

# Teaming from Three Perspectives

## Interviews with participatory action research participants



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### ABSTRACT

Taking part in the autism spectrum disorder participatory action research (ASD PAR) project was a genuine team effort for the group of people supporting Rose<sup>1</sup>, a primary school student with Asperger syndrome. The following excerpts are from interviews with some of Rose's team. This is a collaborative approach to telling the story of the team's collaborative effort. The voice of Rose's parents, the principal of the school she attended and the resource teacher: learning and behaviour (RTLB) who coordinated the project, are all heard here and offer readers some insights on teaming from three perspectives.

### PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

#### First impressions

When we got to the first meeting we were pretty taken aback because we were the only parents there on the day and we had expected a lot more. We were very nervous; really not knowing what was going to happen. I think we were both expecting a lot less than what did actually happen! We found the meeting to be very informative. For us as parents, we left there on a high, knowing that there was some major support out there for our child. We initially attended the meeting not really accepting that there was a problem with our child. We'd had previous experiences with Special Education Services and, not putting them down, but getting information on a piece of paper was not what we were looking for. What we wanted was information from another face, telling us or informing us what to do with a child like Rose and where to go. Anyway, we left the meeting very much on a high note. Everybody there was absolutely great.

#### Meeting with the team

The meetings were brilliant. Because our team had different people, with different experiences, with different levels of knowledge, for us, as parents, we could ask any questions and have them answered. People have to understand that parents are in the dark when they have a child who they perceive to be perfect, as each parent does, and all of a sudden they are told "I'm sorry there is something wrong with your child. They've got this, they've got that". We were very much in the dark. To have those people at those meetings with all that knowledge, answering all our questions was just fantastic. To see what they were doing for our child and keeping Rose involved with her peers was just absolutely fantastic.

### Parents' preferences

We decided that we wanted Rose to stay in the class, to stay with her peers and to stay around people of her own age. We felt that it wouldn't do her any good at all if she was taken out and put into a little group of children with similar abilities. So with the team's effort and our effort we decided to keep her in the class.

### Changes in the team

For us, as parents, the change of teachers and teachers' aides really hasn't been any difficulty at all. Initially, we felt a bit dismayed because we thought that with each change Rose was going to have to start all over again and go through all the whole rigmarole. But now we think that it was actually a big help to her because it made her interact with different people. She might have got a little bit bored with the same person year in and year out!

### Lasting impressions

We have enjoyed the process of working with the team. It's been fantastic. We both agree with that. The information that we have got from everybody is absolutely fantastic. We wish to thank them personally – you have been absolutely marvellous to us. Thank you.

### PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE

At the school, we found the research programme very successful. Rose has become a person who speaks, tells people what she wants them to know and requests information. She has made amazing progress. I feel that this was entirely successful because it was an inclusive programme. Rose was given help, along with the other children in her class. The programme applied not only to her but to her peers. It was also successful because the resource teacher: learning and behaviour had the time to coordinate with all of the people involved in the programme. A teacher could not realistically be expected to do this. The programme also had funding that allowed the teacher, the teacher's aide, me, the parents, everybody, to get together in school time to discuss where the programme was going and how successful it had been.

### RESOURCE TEACHER: LEARNING AND BEHAVIOUR'S PERSPECTIVE

#### A classroom-based project

From my perspective, as a resource teacher: learning and behaviour, I thought the project had to be based on how

<sup>1</sup> Not her real name.

I usually work. To do that, I needed to enlist the help of the teachers, the school, the teacher's aide, the parents – everyone. We all needed to be on the same track. I probably spoke to Rose's parents on the phone once a week, saw Rose once a week, and worked in the classroom with the class for an hour a week.

The teacher and I decided we'd do circle work with the whole class. That was really interesting because at the beginning, our little girl would not speak, she would not even look. She just looked away and played with other things. Then the other children would whisper what she needed to say and she would say it. After a while she said "no!" to the other children and gave her own contribution to the discussion. It might not be what we were talking about but it was wonderful! And by the end, she was actually able to participate in the circle properly. That was one of the amazing things. It probably took six months for her to start joining in like that.

As well as the circle work, we did cooperative techniques within the class. We taught listening techniques and played games, that included talking, listening and looking at the other person, and other little communication rules. Then Rose practiced these outside the class with the teacher's aide. She didn't actually pick them up via classroom teaching, but the extra coaching really helped. Because she had already seen it happening in the class, she knew her one-on-one work was for the class and so she was keen to do it. Once she went away from the class and practised, she could come back and actually participate and join in the next time. It was quite amazing. We developed this approach and learned as we went along. The speech-language therapist was really helpful too.

