Within our Circle of Influence

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ABSTRACT

Two teachers working in Year 0-1 classes at Manurewa South School, a decile 2 school in the Manurewa area of Manukau City, Auckland, share their voyage of exploration around their own circle of influence. In this article the research team including Bronwyn Blair, a facilitator from the University of Auckland, worked through a cycle of needs analysis and assessment, reflection, practice and reflection, and evaluation of 12 students targeted from their classes. The five and six-year-old students were experiencing behaviour and/or learning difficulties. The team explored teaching social skills while also focusing on raising literacy achievement. Practice interventions included a mix of changed teacher behaviours, practice, and planning in the areas of literacy and social skills for the targeted children. Pre and post-data were collected to guide and evaluate teacher planning. Teachers later became involved in school-wide development sharing their ideas and process.

INTRODUCTION

In approaching the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EEPiSE) project, we decided to examine both the learning and achievement of our students as well as factors that could affect this. Initially, through taking a very wide approach, all the factors that could influence students' behaviour were of interest to us, and a circle of influence was drawn to represent our thoughts.
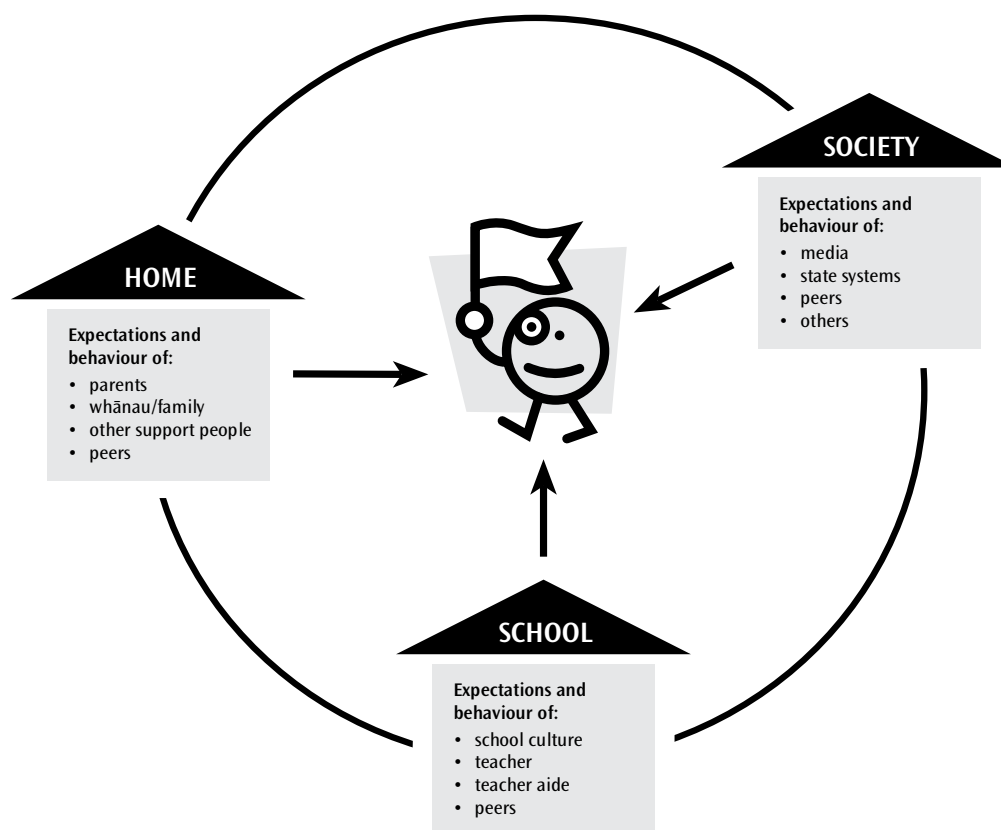

Figure 1. The consultation process

As we worked through this process we identified that as teachers we thought we had to assist our students in every aspect of their lives, because all of these factors could influence both their learning and their behaviour. This left us feeling overwhelmed and wondering how to make a difference in these students' lives as in many of these situations it was difficult to intervene. It was so easy to become reactive and focus on every influence drawn within the circle. Through the support of our facilitator, we began to see more clearly that focusing on issues outside our realm of influence was not only leaving us overwhelmed, but was affecting our effectiveness as teachers. Many of these factors, although part of our students' circle of influence, were beyond what we as teachers had control over. How could students who were affected by several influences, which in turn affected their behaviour, be best supported in their learning? Like every other student in our classes they had an equal right to learn. In exploring how these students could be helped, Hattie (1999) suggested that quality classroom teaching has the most influence on successful outcomes for students.

