What We Did

Journeys in autism spectrum disorder participatory action research

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ABSTRACT

This article is an analysis of the work submitted to the Ministry of Education by teams and mentors who took part in the autism spectrum disorder participatory action research (ASD PAR) project. The key findings are grouped under four themes and highlight the value of: team work; positive attitudes; using participatory action research in real-life settings; and learning together as a team.

Keywords

Action research, autism spectrum disorder, effective practices, participatory action research, professional practice, reflection, research methodology, teams.

INTRODUCTION

Supporting children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is an endeavour associated with both reward and challenge. There are teams of people across New Zealand who provide this support daily, without fanfare or display – it is simply what they do. In 2003 and 2004 nine such teams stepped up and out by taking part in the national autism spectrum disorder participatory action research (ASD PAR) project funded by the Ministry of Education[1]. As participants in the ASD PAR project, teams reflected on, scrutinised, adapted, enhanced and documented their practice, while ultimately working towards improved outcomes for the children and young people with ASD at the centre of their teams.

Project teams and their mentors submitted proposals, milestone reports and final reports to the Ministry of Education throughout the project. While such reports may never fully capture the lived experience of the "insiders" who wrote them, they do provide valuable insight into the teams' work, what they learned and the outcomes they achieved.

'What we did' was a heading that appeared in many of the teams' reports. What teams reported under this heading, however, revealed much more than what they did; more even than how they did it and why. In describing what they did, teams and mentors told a compelling story about how they worked and learned together as a team around a child or young person with ASD, how their attitudes influenced the support they provided and how they came to grips with using participatory action research (PAR).

Specific findings about supporting children and young people with ASD are described in the companion article, also published in this issue, *What Works for One.*

METHOD OF REPORT ANALYSIS

Permission to use the project proposals, milestone reports and final reports was sought from at least one person who participated in each of the nine project teams and each mentor team. One team and one sub-team declined permission. Documents from the teams and sub-teams who granted permission were analysed qualitatively. A process similar to the "constant comparative analysis approach" outlined by Mutch (1995) was used. The permission process and qualitative analysis of project reporting were carried out by the author who was not involved in the ASD PAR project at the time it occurred.

Initially, each report was marked with "flags" that labelled salient ideas. Following this, a software package was used to create a mind map for each project. Ideas on the "flags" were transferred to the mind map and similar ideas were given one descriptor. For each project's mind map, the many fine-grained ideas were grouped under emergent themes. These themes, and the ideas that fell within them, were then aggregated across the projects. Frequent and powerful ideas were captured. Working with a colleague, the themes and ideas were re-arranged and refined. Linkages and relationships between themes and ideas were tested.

The themes and ideas were then written up as an outline and a copy sent to team representatives and mentor representatives for comment. This article and the companion piece were written based on this outline. Each team that has been directly quoted in the article has given permission for their words to be used in this way. Pseudonyms for children's names and schools have been used throughout the article.

Four themes are explored in this article: teaming; engaging with participatory action research; attitudes; and the adults' learning journey.

TEAMING

Ideas about teaming emerged powerfully from all of the projects' reports. There was agreement that a team approach was paramount to supporting children and young people with ASD. Three sub-themes emerged: coming together (the make up of the team and collaboration); making it work (processes and activities that supported team work); and the values and culture of the team.

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[1] For background to the ASD PAR project and demographic information about the teams involved, see the article *With Hindsight* in this issue.

Coming together

Over time both the teams and especially the team leaders have developed in confidence in leading their teams and in developing a shared understanding of these two particular children. The parents on the teams have also established a role for themselves … according to their own needs and style, and the teams have been sensitive to these preferred ways of working. Including the teachers fully in the decision making of the team has been complicated, given their other commitments. However, both teachers have demonstrated a greater understanding of the children and have been instrumental in facilitating greater inclusion of the children into the class and centre groups. (Local project team H.)

