

Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE)

In it together

Vijaya Dharan

Psychologist, Ministry of Education, Special Education, Lower Hutt and former Senior Advisor – EePiSE Project.



ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the process of EePiSE from conception to conclusion. It attempts to outline the extent of cooperation and collaboration among educators across sectors in identifying what works for children and young people who require significant adaptation to the curriculum. Outlined are the sequence of events, and the people involved, in a project which was the first of its kind in the field of special education in New Zealand.

Practice Paper

Keywords

Action research, collaboration, effective practices, professional development, research project, teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

The basis of this article was the numerous queries around how the project came to be. As the longest serving project team member on the scene, I felt compelled to share the birth and growth of the EePiSE project with you all in this special edition. The project, as you will see by the articles in it, was a fine example of collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

Where did it Begin?

The project was one of the initiatives of the Ministry of Education aimed at supporting and enhancing teacher capability to meet the growing diversity among students. The main purpose of the project was to *explore what works and why* for students who require significant adaptation to the curriculum, and to identify ways to sustain the effectiveness of teachers that will result in improved outcomes for these students in whatever settings they are educated.

SET UP PHASE

The project team led by Dr Roseanna Bourke, who was then the Professional Practice Manager - Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE), worked on setting up the initial infrastructure for this initiative, originally called “Building Capability in Special Education”. However, the title caused some confusion in some parts of the sector as it was mistakenly linked to school property modifications. There were also other reasons, as cited in a later article by Roseanna Bourke, that led to a change of the project title to Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education or what is now fondly referred to as EePiSE. As one of their main tasks at the very beginning, the project team set up an internal Ministry steering group and an external advisory group, with both groups playing an important role in plotting and shaping the course of the EePiSE project.

Steering Group

The steering group was made up mainly of cross-Ministry staff from policy, curriculum, special education, and the schooling improvement division. The steering group contributed to the overall research questions addressed through the different phases of the project. The key role of the steering group was to contribute towards the project design and to ensure that the intent of the funding was adhered to throughout the project.

Advisory Group

The advisory group comprised of principals from primary, secondary and special schools, and representatives from disability and parent advocacy groups, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), and the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA). The advisory group continued to inform the project until its completion. The role of the advisory group was to focus on and inform the project team on the practical aspects of the project from their perspectives – a kind of reality check of sorts.

THE FIRST PHASE

The first phase of the project involved the commissioning of a literature review to address three key issues:

- the learning and social outcomes for children and young people with moderate to high needs requiring significant curriculum and teaching adaptations
- features of effective interventions that improve student learning and social outcomes
- building teacher and school capability.

In addressing these questions, the review also identified some key features of effective professional development for teachers, particularly to improve the learning and social outcomes for students with special education needs. The literature review identified that for professional development of teachers to be effective it should be school-based and that it must be built into school-wide plans for improvement that supported teachers to work collaboratively and implement new ideas.

Teachers needed professional learning and development that was practical, that addressed their issues and took account of their learning context. They had to own the process of their learning and be able to draw on one another's experiences and expertise. It was important that they were given time to share and plan together.

THE PILOT STUDY

Research of this magnitude was the first of its kind in New Zealand in special education. The project team, in consultation with the steering group and advisory group, decided to undertake a pilot study in 25 schools to explore some methodological approaches. The task ahead was both exciting and challenging. While schools were facing some challenges owing to staff changes at various stages of the project, the project team too had changes of personnel at different times. However, Roseanna Bourke provided continuity through her leadership.

How did Schools get Involved?

The advisory group strongly recommended that the expressions of interest sought from schools to be part of the pilot study had to be simple and brief. As a result, a one-page *Expression of Interest* was mailed out to all schools in the country. This was preceded by an advertisement in the *Education Gazette*. There was a small technical glitch that held up the mail-out of these forms to schools. Eventually the mail-out reached schools on what was the last working day for secondary schools in 2003, and arrived later still to schools in remote areas. The lateness of information did not seem to be a deterrent. The response was overwhelming. More than 300 schools expressed an interest to be involved, out of which 25 schools, including four kura kaupapa Māori, were selected to participate in the six-month pilot study.

Criteria for Selection of Schools

Members of the steering committee were involved in establishing the selection criteria. Schools included primary, intermediate and secondary, with a wide range of decile rankings across the country. Four settings – regular schools, special schools, kura kaupapa Māori and school-based classes for the focus group of students were chosen on the basis of the number of students who were receiving additional support to access the curriculum.