This made an enormous impact on us both and made us realise that in order to help these students learn:

Everything that happened within our classrooms was within our circle of influence. We could leave other things alone and try to make changes within ourselves as teachers and in our classrooms, and this would make a difference for these students at school.

With the help of our facilitator, Bronwyn, a four-phase programme was developed:

1. Needs analysis was carried out through assessment and evaluation.
2. Reading the literature helped us identify possible ways of meeting these needs.
3. These strategies were incorporated into our teaching and learning practice.
4. Further assessment and evaluation of our practice was carried out to measure changes.

The decision was made to target a group of six students from each class. The students were all experiencing learning difficulties, having made very little progress over the year, and several also experienced behavioural difficulties.

STAGE 1
NEEDS ANALYSIS
From our **needs analysis** it was decided that everything we did had to have a purpose.

Our purposes in teaching **social skills** were:

*   to improve social outcomes
*   to reduce undesirable behaviour
*   to enhance learning.

Our purposes in **literacy** were:

*   to raise learning achievement in reading
*   to raise learning achievement in writing.

We were guided by Brophy's (1988) ideas on good classroom management:

Good classroom management implies not only that the teacher has elicited the cooperation of the students in minimising misconduct and can intervene effectively when misconduct occurs, but also that worthwhile academic activities are occurring more or less continuously and that the classroom management as a whole is designed to maximise student engagement in these activities not merely to minimise misconduct (Brophy, 1988, p.3).

Brophy's comments indicated that as teachers we needed to examine our own practice closely to look at our impact on student learning and behaviour.

Once we were clear about our focus for our 12 students, we not only wanted to collect data on each student's learning, behaviour, and social skills, but also on how our own teaching practice and planning impacted on the learning and social skills of those children. The data needed to be:

*   valid
*   purposeful
*   from a variety of sources.

The following data was collected.

TABLE 1
Data Collection

RAISING LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT	DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS
• phonic knowledge	• time sampling of children's on-task behaviour
• running records	
• writing sample	• anecdotal recording of social skills and behaviour in the classroom
• concepts about print	
• sight words	• observation of teacher attention to student behaviour
• observations of teaching behaviour	
• teacher planning for lessons	• observation of teacher

The data collected was analysed in order to find out the strengths and areas of need for both the students and the teachers. While it was easy to analyse and find out about the students' needs and strengths, it was very challenging for us to analyse our own. This is when we had the facilitator observe us teaching our classrooms. While it was quite daunting to begin with, to have someone watch and note every word and every action, in the end it was fruitful as we could now analyse through a reflective process, what needed work in order to do what we had set out to achieve for our students. Our planning procedures were also under scrutiny. We went back to Ministry of Education (1996, 2003) publications to guide us through the processes of guided reading and writing.

We aimed to use effective practice research to guide data collection, analysis, and to plan any changes to our teaching.

STAGE 2
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE

As teachers we worked collaboratively and reflectively with Bronwyn to develop a package that covered both professional development and changes to practice to support our classroom programmes. We started from where our strengths were, for example taking guided reading lessons, and then moved on to taking guided writing sessions, one of our weaknesses. Prior to this we had reverted back to whole class writing as we tended to put guided writing in the "too-hard basket". To be able to link reading and writing was a learning curve for both of us. We had very rigorous, intense sessions on how to take running records, how to analyse them and plan for students' needs, and how to use the information to inform both reading and writing. Language experiences were then planned to provide the students with ideas for modelled writing, shared/interactive writing, guided writing and independent writing.

The information gathered on teacher responses to children was studied carefully. What was apparent was how important teacher modelling was for children. From discussions with Bronwyn we knew that all behaviour had a purpose, so the purpose behind each student's behaviour was determined. We developed ways of noticing little triggers before children reacted to a situation, as it was easy to forget that preventing challenging behaviours occurring in the first place is one of the most important parts of behaviour management. We referred back constantly to Bill Roger's (1995) technique of managing behaviour in the least intrusive way.