The team around the child

While most of the teams had been working together in some way prior to the ASD PAR project, their ongoing commitment as the team around a child or young person was a dynamic endeavour.

Engaging the whole team around the child was integral to developing a holistic picture of the young person, planning interventions, implementing strategies across settings, monitoring progress, and reflecting. Teams were emphatic that the support provided to children and young people was unquestionably enhanced by the involvement of the whole team.

The value of close contact and communication between and among team members has been demonstrated in this study … The "expertise" and specialty skills of all team members are respected. (Local project team A, sub-team 1.)

Discussions centred around Heidi's communication skills have been enhanced by the closer interactions between those working with her, when team members contribute important information about Heidi gathered from a variety of social and physical settings to add with their professional and personal expertise to the team's knowledge base and planning processes. (Local project team A, sub-team 3.)

Each project team was unique in terms of membership and how it was configured. While engaging the whole team was considered important, many teams discovered that this did not require each team member to contribute in the same way. Ultimately these differences in participation, perspective, expertise and knowledge of the child or young person were intrinsic to effective team work.

Each sub-group has functioned differently … Much of this is attributable to the actual dynamics of the teams themselves and the circumstances affecting the nature and depth of team members' individual involvement. (Local project team E.)

While the mother has the most indepth knowledge of Esther, the team and its supporters have a wide knowledge and experience in both social skills development and in working with students on the ASD spectrum. (Local project team C.)

All members of the team contribute their separate roles and expertise. All are valued for their unique input and have an equal voice in meetings to discuss Elliot. (Local project team F.)

The place of the family

Many of the teams considered the place of the child or young person within the team and all reflected on the role played by the family or whānau[2] in the teaming process. There was agreement that the young person must be held at the centre and that the family's place in the team was paramount.

The research established the benefits of an open, ongoing relationship between school and family. Between "us" we represent two of the most important circles of support for the child. It makes sense that one should enlist the support of the other. In the busy world of family and school, time is not always made available for "sharing" and reflection. As a school we must structure this time into the system, the goal being to maintain an "ongoing conversation" with every family. (Local project team B.)

Our intervention has been moulded to suit Gina's needs as they have arisen, and the needs of her family. It has been such an integral part of the project to recognise the needs of her family as an essential component of our intervention. My initial vision was to concentrate on progressing through the PECS system … However, it quickly became apparent that when working with Gina there were so many other aspects of her being that impacted on her everyday life that were just as important. (Local project team A, sub-team 1.)

Collaboration

Notions of collaboration emerged repeatedly as teams reported on how they worked together. These reflections moved beyond the rhetoric of collaboration and revealed that working collaboratively was not always easy. Collaboration required some people to work in new ways: educators were challenged to truly understand the family's worldview, specialists shifted from the role of "expert" and families stepped up with increasing confidence to have their perspective come to the fore. For some teams this change was difficult despite their best efforts, particularly where an existing culture of how to work with families or classroom teachers prevailed.

Speech-language therapist and psychologist reflection: … [The project] has created the opportunity for the voice of the parent and the teacher to be given equal weight and to drive the interventions. [We] share responsibility for finding all the answers – not needing to drive it as a professional. [We have developed] an insight into the larger context of the child in both home and school settings. (Local project team A, sub-team 2.)

Making it work

The teams described several factors that affected their team work. They were: time together, communication, understanding the roles played by team members, leadership, and support for the team.

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[2] Immediate or extended family.

Time together

Spending time together was identified by all the teams as essential. This was not always easy where team members did not live in the same area, and where team members had competing priorities. Meetings where as many team members as possible could attend were considered very valuable. For some teams, it was not that these meetings were different from the usual meetings teams had (such as Individual Education Plan meetings) it was just that they were more regular. Regular informal meetings, even over the phone, were also useful.

> The opportunity to meet together more often than the regular Individual Education Plan meetings has assisted us in becoming a more cohesive unit … and we look upon our team meetings, whether planned or informal as being the most valuable aspect of our whole involvement in the project. (Local project team H.)

