TLRI school sector symposium: a summary

16 November 2012

On 16 November 2012 an invited group of researchers met at a symposium in Wellington hosted by TLRI. The aim was to explore what we have learnt about teaching and learning in the school sector through the collective work of TLRI, including where the gaps are and what the priorities should be for the fund in the future. The participants were responding to and building on a paper commissioned by the TLRI advisory board from Mary Hill of the University of Auckland, and Bronwen Cowie from the University of Waikato, called *The contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative to building knowledge about teaching and learning: A review of school sector projects, 2003–2012.*

This summary seeks to capture the main ideas that emerged from the symposium.

The papers

Mary Hill and Bronwen Cowie began by introducing their paper, setting out the approach they took and its constraints and limitations. The review explored the 49 studies that have been carried out in the schooling sector to date. They found these collectively addressed the aims of TLRI. They were well aligned with national and international education concerns and there was evidence of a cumulative approach to knowledge building. They noted that TLRI also provides support for innovation and they would have liked to see some more innovative projects.

The reviewers found evidence the TLRI projects in this sector have supported the building of research capability and have made a significant contribution to bringing together research and practice. They commented that there was a lot of scope for much wider dissemination and not just through TLRI channels.

- They highlighted areas for improvement in reporting:
- Thirty project reports didn't state a research methodology.
- The most common form of data collection was qualitative but there was often a lack of clarity about the data and the analysis.
- Eighteen used video but only two discussed how the collective data was analysed and used to inform the findings.
- As a result of the changes in reporting requirements in 2008, not all the projects produced final reports, which meant there were gaps in information about them.

The reviewers posed several questions:

- Is there a way to get more sharing of tools between research teams? Can we build on the research instruments, not just the research ideas?
- What mechanisms can be used to enable people to progress from being members of a research team to being leaders?

- How can we do more to extend the impact and dissemination of the work? For example, they found almost no reference to TLRI work in Ministry of Education-based resources.

The responses

Susan Sandretto from the University of Otago was asked to give a response to the report from a primary education perspective and NZCER chief researcher Rosemary Hipkins from a secondary education perspective. They posed a series of questions designed to encourage participants to think about the way we might preserve the intent of the TLRI and collectively shape its future.

Dr Sandretto warned against any move to carve the curriculum into different slices to ensure "coverage". "How can we develop projects that honour the complexity of teaching and learning in the primary sector?"

She noted the huge demands on teachers and wondered if there should be more emphasis on projects that will support teachers to inquire into their own practice.

She addressed the issue of what counts as research evidence and whether some curriculum areas risked getting lost if there were no standardised tests that could be used. "Can projects focused on the role of integrated curriculum support us to step outside the bounds of curriculum areas?

She was also interested in the role of theory—"Is there scope within TLRI for researchers to develop a shared metalanguage around teaching and learning?"

Dr Sandretto picked up on the comments in the review about the need for more dissemination. She questioned what was informing policy if it wasn't New Zealand research. In terms of future direction, she questioned how TLRI was working with students to position them as more powerful partners in research on teaching and learning, given that most of the projects were focused on teachers.

She was interested in projects that explore what counts as learning, which she saw as particularly important in the standards environment. "How can we make learning explicit in ways that honour its diversity and flexibility?"

Also, "What do the practices of teachers who get it right in Aotearoa New Zealand look like? What can we learn from them?

Rose Hipkins looked at the secondary education perspective through a future focus frame. TLRI was charged with having a focus on learning but that raised the question of what learning was or could be. She noted the future focus principle in the New Zealand Curriculum tended to be equated with the four "topic" themes mentioned (e.g. sustainability) but it was possible to take a more expansive view of this principle as being about children and their future. This could include exploration of questions such as how to help students take technology and use it in positive ways.

There was evidence of TLRI projects that were taking an orthodox education and making it better. That was important but perhaps not enough. She identified gaps in relation to a future-focus such as:

- developing citizenship capabilities
- key competencies
- the ability of ICT to transform our world and learning

- family and whānau and community engagement.

Dr Hipkins questioned how to build robust evidence of learning about wider aspects such as capabilities and values that were important for future building but which could not be measured with a standardised test.

She singled out the partnership model as a real strength of TLRI and wondered if more could be done with it. "It requires bringing together different bodies of knowledge in a way that enables participants to learn together. Have we got the design right to leverage that? It is not just respecting each other's knowledge but enabling the building of new knowledge."

Discussion

A number of themes emerged over the day.

Covering the curriculum

There was a lot of discussion on whether and how the fund should seek to "cover" the school curriculum in an equitable way. Some areas, such as literacy and numeracy, are more commonly funded than others. Did that matter and, if so, what should we be doing about making the curriculum focus broader?

It should be possible to signal that the fund was interested in bids from a particular area in any one year, or to deliberately prioritise curriculum areas that had not been prioritised in the past.