### **Working with the team**

The team had monthly meetings and that was wonderful because we usually are not able to provide support like that in schools. The wonderful thing about the project was the extra resources, because it meant we could set it up so everyone could attend the meetings – the teacher, speech-language therapist, teacher's aide, often the parents, and sometimes the principal.

It was important that the teacher's aide could attend the meetings. She had a big input into the project. She actually gave a lot of support because she was a full member of the team and she saw what went on day-to-day in the classroom. It was important that the teacher's aide came to the meetings and saw the process instead of just "looking after" Rose. She became more focused too because she saw that she was actually teaching Rose skills and not just "looking after" her.

Sometimes the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) early intervention teacher who oversaw all the ASD PAR projects in this area came to our meetings. She supported me and noticed differences that I hadn't noticed because she came from outside.

The speech-language therapist worked in a different way. She didn't come into the class but came to the meetings and talked about the process. She was like a guide.

Working with Mum and Dad was wonderful. They did their very best at home too. For example, they spent a long time teaching Rose how to ride a bike. It probably took three months and they did that every night. Rose can ride a bike now.

### **Changes in the team**

We had many changes of personnel. We worked with three teachers and three teachers' aides. And I thought, well, we need to keep going because this is normally what happens in schools and what happens with these children. The principal and I were the only ones who were constant. This was quite difficult, because my role became making sure that new team members understood what we were doing, particularly the idea of cooperative learning and teaming in the classroom, which weren't normal practice.

Sometimes it was initially difficult for new team members to understand Rose. She was a little girl who looked as though she could manage. New teachers coming into the room would think because she looked like the other children, she could do what they were doing. It took quite a while for them to realise that she wasn't able in many areas and needed some help. It's a great breakthrough once a teacher understands the child's difficulties.

### **Time and resources**

I think it really helped that the project had resources. The funding for people to attend meetings made them feel valued, and because they felt valued they gave more effort and there was more commitment to the process. If it had just been me talking to the teacher in their morning tea time, or trying to have meetings in our own time after work, they may just take it or leave it. We often had our meetings in school hours. We could afford to employ a teacher to take the class, releasing the classroom teacher for the meeting, and that was just wonderful. I think that was what really made the team work. That's something we don't often have the opportunity to do in normal school situations.

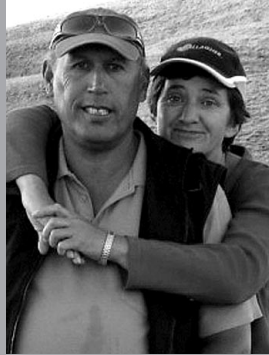
### **Outcomes for Rose**

Rose learned to go up to people, speak to them, say "hello", wait for an answer and give answers herself. In a way, she learnt these little techniques to help her with her communication, which made other people happy and it made her life easier. She'll come up to me now and say "Hello Judith!" and "How are you?" and that's great because it normalises her behaviour.

The wonderful thing was that other children started including Rose – in the classroom and in the playground as well. She'd be out there, running around, holding hands and skipping with the other girls. She was a very fashion-conscious little girl, and took pride in her appearance and the other girls liked that too. Seeing her, looking beautiful and playing with her friends, was really heart warming – a joy for all of us.

## PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Cathy and Trevor Kehely



### Rose's parents, Cathy and Trevor Kehely

Cathy and Trevor live in Northland having spent time in the Hawke's Bay and Wairoa before that. They live on a sheep and beef farm and work in the farming industry. Their eldest son is a carpenter, their younger son hopes to join the navy and their youngest child, Rose, now attends high school. They are happy to be identified as Rose's parents because if she reads this article in the future, they want her to be proud of who she is and know her parents wanted the best for her. Cathy's tribal affiliation is Whakatohea of Opotiki and Trevor's is Ngati Kahungunu of Nuhaka.

### Principal of the school Rose attended

The school Rose attended opened in 1870 and is situated in a very small township on State Highway One. It now serves a diverse population from farms, newly settled lifestyle blocks and from the township. The principal has been at the school for the last 10 years, during which time she has enjoyed seeing it become a "community school" where the teachers and students work together as a team, and parents are welcomed into the school to be involved with their children's education.

Judith Cain



### Judith Cain

Judith Cain began her teaching career in 1960. She has taught in primary schools in Canterbury, Southland and Northland. In her current role as an RTLB, she has been privileged to work in inclusive settings with teams of people to support children who struggle in the school situation. She has a passionate interest in children's learning, has continually updated her knowledge, and recently completed a Master of Education at Victoria University.

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