> The parent and I usually had weekly contact either by phone or email to discuss the things that were working well, and to get some understanding of the things that were not suitable, and why … More regular, frequent contact meant a quicker building up of the working relationship with all team members. (Local project team G.)

> While research money was available to release teachers to attend to project-related duties, there was a shortage of relievers with the experience and skills needed to teach students with severe disabilities. Additionally, given the nature of ASD, the change of teachers and routines were issues of concern to project teachers and so made them reluctant to use release time. (Local project team E.)

Teams trialled several strategies to support their having time together. For example, meetings were scheduled well in advance or were held in the family home over a shared dinner. In some cases, the resources provided to each team for the project were used creatively to support teams to get together, such as releasing teachers for meetings during school time, and meeting families travel costs.

> Once a term a dinner meeting was held at the parents' home outside of school/work hours … so that all team members could attend … Meetings led to feedback, reflection and developing new strategies. For the school it also facilitated a whole view of the child in his home context. (Local project team F.)

Communication

It is not surprising that a heightened commitment to communication, and an increased effort to share information among team members, was consistently reported to enhance team work.

Many teams adopted an open approach to communication, where the views of all team members had a valid place in discussions. In this climate, problem solving and decision making were cooperative processes.

> … with the existing model of open and honest discussion, and the ongoing reflection on our work, it was a relatively simple process to introduce a cooperative

decision making model. This reinforced a willingness of all staff to speak openly about their actions and those of others and how we might change what we were doing to encourage and guide change in the students. This also led us into a willingness to critically review our programmes for each student. (Local project team C.)

Making sure that all team members "were on the same page" was considered vital for several teams who ensured that information was always shared. Teams reflected on the language used to convey information and found it essential to use everyday language, avoiding jargon where possible. As most teams had members from several different contexts, this meant using strategies such as group email messages and home-school communication books.

> The home-school notebook travelled with students and was used on most days to keep parents informed of events and actions in their daughters' school lives. Most parents and caregivers were equally good at letting us know what was happening on evenings, weekends and holidays. (Local project team C.)

Roles within the team

While many teams reported a sense of equality in their team processes, team members clearly played different roles. Some teams found it useful to delegate roles that supported the mechanics of their project, such as managing the budget, organising meetings or acting as a conduit for information. It was clearly helpful for these roles to be articulated and for people to be aware of others' expectations. Often the roles played by people that supported team work, such as facilitating discussions, providing positive feedback and buoying the team's enthusiasm, evolved over time.

> Although each of the teams has worked together for some time new ways of working and roles are required for the action research project. In the past, some members of the team were involved in keeping the rest of the team informed about what they were doing rather than in making shared decisions with each other. (Local project team H.)

> Initially, meetings were facilitated by the resource teacher: learning and behaviour. The team quickly developed its own coherence and there was no longer a need for a facilitator. (Local project team A, sub-team 2.)

Leadership

Teams' conclusions on leadership were variable, with some reporting the benefit of a team member taking a leadership role, and others indicating the value of equality and joint processes to determine direction. For teams whose experience of participating in the project was marred in any way, particularly by issues at the national level of the project, leadership of a nurturing kind was important and was provided by various team members, including mentors. Several school-based teams found it valuable for someone from within the school's leadership structure to be involved or supportive of the project.

> Positive, proactive leadership provides a climate where people will risk more and work further from their "comfort zones", as the potential for failure is seen as

part of the learning process rather than something that reflects badly on an individual. This means people are more willing to attempt tasks that might be a "stretch" personally. (Local project team F.)

Support from school leadership, in the form of ideas and validation, was an important aspect in the success of this project. (Local project team D.)

Support for the team

Some teams used support from specialists in a consultative fashion and all teams were supported by a research mentor or mentor team. Many teams acknowledged the benefit of the contribution and support provided by specialists and mentors. Providing a sounding board, bringing specialist knowledge or skills, maintaining the team's enthusiasm and facilitating discussions or workshops were all welcome contributions made by specialists and mentors.