Researcher Collaboration

Auckland College of Education (which has since merged with Auckland University), was selected to lead the research. They collaborated with three other colleges of education, two universities, GSE and a private researcher. While the collaboration was highly desirable, the logistics of obtaining ethical approval from the various ethics committees pushed back the start time of the pilot study by a term in 2004. Subsequently, schools were involved in Terms 2 and 3, 2004.

Overall around 96 focus groups were held in these schools with school leaders, parents, teachers and students. The focus groups were asked to: *identify relevant learning, social and cultural outcomes for all learners; how these outcomes were currently being achieved, and what would be needed to enhance these outcomes – particularly for those students who required significant curriculum adaptations*. The teachers in these focus groups clearly expressed a need for school-based professional development opportunities to enhance their expertise to support the diverse range of students in their classrooms. The result of the numerous focus groups and findings from this pilot study can be accessed through the Ministry of Education website (www.minedu.govt.nz).

The nature of professional development that teachers in the pilot study wanted mirrored the international trend. They wanted the professional development to be situated within the context of their schools in order to be meaningful and sustainable.

Teachers, while categorically stating the need for ongoing support for them to be able to meet the needs of the growing diversity within their classrooms, also identified some key features that would improve the effectiveness of the professional development. They wanted the leadership within schools to foster a culture of acceptance of diversity, which they saw as a key to sustain effective teaching practices. For the professional development and learning to be more effective they said that:

- teachers had to own and facilitate the process of their professional learning and development
- professional learning opportunities should be based on teachers' immediate needs and build upon their existing knowledge
- collaborative planning and goal setting should be a continuous process with ongoing monitoring, adaptation and review
- supporting teachers in their professional development and learning should be built into school-wide planning for raising student achievement
- supporting teachers in working with families/whānau was important for improving outcomes for all students.

ACTION RESEARCH AND ACTION LEARNING

Informed by the pilot study, an advertisement was placed in the *Education Gazette* in August 2004 inviting schools to participate in a year-long action research and action learning programme of professional learning and development during 2005. Once again, a one-page format (see Appendix 1) was used. Schools had the option to choose from either an action research process or a professional development and learning opportunity which was to be more aligned to action learning. There were more than one hundred expressions of interest. In probing the reason for the lower response to the year-long study in comparison to the overwhelming interest for the pilot study, it became clear that a number of schools across the country were already involved in other Ministry of Education initiatives such as numeracy, literacy, and information and communication technologies (ICT), and did not want to add to their work programme for the year.

The Selection Process

Schools

Similar criteria to that of the pilot study were applied in selecting schools. Forty-nine schools were selected to participate in the year-long professional learning cycle or the "EPISE journey" as the schools refer to the learning process.

Researchers

Researchers from the University of Auckland, Victoria University of Wellington, Christchurch College of Education and Poutama Pounamu research whānau (the Māori research arm of GSE) facilitated the action research in 25 schools. GSE districts were approached to identify facilitators who could work in the other 24 schools which chose professional development through an action learning process.

Facilitators

GSE district managers were asked to nominate staff who:

- had significant experience in working with students with moderate, high and very high needs who required significant adaptation to the curriculum content
- had up-to-date curriculum knowledge and were able to link research to practice
- had the interest and skills to facilitate high quality professional learning
- had the ability to use, adapt and develop resources as required
- could take the role of mentor and foster professional growth in schools
- had the competency to gather and analyse data to evaluate the impact of the professional learning process in each setting particularly as it related to the learning, social and cultural outcomes for students
- had the ability to support networking and the growth of communities of practice to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of outcomes for students with moderate, high and very high needs who required significant adaptation to the curriculum content
- had the ability to write a final report incorporating all aspects of professional learning of the schools
- could work to agreed timelines and present milestone reports on time.

Managing a Virtual Team

Not surprisingly, facilitators and researchers were located across the country. One of the most effective ways we used to communicate was through teleconferences. The facilitators found these conversations useful in the initial stages and reassuring during the later stages. Specific professional development on action learning was provided to upskill GSE facilitators.

Meeting of Schools

From the outset, this project was conceptualised to be a collaborative venture between educators. To further strengthen this notion, the 25 schools involved in action research were invited to a day-long hui in Wellington to outline the intent of the project. At the meeting schools were given an opportunity to probe what the notion of *Learning for All* meant to their schools and communities, and how they could enhance this notion through the project.

The 24 schools involved in the action learning had similar opportunities in four regional meetings.

