Paraprofessionals working with English language learners are now a prominent feature of the NZ government’s overall strategy to raise English language proficiency for children whose home and or first language is not English. This paper considers the professional development needs of paraprofessionals through evaluating their practices.

KEYWORDS
Paraprofessionals, English language learners (ELLs), ESOL, professional development, lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION
Lifelong learning has been accused of being more of a policy slogan than a philosophically generated concept underpinned by empirical research (Kang, 2007). Academic work on the topic has not really succeeded in shifting perceptions of the area as being somewhat amorphous (see, for example, Field, 2000). Whether this is a problem or not is open for debate. It seems that lifelong learning’s openness does provide the flexibility required in postmodern times and the concomitant need to learn for and shape new modes of knowledge production (Edwards and Usher, 2001). One of the predominant facets of postmodernity is unprecedented global migration and the resettlement of white settler societies like New Zealand with people from diverse cultures and languages. Providing a robust learning environment and education for the children of migrants is just one of the complex areas of new and ongoing knowledge production and learning that exercises the minds of educators across the western world.

As an evaluation of the learning and teaching of ESOL paraprofessionals, this study provides some empirical flesh for the concept of lifelong learning. The paper reports on the first part of a two year study on the practices of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) paraprofessionals working with ELLs (English Language Learners) in initial reading programmes. In this phase of the study researchers analysed paraprofessional practices with a view to reporting on areas of practice that could/should be addressed in professional development. The second part of the research is currently underway. This consists of an evaluation of the English Language Assistants (ELA) professional development programme which has been offered since 2002.

As part of a wider response to findings that assert that having a home language different from the school language is a significant risk factor for achieving lower levels of literacy as well as for lower school achievement in general (Wylie et al, 2000; OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2001) the Ministry of Education has allocated special funding for resourcing ESOL provision in New Zealand schools. One of the targets for this funding is the employment of teacher aides/language assistants, referred to in this paper as ‘paraprofessionals’ because they are not trained (professional) teachers. In New Zealand the Ministry of Education (2006) defines paraprofessionals as: ‘Teacher aides and education, behaviour and communication support workers’ and in turn defines teacher aides as ‘People who help educators support children and young people who have special education needs, also known as kaiawhina and paraprofessionals.’

Ministry suggestions for the ways in which paraprofessionals can be deployed in ESOL work are as follows:
Read to and with a small group of students, with supportive activities and discussion; work through the Self-Pacing Boxes programme with individuals or small group; develop key oral and written vocabulary in a specific curriculum, topic or concept area, through discussion and using visual support materials with a group; support first language translation and interpretation to aid learning; be available in a class to support NESB students in carrying out specific learning tasks set by the class teacher; prepare and organise materials and learning support resources under teacher direction; supervise learning centres established by the teacher.

(Ministry of Education, 2006)

Those paraprofessionals employed for work with ELLs in New Zealand schools may be from a variety of employment and educational backgrounds and might be bilingual, multilingual or English speaking only. Equally, they may be employed to support the work of teachers in a variety of ways.

The question of professional development and ongoing education for ESOL paraprofessionals working with ELLs is an important one which the New Zealand Ministry of Education has attempted to address through providing targeted one–off courses. These courses are called ELA Professional Development and are run under the auspices of the Ministry and delivered through the commercial arm of a New Zealand university. They are run over one semester via five full day seminars followed by a graduation. For every school that participates, one coordinating teacher and at least two paraprofessionals attend the course. Paraprofessionals have assignments to complete throughout the course. One of the general quality indicators for the courses is that paraprofessionals develop as lifelong learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of paraprofessionals are women who tend to be re-entering the workforce after a period of absence and generally live near the schools they work in (Pickett et al, 2003). Significantly, paraprofessionals predominantly teach and support in areas of high specialisation e.g. students with learning disabilities, students from very diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and students with high physical needs. Giangreco (1999) notes that one of the biggest concerns with paraprofessionals is their lack of training coupled with the considerable time they spend with high, or at least, extra needs students. Consequently the issue of ongoing training and education for paraprofessionals has been an area of considerable interest in the literature. This ranges from sharing ideas for school-based inductions and focussed training sessions with teachers (e.g. Cobb, 2007, Hauge & Babkie 2006) to the analysis of comprehensive career advancement programmes (Pickett et al, 2003). In the United States these latter programmes began in the 1960s as a way of moving paraprofessionals and other non-traditional students into teacher education (Pickett et al 2003, Kaplan 1977) at a time of low teacher numbers and in recognition of the need to train teachers more able to relate to the communities in which they were teaching.