The consistent approach of a tightly knit team, plus the support of other teachers and expert personnel, has been a model to emulate in the future. (Local project team F.)

The professionalism, knowledge and experience of the mentor team has been a crucial element in the success of this research project. The three mentors have contributed much more than they were contracted to provide. This is appreciated and acknowledged. (Local project team E.)

The values and culture of the team

It seems most clear to us that the PAR model relies heavily on mutual trust and respect if it is to work effectively. Staff need to be confident of speaking out openly at either focus group meetings or to the wider team. (Local project team C.)

The teams strived to operate in a climate where relationships were built on trust, respect and openness. Honesty, humour, and a sense of equality were also valued. Most teams discovered that disagreements and conflict were inevitable as they worked together, and moving forward constructively was supported by a trusting team culture that valued all team members and their contributions.

[The family] was prepared to try things outside their comfort zone because they felt the team had a profound understanding of the family and Elliot. This engendered even more trust than that which existed at the beginning of the project. (Local project team F.)

Some teams experienced changes in team membership during the project and brought new team members on board. These teams found it important to be aware of their team culture in this process. It was not just the child or young person that new team members became acquainted with, but the team around the child and their preferred way of working. Giving new team members a sense of "how we do things around here" was found to be an effective way of supporting their participation.

We improved our ability to include new team members and bring them into the group by just letting them observe the group process during the meetings at the family home. They joined in as they felt comfortable.

New team members commented they felt welcome, did not feel pressured to perform, and therefore felt comfortable to contribute quite quickly. (Local project team F.)

ATTITUDES

Many of the projects identified that the adults' attitudes made a real difference to how children and young people responded and the outcomes they attained.

Teams found themselves in a positive feedback cycle where a child or young person's success lifted the team, making the adults themselves feel successful. This in turn fostered families and educators who interacted positively with children and young people, and had optimistic expectations for these interactions. These attitudes and interactions only served to further enhance success for children and young people. As teams raised their expectations, children and young people surpassed them.

As a result of Dominic demonstrating that he can learn, staff have raised expectations of him. Staff have an increased awareness of his lateral thinking, interpretations and his association of ideas. (Local project team E.)

Roy's parents found it reassuring that there was a recognition that progress could be made. This acted as an incentive to raise efforts. It has raised the family's expectations of what Roy should/could do … It has given the family a boost and motivated them to do more. (Local project team E.)

Some teams were mindful that high expectations must be both realistic and matched with the necessary support to succeed.

Teams not only raised their expectations, they shifted in how children and young people were regarded. They described young people positively, as valued, accomplished and included participants in family, centre, school and community life.

It has made me realise how cool people with autism are. (Local project team D.)

ENGAGING WITH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

All of the teams told compelling stories about their journeys as practitioner- and parent-researchers. While each team engaged in PAR in a way that suited their context, all teams reported on a process that was cyclical, passing through similar phases. Benefits and challenges of engaging with PAR emerged, as did some pragmatic considerations when embedding the process in the everyday lives of families and education settings. Sections within this theme are: defining PAR, PAR cycles and PAR in the real world.

Defining PAR

Wadsworth (1991) explains that action research 'is not research or evaluation done by some people that is hopefully followed by action by some other people – it is action which is evaluated and researched with a view to both identifying where it has "worked" and what to do if it can be improved *by those who are parties to that action*' (p. 5, italics in original).

While action research is generally illustrated as a cyclical process, the specific steps followed can be described in various ways. Wadsworth (1991) suggests that action researchers move through phases of reflecting; designing; field work; analysing and drawing conclusions; and then putting it into practice – which in turn activates another period of reflection and the cycle starts again. While all the ASD PAR teams worked in cycles, they moved through and interpreted the action research phases in ways that were meaningful for their teams and their contexts.

Teams discovered that the action research approach complemented how practitioners already worked in their day-to-day practice. Many of the processes and skills required for engaging in action research were well-honed by practitioners, such as observation, data collection and reflection.

