an interest and back up the work of the school is vital in helping further students’ education. However, this is often far from an easy task, with schools reporting a need for more support and resourcing to improve their efforts in getting parents/caregivers ‘on side’.

\(^5\) Some schools, however, reported that their teacher aides were trained teachers who were no longer working as ‘teachers’ per se (eg, due to retirement).
Just as some schools are likely to be better equipped than other schools to cope with meeting the needs of their NESB students without jeopardising other priorities, so are some NESB families better ‘resourced’ to deal with the learning of English, and so on, than others. For example, participants in the study advised that some families have the capacity to pay for supplementary tutoring for their children:

“Most of [the NESB students at this school] have tutors of some sort I think. (I guess you’d be looking at $20 per hour on average.)” [ESOL coordinator, intermediate school.]

“A third of NESB students’ families [at this school] are funding tutors. For secondary students [tutoring] is about $30 per hour, primary approximately $25 per hour. The rich new immigrants are doing well, the refugees are not doing so well. Intensive support gets you a long way along the track. One-on-one is ideal.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

Other NESB families, however, due to economic, social, and emotional difficulties are not only not in a position to pay for extra tuition for their children, but also have a great many day-to-day living problems to deal with that can impede English language acquisition and learning generally.

“The traumatised [students] are really time intensive. They’ve got to learn how to relate to people. They need much more time [than other NESB students], possibly two hours a day, on a very small group basis, if not individually. They need much longer than we can give them. We would like to be able to offer a proper introductory course which would go on as long as the students’ social and language needs demanded it. [It would include] getting to know people, getting to trust people, getting to know their way around the school — an orientation course. That would be really important because some students suffer from stress and this causes inappropriate behaviour within the class. Some are affected by what is happening on the television or radio news [for example, news about the situation] in Yugoslavia, and this unsettles them further. With other students you would send them along to a counsellor, but these students do not have the language to express themselves. ... The [ESOL Department] is where they feel comfortable [in the school] and this is where they come. So in fact you are providing a counselling service. And it is time-consuming trying to communicate. And you are not timetabled to be a listening ear third period on a Wednesday! And you might spend the whole of that period trying to find a translator.” [Three ESOL teachers, secondary school.]

“As far as the Somali students are concerned, they and other refugees fall into a bit of a gap. They need more help socially, and in counselling areas. I think there is a need for more resources and it’s in the refugee area that it needs to come. We get some very unhappy refugee children who need a lot more input.” [ESOL coordinator, secondary school.]
“The children here [most on the school’s roll are NESB students] live for school — Friday afternoon comes round and a lot of them are quite disappointed because the weekend is coming up and they know they won’t be coming to school. And that is a reflection of their home lives. [For example], they can run around and play here at school, [which] is a big plus for our children because a lot of them come from flats where they haven’t got a backyard to play in so they love coming to school.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

The reference made in the quotes on the previous page to some NESB students receiving private tuition raises additional questions: while, mostly, participants felt that this extra tuition aided NESB students’ progress in English language acquisition considerably, due to the intensive one-to-one interaction that was provided (and which schools acknowledged they could not provide nearly as much of as they would have liked or as they saw necessary), some participants in the study were cautious about the qualifications or abilities of some private tutors, feeling that they sometimes teach their students poor or inadequate language which later has to be ‘unlearned’. Another question concerns the role of the school and of the community in meeting the educational and other needs of (NESB) students: for example, should the school be responsible for the pastoral care of students, with the risk of compromising time spent on educational matters, or should this type of care more properly be the responsibility of the community and/or other institutions? A similar question might also be asked about the relative roles of the school and the community in relation to, in this case, NESB students’ acquisition of English via intensive — small group or one-to-one — instruction.

An issue raised many times both directly and indirectly and in various contexts by participants in the study was that of class size. The message was that, often, class sizes in general are too large, making it very difficult for the teachers to devote enough time to any students, not only NESB students. For example:

“There is a tremendous amount of stress on the classroom teacher when they have a class of 34 [or more children] and within that a group of [NESB] kids who are from different ethnic backgrounds.” [ESOL coordinator, intermediate school.]

It was evident, too, that many participants in the study felt that more liaison among all those who contribute in some way to programmes and support for NESB students would be highly desirable. For example, it was felt that there should be more liaison among schools to allow for sharing of ideas, resource materials, and information about students who transfer between schools; more liaison between schools and those organisations that produce resource materials and provide backup for teachers; more liaison among institutions and groups which provide training in the teaching and learning of NESB students; and more liaison between immigration and education authorities. Such liaison, it was believed, would
ultimately result in better outcomes for NESB students and their families and for their schools and communities. For example:

“When they [the NESB students] shift schools there is no, ‘OK, this is their file, take that with you to your next school’. I phone up schools if I know where they’re going but with the refugees, often they’re here one day, and not the next. You spend an awful lot of time [working with some of these students] and some of it is just thrown away because they go, so some sort of coordination [across] schools would be useful.” [ESOL coordinator, secondary school.]

“As far as courses and things go [relating to the teaching of NESB students], I know there are anomalies between what colleges run, what the universities run, and those for teacher training. I’ve been looking at courses at the moment, some courses are behind the times. I wondered if these groups are working together. That might be something to look at.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“People come from all over the world to look at our reading programmes but, for all that, we are behind the times with our TESOL [teaching English to speakers of other languages]. Some people [schools] are really way ahead [in this area], like us, but for others the attitudes are really poor amongst the teachers and the parents [community] and it is very unrealistic when [the government is] continually encouraging more immigrants and accepting more refugees [every] year.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

One final issue is: what measures or criteria should be used to judge whether a student — not only an NESB student, but any student — is doing well in our schools and society? Schools’ stated purpose of programmes and support for NESB students is, essentially, that of providing equality in educational opportunities, or, in other words, to allow NESB students to study alongside their classmates on an even footing. One participant also put the overall purpose as follows:

“For the students, obviously, the aim is mainstreaming as soon as possible.” [Principal, secondary school.]

However, careful consideration needs to be given to what the answers should be to such questions as what do terms like equality in educational opportunities mean?; how long does it take for NESB students to be able to cope as well as their classmates?, and what does ‘coping’ mean? Is the level at which their classmates operate necessarily a good measure, given that the standards and abilities in different classrooms in different schools in different countries can and do differ greatly?