Professional development for paraprofessionals remaining in the role, however, seems to be patchy (Giangreco, 2003). Many paraprofessionals have an inadequate repertoire of strategies and the educational theories from which they are derived, for the range of instructional situations in which paraprofessionals find themselves (Forster & Holbrook, 2005 ) (Harvey et al, 2008).

Moreover, for many paraprofessionals their work has evolved well beyond the original paraprofessional role of administrative support. Increasingly the paraprofessional role involves instruction and is often unsupervised (Forster & Holbrook 2005; Likins, 2003; Harvey et al, 2008).

Another side to the issue of general and specific training for paraprofessionals is the issue of how teachers interact with their paraprofessionals. Giangreco (2003) writes that teachers can be so relieved at having a paraprofessional in their classroom to deal with a student/s with special needs that they disengage from teaching the student/s themselves. Moreover if the paraprofessional has had any level of training (or many years of experience) they may well be deferred to as the person with the expertise as far as a particular students or group of students is concerned. Giangreco (2003) warns against this and urges teachers to take responsibility for directing learning for all their students including those with high/special needs. A corollory is that teachers need more training themselves in how to direct the instructional activities of paraprofessionals, either through pre-service or in-service training (French, 2001, Downing et al 2000, Wallace et al, 2001). An important feature of the ELA Professional Development Programme is that coordinating teachers attend
the five day course run over one semester alongside the paraprofessionals that they direct.

Despite most of the above literature relating to paraprofessionals supporting students with physical and behavioural difficulties, the current study (Harvey et al, 2008) investigating the practices of ESOL paraprofessionals working with ELLs in initial reading programmes has uncovered a range of similar and related issues in relation to the professional development required by paraprofessionals.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study, conducted in 2007, was largely qualitative, aiming to occupy a 'watching space'. That is, the researchers observed and recorded what happened in schools and classrooms without attempting to modify the environment in any way (Nunan 1992), although unavoidably the presence of a researcher in the room with students and paraprofessionals was in itself intrusive to some degree (Labov’s [1972] observer’s paradox). Observations were supplemented by interviews which served the purpose of contextualising and informing the observations. The focus was on the practices and working context of the paraprofessionals in their daily work in initial reading programmes with ELL students. ERO (Education Review Office) reports for all the schools involved as well as ESOL verification reports obtained through the Ministry of Education were also analysed.

For years 1-4, four teachers with responsibility for paraprofessionals working in ESOL and EOL reading in particular, were interviewed to discuss the organisation and practices of ESOL paraprofessionals in their school. Information existed at this level and a full study as implemented at higher levels in the school system was not required.

For years 5-13, data was gathered through forty eight observations of paraprofessionals working in classrooms or withdrawal situations and twenty four interviews with the same paraprofessionals and the teachers who direct their work. The interviews and observations were equally divided between primary (years 5-6), intermediate (years 7-8) and secondary (years 9-13) schools. That is, there were sixteen observations of paraprofessionals working in each sector and eight interviews with the paraprofessionals and their associated teachers. All data was recorded as handwritten notes and later written into electronic data files. There was no electronic recording of data during the observations or interviews.