> The early phase of the research created pressure for teaching staff who saw the research as an "added extra" to their already busy teaching lives … There was a sense that they had to focus teaching practice around the project. After a settling in period, the action research was put into perspective and the project fitted around teaching practice rather than the other way around … [In fact,] teachers practice participatory action research as part of their daily work. (Local project team E.)

It is noteworthy that the ASD PAR teams were engaged in *participatory* action research. This meant that although they were supported by a research mentor, the intention was for practitioners and parents to take the driving seat as researchers, examining and ultimately improving their own activities. Some of the teams saw challenges to participants taking the lead role as researchers and expected that the mentor would take this role.

> The pressures of time on very busy educators necessitate the need for an "outside" person to undertake the facilitation, coordination, data collection and report writing. Prior to the research project commencement it was assumed that this would be incorporated into the role of the mentor team. This was a misunderstanding … Future participatory action research projects [must consider] this issue. (Local project team E.)

In a climate where some teams were unsure of the status of ethics applications they had submitted, and communication from the national project team was absent or ambiguous about whether to commence or continue with their research activity, some teams began to question the status of their team's work and grappled with how it differed from everyday practice.

> As each of the facilitators was involved in providing a service to the target child outside the research project it was necessary to decide how this project would differ from the regular pattern of service. It became clear that this project would not cover all of the service delivery areas … The amount of detailed data collected and the reflection with the whole team would be other aspects that set the project aside from regular service delivery. (Local project team H.)

PAR cycles

> The cycle of observation, analysis, planning, action and evaluation is more effective with the input of … team members from Heidi's several environments. (Local project team A, sub-team 3.)

Identifying the issue

Several teams reported the value of spending time in an initial period of reflection and discussion, to decide on and define which aspect of supporting the child or young person they would focus on.

> [It] has become apparent that the planning, reflection and consideration of the logistics and guiding principles to get to the official start of the project [was] an action research cycle on its own. (Local project team G.)

> All participants agree the research questions gave a focal point and that the time spent developing them at the beginning of the research project was essential. It was important to get them right. (Local project team E.)

Planning

Planning the "action" of PAR was seen by several teams as a vital step. Planning was described as a distinctly team process and having the input of all those supporting the child was considered important. Including the whole team in the setting-up phase meant everyone knew about and was committed to the plan, which in turn increased the likelihood of it being enacted by all team members.

> There has been more discussion and consideration about the approaches to use and this has been helpful for all team members in becoming aware of what is happening and the purpose of the approaches. (Local project team H.)

Fieldwork

In the context of the ASD PAR projects, fieldwork happened in classrooms, centres, homes and the community, when teams put into action the plans they had developed. Fieldwork was purposeful and coordinated. Teams carefully observed and documented their practices, recording data to aid team discussions, reflection and subsequent refinement.

> One of the major advantages of regular team meetings has been the opportunity to consistently monitor Heidi's progress, to coordinate intervention strategies and to gain insights into her abilities as they are demonstrated in a wide range of natural settings. (Local project team A, sub-team 3.)

> Staff have acquired a way of researching and evaluating their own practice. The cyclical nature of participatory action research was evident in this project when initial interventions were unsuccessful and new interventions had to be introduced. (Local project team D.)

> [We] set up a system for personal reflection (diaries) and anecdotally recorded changes in relation to the goal [and] used the simplest form of recording possible: sticky notes on a grid …

	What we have seen	What we have heard	What we have felt
With familiar adults			
With unfamiliar adults			
With peers			
With siblings			
Other			
The process			

(Local project team A, sub-team 2.)

Reflecting

Wadsworth (1991) describes reflection as 'both an end and a simultaneous beginning when we stop, and metaphorically look back over our shoulder at what we are doing' (p. 5). Many teams found that setting aside time to reflect with others was an extremely useful activity. Reflecting on events or actions in the past was synonymous with planning what would happen in the future – teams asked themselves "why?" and then inquired "so what's next?"