Others spoke against any notion of covering the curriculum—"the simple categorisation of curriculum areas"—or of trying to create an equitable balance through the funding. A better way would be to be clear about valuing student outcomes that were more than student achievement data; for example, examples of student metacognition.

It was also important to be strategic about coverage. The fund could use several principles to ensure this occurred; for example, national interest principles. Rather than a balanced pot of money distributed to cover the curriculum, it might be smarter to look at supporting hybrid relationships between siloed areas of the curriculum.

There were also cautions about taking projects that were designed for one thing and using them for something else. The example given was the key competencies, evidence of which can emerge in projects where they are not the explicit focus. Any discussion about key competencies needed to reflect their complexity.

Structure and funding

Some questioned the structure of the fund and the way the money was allocated. There was some support for funding for smaller projects, around the $50,000 to $60,000 mark, or for core funding to be given to one project with a number of smaller satellite projects attached. Another mentioned the model that CORE used with e-fellows, which involved a structured process to bring people together to discuss methodology.

Funding had to be looked at strategically, given the small nature of the fund and the fact the school sector was only one part of it. One participant commented: "TLRI has worked well as one source of funding for a larger programme of work. It can be seen as a strategic way of drawing on a range of funding in order to have a big impact."

Another said: "I don't like the principle of equity in thinking about funding, in the sense of a simple balance—you've had so much, no more. It's much more about thinking about the principles that allow you to be strategic."

Several commented on the way the writing from TLRI projects can extend way beyond the project funding, perhaps even years after. That often means data are left not analysed. One researcher made a plea for the opportunity to return to projects some time later. "There is a tendency to think we can investigate, get an answer and move on," another said. "We have to keep asking. Next time round the answer will be richer, deeper and more nuanced."

Mary Hill made the comment that, from her analysis, some projects seemed to have a "whirlpool" effect in terms of how far they reached, while others didn't go anywhere. It raised the question of how TLRI could identify those who were capable of taking what might be a small project with a group of teachers and creating that whirlpool. Bronwen Cowie commented that one of the characteristics of such projects seemed to be that they were woven through personal or research team pursuits and more people were constantly brought into the team so that it evolved.

"We have to think about partnerships around distributed expertise," another said. "Teachers work so hard. There are expectations about collecting data and analysing data and of course teachers have to be concerned about formative data but to expect them to be researchers—I don't think so."

Leadership was seen as key, so that projects had a layer of support for the teachers to help build their skill base and to facilitate professional discussions. "TLRI could offer a seeding ground to find different ways to do that."

Māori education and Treaty issues

Several participants raised the place of the Treaty. "I can't look to the future without looking to the past as a way of informing the future. How does the Treaty play out in research and if it is about building new knowledge, how is Māori knowledge part of the new knowledge and new teaching?"

TLRI programme director Robyn Baker acknowledged Māori education was a weakness within TLRI despite efforts to support projects. Proposals often contained a focus on Māori learners but didn't carry it through into the final reports.

Researchers felt the focus needed to be deliberate and spelt out, otherwise it would be put into proposals in order to get funding. They wanted to see the fund support both kaupapa Māori and bicultural approaches.

One participant suggested thinking about the Māori component in all research proposals, to find some way of getting a more cohesive approach across projects. There was also support for the idea of a TLRI hui of people doing work with Māori learners. "You need to know who else is in the field, so someone in maths may be able to link up with people in other fields."

Researchers spoke about the importance of Māori researchers being mentored. "I need to be mentoring other Māori researchers to take my place," one commented: "It's about making a personal commitment to growing someone else."

A focus on learners

The symposium spent some time discussing the fact that most of the focus of TLRI projects has been on teachers and teaching practice, rather than learning. This was a clear gap. "We are meant to be having an impact on learning but not many projects focus on it."

The challenge was how to make learning growth visible, with several noting the difficulty of measuring learning. "Learning is complex meaning-making" was one comment. Another said it could be difficult to design projects around learning.

"If you're working with teachers engaged in professional development, I'd be very worried if learning didn't occur. If it does: you've done intense work with a group of teachers and they've learned. So what?"

Others felt measuring learning was not necessarily difficult but it was intensive and took up a lot of resource.

"We wanted to look at moment-by-moment vocabulary acquisition. You can figure out how to do it but actually doing it on a big scale is the problem," said one participant.

Another commented, "The teacher is the key variable in terms of learning, so maybe that's why a lot of us have focused on teaching."

"There is also a tension between what happens in the classroom, which is governed by external exams and what I as a researcher would like to look at. That constrains me in terms of the research I'd like to do."

Another said it was hard to measure learning with the funds available. "You need in-depth interviews and you need to keep following students. TLRI wants you to spread as wide as possible—I was asked to have more schools in my project."

Dissemination

A large part of the discussion focused on dissemination.