Findings

The paraprofessionals themselves were diverse, although exclusively women. The research team distinguished between two groups. One group were the New Zealand-born and largely monolingual paraprofessionals who tended to have come to the work through mother help roles. They had mostly completed general courses for paraprofessionals and some specifically for ESOL. In the primary and intermediate sectors no New Zealand-born paraprofessionals had completed university qualifications although several had taken university level papers. In the secondary sector both New Zealand-born and migrant paraprofessionals tended to have university qualifications, including ESOL-specific qualifications. The overseas-born and largely multilingual paraprofessionals across the sectors tended to have tertiary qualifications from their own countries as well as, in some cases, extensive experience as teachers. Several of these paraprofessionals were very skilled educators. The research team felt it was important to recognise the different strengths that the two distinct groups had in supporting student learning. It may well be that in the future some differentiation of training would be appropriate for these two groups. It also seemed that training should address varying levels of experience and skills with ELL students generally, as well as in particular areas e.g. assisting target pronunciation and focussing on form.

The issue of career structuring and staircasing was raised a number of times by principals, teachers and paraprofessionals during the course of the research. Most participants believed there was a need for a more explicit career path for paraprofessionals. However, it should be noted that some paraprofessionals liked working in the role because it carried no career expectations or pressures and they simply enjoyed the interaction with students. Some ideas for improving the career pathways for paraprofessionals included a training progression through a series of graded steps (beyond the current two) which could count towards a component of formal teacher training. An alternative idea was that training could lead towards a specialised TESOL qualification for paraprofessionals who could work full time on a peripatetic basis between nearby schools.

A problem for several overseas-born paraprofessionals, particularly those with qualifications and teaching experience from their countries, was that they wanted to become teachers in New Zealand. However these people found the requirements for registration and/or retraining overwhelming and expensive.
The observed range of levels of effectiveness of paraprofessionals across all school sectors varied widely. Many paraprofessionals worked very effectively to promote successful learning with students, others worked well on some levels e.g. displaying empathy towards students and giving positive feedback, but were less skilled in other areas e.g. questioning and correctly levelling materials. However, some paraprofessionals were working in contexts beyond their skill and experience level. This tended to be where they were working in situations which exceeded the Ministry’s guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2006) i.e. they were working largely autonomously without clear teacher direction or supervision.

Planning and coordination between paraprofessionals and teachers also varied widely with some paraprofessionals being very closely directed by a teacher and, others being relatively free to plan sessions and to choose what resources to use. In some cases this was because teachers were too busy to work with paraprofessionals, in other cases it was because the paraprofessionals were seen as having enough expertise to work more-or-less autonomously.

Areas that paraprofessionals needed further development in was: feedback; questioning; appropriate visual support for literacy materials; selection of materials; systematic record keeping; and how to work sensitively with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students. In situations where paraprofessionals worked on their own with students, the research team felt that there should be an explicit programme for the regular observation of paraprofessional practice.

Training in student group dynamics and management would also be beneficial for many paraprofessionals. In small groups the researchers found that students were engaged and very keen to learn from paraprofessionals. Many enjoyed the extra attention and gained confidence in smaller withdrawal groups. Paraprofessionals were mostly not able to manage larger groups to promote effective learning.

CONCLUSION

The research indicates the clear need for ESOL paraprofessional professional development in order to provide more engaged and productive learning environments for the ELLs paraprofessionals work with. Moreover, with more explicit guidance for schools and teachers working with paraprofessionals the use of paraprofessionals in schools could be made considerably more effective.

The ELA programme appears to address immediate skill deficits in language and literacy teaching for paraprofessionals working with ELLs. In addition, it promotes awareness raising and the training of ESOL and mainstream teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals. However, the programme may not engage long term educational and/or professional aspirations paraprofessionals may have. To be fair it does not claim to. However, with a stated goal of being the first rung on the ladder of lifelong learning for many paraprofessionals a more explicit articulation into further training may be required in the future. An ongoing issue is gaining formal recognition/credentials for paraprofessional training and this also needs to be investigated.

While Part B of this research will consider the ongoing effects on practice of the ELA training (up to three months after the completion of the course), there is also a need to consider ways to embed and extend this very targeted professional development through networking, clusters, refresher courses and the like.

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