> In the time of our involvement with the project we have all grown in our confidence to reflect and be able to change our teaching approaches in accordance with what observations we have made. (Local project team H.)

> Reflection allowed us to develop a strong and functional management plan for Esther's more challenging moments that all staff had input into and that all staff were happy with … Short-term temporary decisions were made by senior centre staff, with an absolute understanding that these were provisional to give us time to reflect and discuss our options calmly rather than making decisions in crisis … We [then] worked through several provisional plans with revisions and amendments before we were all happy with the outcome. The 'reflect, plan, action, reflect' cycle gave us a very powerful tool for managing this process. (Local project team C.)

Some teams reported the value of parents and practitioners engaging in private self-reflection about their own practice; a process facilitated by using reflective diaries and journals. For most teams, reflection was described as a group process that occurred in meetings as team members engaged in discussion.

PAR in the real world

> Despite the frustrations and delays of the term, or because of them, we had come to appreciate the advantages of working in a real world model. A more traditional research approach would have been less able to handle the set backs that action research saw as an integral part of the whole process. Certainly, we felt that the real world had intruded into our centre and had a major impact on the project. Some of the results were not positive, but we had had some pleasant surprises as a result of the difficulties. And we had learned a great deal about action research and about the impact of our actions on student outcomes. (Local project team C.)

Teams reported a range of real-life factors that impacted their ability to embed PAR in their context. Family commitments and priorities, geographical distance between team members, availability of communication technologies, such as email, and the health of the children or young people at the centre of the teams all influenced teams' momentum in moving forward with PAR.

The most consistent factor that emerged as affecting teams' use of PAR was that of time. Time constraints imposed by participants' usual work commitments and busy lives meant making adequate time for the project difficult. The nature of how time is divided and used in the school year was also a factor. Participating in a nationally funded project, with its associated time restrictions, was also reported by teams as an issue.

> In order for practitioners to reflect upon their practice, they must have time. This needs to be timetabled to ensure it takes place. Funding must be in place to do this. (Local project team D.)

> The research project contract was for one year. The holiday periods and structure of the school year have a significant impact … Over three months of the year was taken up in school holidays. One term was spent with proposal writing and planning. Two terms were devoted to solid research input. The final research term … [was] such a busy time … that the research focus could not be a priority … This reflects reality. (Local project team E.)

THE ADULTS' LEARNING JOURNEY

While the teams focused on how best to support the learning and development of children and young people, their reports also gave an account of how the knowledge and skills of the team were enhanced by the project. Teams developed knowledge in several areas and reported a range of activities that enriched their learning, such as participating in workshops, attending a national ASD conference, engaging with mentors and specialists, reading literature and spending time together in discussion and reflection as a team. Acquiring knowledge *together* was a strong theme.

Enriching the adults' learning

> The attitude and knowledge of staff also contribute to a supportive environment. They need to feel relaxed about taking the time to know the students and to build relationships with them, as well as gaining an understanding and knowledge of autism. (Local project team D.)

Some teams highlighted that those supporting children and young people need a good understanding of ASD and appropriate support strategies. Other teams emphasised the need to learn from the child and developed an understanding of ASD in terms of how it impacted the individual they supported.

Many teams found it valuable to learn about PAR.

> The most obvious area of ongoing support provided by the mentors was around the research process itself. This is because the local project team members were very familiar with the students involved in the study and also

with the factors associated with ASD. However, they were not as familiar with the concept of action research and all that this entails … As the project progressed, the confidence of team members to undertake action research grew. (Local project team E.)

It was evident that as teams developed knowledge and skills, their confidence grew, which in turn enhanced the support they provided to the children and young people.

Teachers and teachers' aides are more confident in their knowledge and practices – this has had a relaxing effect upon the students. This has resulted in teachers using different strategies for different students, which is a very learner centred and individual approach. (Local project team D.)