Goals were set for both teachers and the 12 students and these were included as part of our daily work with the students. By targeting particular aspects of learning we were able to specifically work with the students' required needs. Planning for both literacy and social skills now became very specific including concentration on letter/ sound associations, basic sight words and reading strategies; we went "back to the basics".

A balanced literacy programme was provided for the whole class. Students wrote independently with the teachers, and the teachers in turn wrote with and to the students. High expectations were communicated to the targeted group of students every day. These students were expected to achieve in the same manner as all the students in the class. We continuously told them we believed that they were capable of doing it. The target group was given literacy input from the teachers every day in order to give them maximum and focused attention. We consciously used instructional strategies including modelling, prompting, questioning and giving feedback, which are 'deliberate acts of teaching that focus learning in order to meet a particular purpose' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.78) within a range of contexts and approaches to teaching reading and writing.

Resources were developed specifically to meet the needs of the target students. These were included in regular small group practice sessions. The resources were incorporated into our task board activities and the students were encouraged at every opportunity to use them either independently, in a pair with another member in the group, or in a group with another "expert" buddy in the class. Gradually, as the confidence in these students began to grow, they were able to show other students in the class how to work on these tasks, and so the target students became the experts in the classroom.

Provision of opportunities for students to have a lot of legitimate talk in pairs and in groups was another strategy we consciously put into our classroom planning. Once student talk was relevant, they were able to transfer it into their written stories. Because the students were young, we held the preconception that children had to do a new story every day and somehow we could not imagine children writing one story over a couple of sessions at this age. Our open discussions with Bronwyn got rid of such fallacies and we moved on to help students do what they could do best.

We decided to concentrate on one social skill every three weeks and planned how this was going to happen for each of the three weeks. From the initial information collected a decision was made to teach social skills to the whole class, as we wanted everyone to use the skills we chose for these students. We saw that these students could be disadvantaged if the others did not know of what became "our ways". As a result of this the idea of "class rules" became "class ways". We developed the class ways with input from students, asking them what they wanted in their classroom. The students, therefore, had ownership of the class ways. We constantly referred back to them and there were deliberate acts of teaching, role plays, and constant reminders and positive reinforcements of these desirable behaviour patterns. Thus we chose a model that relied on teaching skills rather than a punishment model.

In both social skills and literacy, students were encouraged to evaluate themselves and others in the group. This made children see what other children were doing and it also helped them develop the confidence to be able to evaluate themselves.

STAGE 3
FINAL DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

It was now time to collect data and analyse this to see the shift in learning for our 12 students. We repeated the initial observations, and data collection methods. The results we saw were extremely positive. From our observations we noticed that:

- students were more courteous to each other
- there was more tolerance and cooperation between students which in turn enhanced their relationships
- on-task behaviour had improved markedly.

An in-class observation by Bronwyn supported the change we saw in the language used by students, and indeed the teachers. Pre-intervention observations on teacher attention to student behaviour showed that we had low levels of attention to positive student behaviour. Post-intervention observation data collected showed we were attending to positive behaviour in our students between 80-85 percent of the time.

With enhanced on-task behaviour, came enhanced learning. We noticed that the reading levels of most of our children had gone up. They had made considerable progress in terms of their alphabet knowledge, and concepts about print.

TABLE 2

Student outcomes: Student instructional reading levels from running record results

INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL (USING PM BENCHMARK)				
	March	June	August	December
	1	1	3	7
	1	1	1	1
Class A Students	1	1	1	6
	1	1	1	7
	1	1	1	7
	1	1	1	3
	1	1	1	2
Class B Students	1	1	1	1
	1	1	3	4
	1	1	1	5

Key:

Pre-intervention data

Post-intervention data

Here are three writing samples of the same child taken over a period of about a month. The shift in this student's learning has been from representing words with any letters to using correctly spelt sight words and some correct letter/sound associations in unknown words.

