CASE STUDY:
Bilingual/biliteracy education

What works for Samoan students?

New Zealand’s classrooms and communities are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, so policy makers and education providers need to know what best meets the diverse learning needs of students.

The Ministry of Education’s Quality Teaching Research and Development Project (QTR&D) aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes for all students, including those with specific cultural and language needs. QTR&D covers literacy, numeracy, social studies and science across different language settings. The outcomes of QTR&D will help inform policy and future research and development work with teachers in schools.

The University of Auckland was asked to investigate literacy for Samoan bilingual/biliteracy students against a range of principles, including a recognition that culture counts, ako (reciprocal teaching and learning), the need for high quality evidence-based practices linked to Pasifika student outcomes, and the need for culturally inclusive and responsive learning communities.

The Woolf Fisher Research Centre and the Faculty of Education at the University joined forces for this 20-month project, using previous collaborations with South Auckland schools as the springboard.

Earlier Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) programmes have shown the critical importance of teachers’ personal theories, their expectations and their understanding of students’ learning needs to student outcomes.

“QTR&D is based around the belief that teachers’ subject content knowledge and related pedagogical practices are pivotal to delivering quality teaching for diverse learners,” says Dr Mealoa Taloa who led the project.

“Research is now seen as important in helping teachers form judgements and that teachers who are skilled in the processes of inquiry aren’t afraid to dig deeper into issues of practice and take the lead by constantly examining and updating the quality of their own and others’ teaching practices.”

A three-tier classroom-based approach was used, with hub teachers, a teacher educator/facilitator and a research coordinator. Participating teachers were involved in workshops and assignments that contributed to the overall study and to their own professional advancement.

The project leaders anticipate three key outcomes:
1. The production of limited but intensive studies of instructional practices and outcomes in Samoan bilingual contexts
2. The further development of teachers as adaptive experts, and their ongoing contribution to the development of effective instruction
3. The qualification and upskilling of teachers.

At the classroom level, the project, which is due for completion in June 2008, has already identified a lack of relevant and authentic Samoan reading materials and a lack of standardised assessments.

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Dr Meaola Amituanai-Toloa
Dr Amituanai-Toloa is Associate Director with the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, a lecturer at the Arts, Literacies and Languages School and Associate Dean, Pasifika, at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. Her general research interests are literacy and language development. Her desire to see Pasifika students at the same level of achievement as other students in New Zealand had motivated her to specific research interests in bilingual and biliteracy development. Her PhD work, which looked at effective teaching of reading comprehension of Samoan students in bilingual and mainstream contexts, has been presented widely nationally and internationally.

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The challenges
- Little is known about the development of biliteracy in the context of bilingual instruction and the relationships between development in two languages and two systems of literacy
- Very limited literature on bilingual education in New Zealand

Delivery
- Ten research and development hubs conducted across different languages and teaching settings
- Samoan hub located within Auckland, home to the majority of Pasifika students
- Classroom observation and investigation
- Involvement of the wider Samoan community

Benefits
- Teachers saw the impact of their teaching style and were able to modify it
- Teachers saw how to bring children’s out-of-school experiences into the school context
- There is a risk of slowed progress in Samoan literacy and language when students transfer to mainstream education where English is the dominant language