All teachers reported they felt much more confident about making judgements about appropriate elements of programming because of their increased understanding. (Local project team G.)

Learning together

The major strength of the research project was that all those involved increased their knowledge and skills. Students' communication and computer skills were developed while parents, teachers, teachers' aides, mentors and other professionals increased their knowledge of action research, ASD and effective teaching and learning strategies. In addition, the action research process facilitated a supportive learning community, led to increased communication and collaboration between teachers and parents and, if the findings from the research are broadly disseminated, it has the potential to benefit the wider ASD community. (Local project team E.)

Complex and reciprocal learning relationships existed within teams. Mentors supported teams' use of PAR while learning about the lived experience of ASD from families and educators. While supporting young people's learning, teams learned *from* their children and students – gaining ever deeper insights into what "having ASD" meant. Whole teams developed a profound understanding of all team members' perspectives and situations.

The project provided the mentors with many opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills in the area of ASD and action research. In particular, the mentors appreciated the opportunity of working with and learning from the teachers at Renga Renga School. This reflects the benefits of collaborative partnership, where team members learn from each other. (Local project team D.)

The notion of a learning community was evident for several teams who reported that knowledge was shared and acquired together. Teams did not only learn from each other, they learned with each other. Traditional professional learning and development opportunities, such as workshops and conferences, were significantly enhanced when several team members if not the whole team attended together. New information was embedded and made real as teams engaged in discussion and reflection, and related their learning to their context.

During this workshop, teachers had the opportunity to brainstorm and discuss ideas … Teacher feedback indicated that this was invaluable for all participants, and highlighted the benefits to all of professional collegial sharing. (Local project team G.)

The team was strengthened and empowered by learning and socialising together. Each person took different elements out of the learning experience according to their need and role. (Local project team F.)

CONCLUSION

An "outsider's" analysis of project reports (some four years post the project's conclusion) could never claim to fully capture the complete story of a journey as complex, valuable and demanding as engaging in PAR about supporting a child or young person with ASD. However, sharing the consistent and powerful findings generated by those who stepped up to participate in the ASD PAR project, serves to acknowledge the work of those teams and provides others who do similar work with insights to affirm and enhance practice.

On the face of it, the findings of the ASD PAR project reported here may not seem such new ideas to those supporting children and young people with ASD in New Zealand. Indeed, few would challenge the importance of team work, positive expectations and attitudes, building capability, and reflective practice. Yet, there is a depth to these findings, particularly worthy of discussion on two fronts.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the ASD PAR teams themselves espoused many of these tenets of effective practice in their proposals and early reports, prior to actually commencing work on the project. This raises the question of whether their work and efforts during the project served only to affirm what they already knew and were already doing. In some instances, it seemed this was the case. At the start of the ASD PAR journey most teams reported that they already worked collaboratively, had existing expertise in ASD, respected the perspective of the families and whānau, and regarded children and young people as positive contributors. However, they also reported that the process of engaging in PAR still brought about deep learning and real shifts in practice. The process called on teams to be purposeful in how they planned, analysed and reflected on their practice, and teams' own descriptions of this process revealed a movement from the rhetoric to reality of effective practice. Three very powerful examples of teams who underwent this shift in thinking and practice appear in this journal, in the articles: *Learning from Each Other, Making Assumptions vs. Building Relationships*, and *Building Communities of Support*.

The second point of note is the sheer degree to which teams chose to report on aspects of teaming, learning, attitudes and reflection. One might assume that teams' reporting was weighted more heavily towards findings about specific interventions than the findings described here. This was definitely not the case. Teams reported as much and often more so about the interactions and attitudes of the adults in the team than they did about the specific support provided

to children. Many teams concluded that the way in which the adults worked together and supported each other had as much impact on success as the specific strategies used by these adults when supporting young people. This further underscores that teams were not playing lipservice to notions of team work, capability building or reflection. They were what teams did, as they lived the experience of effectively supporting a child or young person with ASD.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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