These meetings proved to be a starting point for schools to network with one another, which continued to grow in some areas around the country throughout the project. The regional symposia provided a further platform to strengthen the connections between schools.

What the Schools Did

Although the goal for every participating school was to maximise the outcomes for students who required additional support to access the curriculum, schools took slightly different routes in trying to achieve this goal. Although the participating schools took different pathways, their learning in terms of reflective and data-informed practices, seems to be a common outcome for all teachers. Their individual narratives in this special issue of *Kairaranga* will no doubt speak to this.

Building Learning Communities

The research, as mentioned earlier, was also aimed at sustaining and supporting ongoing effective teaching practices. To build networks among practitioners it was necessary that teachers linked with their peers within their schools and also fostered links between schools. Many schools in the project have fostered professional links with their local schools, and also reached out to other schools through specialist teachers, workshops, school visits and an e-community.

The four regional symposia that showcased the learning of schools, some of which have been captured in this special issue, have provided further opportunities for schools to extend their learning communities. The enthusiasm to network among the symposia delegates was encouraging and provided further impetus to the growth of this professional learning community.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Teachers were introduced to relevant literature and research material throughout their involvement in the project. Even reluctant teachers soon became avid consumers of current research information on topics relevant to their professional learning. The findings from the four kura kaupapa Māori during the initial pilot study has been developed into a teacher-friendly resource. In addition, the information contained in the literature review was extrapolated into an active resource material called *Springboards to Practice* (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Seven key themes identified in the initial literature review (*bullying, teaching, learning, friendship, social, identity and self-esteem*) have been captured in a teacher-friendly resource. The resource provides a strong basis for self-examination of teaching practices. This resource serves the dual purpose of informing teachers of what is out there, while actively engaging them to contribute to evidence from their settings on what works for students who require additional support for learning. We hope that teachers will be able to contribute effective teaching and learning strategies from their own practices to the existing richness of information in the *Springboards to Practice* (Ministry of Education, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The EEPiSE project has demonstrated the power of collaboration amongst teachers, and between facilitators and teachers, and schools and the Ministry. The participatory nature (action research/action learning) of the professional development provided the opportunity for teachers to build trustworthy relationships with external facilitators that allowed them to critically examine their existing teaching theory and practices. Although the timeframe has been short to reap the deeper benefits in terms of examining the impact of this reflective practice on student outcomes, the experiences that you are about to read will nevertheless capture the extent of collaboration that has been established among teachers, which is a necessary first step towards creating a community of practitioners who will learn and grow together.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the EEPiSE programme was one in which the Ministry and schools were “in it together”. It is the relationship and mutual trust built throughout the project in and among schools that will help sustain ongoing exchange of ideas between all those involved in teaching and learning. You will find the storied experiences of schools in the following pages demonstrate the impact of the EEPiSE project on students, teachers, school leaders and school communities.

Happy reading!

REFERENCES

Ministry of Education (2005). Springboards to Practice. Source: Donald Beasley Institute (Eds.), *Building capability in education for students with moderate and high needs*. Final draft report of a literature review commissioned by the Ministry of Education: Wellington, New Zealand.

Vijaya Dharan



AUTHOR PROFILE

Vijaya Dharan was a senior advisor with the Ministry of Education, Special Education for the EEPiSE project. She is both a teacher and psychologist by training. Optimism that all children and young people can learn given the right environment that supports their diversity, and belief in their resilience, are what sustain her in the work she does.

Email

vijaya.dharan@minedu.govt.nz

APPENDIX 1.

Expression of Interest

ENHANCING EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Phase 2 Professional Development, Learning and Action Research

If your school is interested in being involved in this project please register your interest by completing the following details.

Name of school: _____

Address: _____

Contact details: _____

Name of contact person: _____

Please choose one of the following:

You wish to work alongside researchers and have access to professional development and learning specific to the needs of your school for students with moderate and high needs who require significant adaptations to the curriculum.

OR

You wish to be involved in professional development and learning to meet the needs of students with moderate and high needs who require significant adaptations to the curriculum.

School type:

- ☐ Primary
- ☐ Intermediate
- ☐ Secondary

Area:

- ☐ Regular
- ☐ Special
- ☐ Kura Kaupapa Māori

Please indicate the number of students currently receiving funding from the following sources:

- ORRS
- Supplementary Learning Support
- Enhanced Programme Funding
- Moderate needs support
- Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour
- Other initiatives (Literacy, Numeracy, ICT etc.)