Robyn Baker explained that TLRI requirements had changed so that a final report was no longer always produced and other forms of dissemination were encouraged. TLRI had found it was spending too much money getting large research reports into a form where they could be put on the website.

The change was generally supported by the symposium, although several commented that they still saw a place for a final report—"but perhaps with a page limit".

"I can't imagine doing a project and not writing a report. That's the first step and then you do the jazzier ones."

One commented that while it didn't seem worthwhile spending money copyediting a large final report, it could be worth paying someone to write a summary report. Another tack would be to work with research

development people within the universities to ensure quality assurance was done on reports submitted to TLRI.

Writing for different audiences was seen as a challenge, including working out who the audiences are and how to reach them. As well, researchers in the university sector faced more pressure than ever to publish in the ways that "count", such as peer-reviewed journals. One commented about a fight to have even refereed conference papers count as publications under the PBRF system.

One researcher told of producing only one practitioner output from her first TLRI project, but by her second project she had figured out how to produce "crossover" outputs for the university and for practitioners/community. The second project had 42 outputs, half of which were for practitioners and the community.

One suggestion was to publish the tools being used in a research project as the project proceeded. Tools could be put on the TLRI website, with commentary around their use.

"Some people's tools are as useful to me as their findings," one commented. "Tools are sometimes not very visible."

However, it was acknowledged that, once published, tools were likely to be adapted. "Do you make them really prescriptive so the reliability and validity remain, or do you just put them up and let people do whatever they want with them?"

The researchers present had tried various methods of dissemination. In one example, teachers had said they did not want to read articles or even summaries but did support a website, so the team developed a website around the project. However, in retrospect, the researcher wasn't convinced it was successful.

"People ask difficult questions and the answers aren't simple and easy to digest. The aim of the website was for it to be simple and we wanted to grow it but in fact we've had very few responses and most of what we have had has come from other academics."

Another explained that their project tapped into professional development days run by a subject association. They built the research findings into the talks they gave rather than giving a specific dissemination about the project.

Participants had varying experiences getting teachers to present at conferences. In one case, funding was made available but no-one wanted to take it up, while others felt the fact that funding was available for this purpose under TLRI needed to be made more explicit.

Another spoke of working with Pasifika teachers who had busy lives and who would not have time to attend a conference. Instead, the project put on a disco for the children and invited the parents into a classroom to talk to the teachers about the research.

Others spoke about seeing teachers grow in confidence from presenting at conferences.

"We have been trying to build increased capability. Teachers are out there presenting, they are then seen as people to call on. Through teaching other teachers they have grown themselves and become leaders in their own communities."

Early childhood was seen as an area where there had been some successful dissemination strategies, with one project providing regular updates to the Playcentre journal.

Thinking about dissemination right at the beginning of a project was seen as crucial. "They should have to identify a range of places and ways in which they might publish. That has to be in the conversation from the get-go."

The symposium discussed how to disseminate to policy makers to ensure policy was influenced by research findings. "You have to have a dialogue—regular, systematically planned."

Projects had to be careful not to overrepresent their work and to talk about areas where they could make strong statements. Another mentioned the importance of cultivating champions for the project outside of the research team who could help spread the word.

Priorities

In the final session of the day, the researchers were asked about top priorities for TLRI in the school sector. There was strong support for more research in the area of kaupapa Māori and/or bicultural education. Several felt strongly that a Request for Proposal (RFP) was the only way of ensuring it happened. However, there wasn't a strong push for RFPs in other areas of the school sector.

A number of other priorities or comments were raised:

- A longitudinal study that tracked a group of students over a period of years, or linking to other longitudinal research projects (such as Growing Up in New Zealand).
- Being more explicit about the impact on learner outcomes. That could be as a research project or research that looked at the impact on learners across a number of other projects.
- Keeping a broad curriculum in focus and learning across the curriculum. More cross-curricular work (for example, the statistics and maths used in other subjects).
- Thinking about how to bring new people on board and getting a ripple effect.
- Honouring success as Māori.
- Keeping the flexibility in the fund—or even increasing the flexibility.
- Using a subject focus as a lens to look at what is going on beneath of the surface for learners in terms of, for example, peer relationships.
- Providing the opportunity to return to projects some time later. This would be a chance to reconnect with teachers and to help teachers to continue to spread the message.
- More funding for ideas that have shown promise but that were only funded for a year.
- Diversity about what counts as evidence of learner achievement.
- Broadening ideas about what student learning means and how we develop tools to measure it.
- Potential of digital technology still not being realised in schools and this is an important research area.
- Focusing on what successful teachers look like.

Researchers were keen not to lose sight of what TLRI had achieved to date in the school sector. There was support for further work to explore how to better measure the impact of TLRI projects, such as the impact of the sort of partnership models that have been built and sustained which extend beyond specific projects.