In post-intervention reflection we noted the following changes in students:

They felt real pride and ownership in the stories they had written. All of them wanted others to read their story. I think the purpose – setting it up at the beginning – has really worked. The students are now keen to write. They are engaged in their work and are learning well.
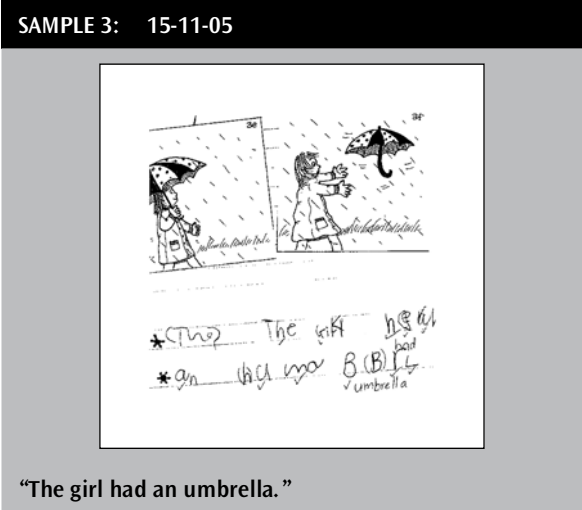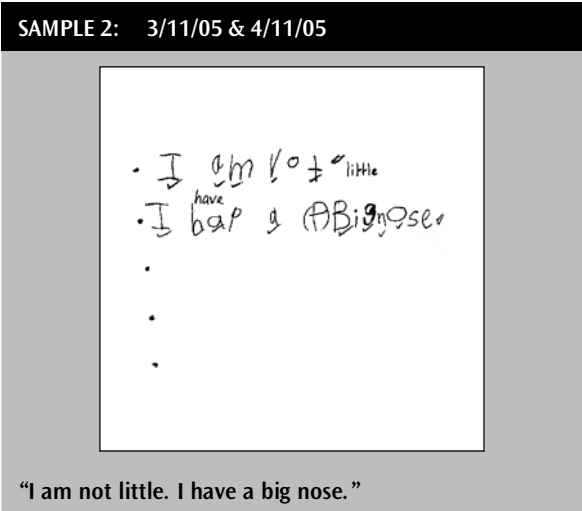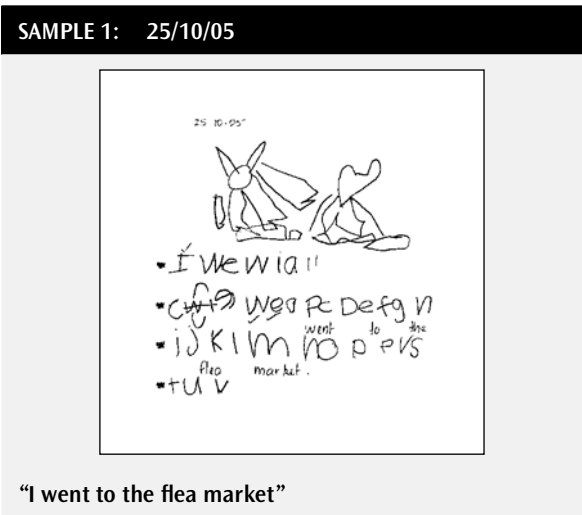
"I went to the flea market"

"I am not little. I have a big nose."

"The girl had an umbrella."

Figure 2: Writing samples from a class student.

STAGE 4
POST-INTERVENTION EVALUATION

Reflection and forward planning now took place on three levels:

- individual
- class
- school-wide.

We looked at our journey from both where we were at, and from where the students were at, and the progress seemed immense. The students were keen learners with boosted self-esteem, who felt success and believed that they could learn. It was quite interesting to observe the shift we had made from what we saw initially as positives and negatives in our classrooms, to how we now saw this in the classroom. The focus in the classroom is now more about the positive behaviour choices students make, rather than annoying small negative behaviours. For example the focus is less on how the students are sitting on the mat, and is instead on attending to those students who are ready to learn. By praising this behaviour the students follow quickly into the expected learning behaviour.

Planning is based on the analysed needs, strengths, and interests of the students. We work with the students on developing their strengths, and where they need to go next to enhance and extend their personal learning journeys.

We had developed confidence as teachers in making changes within the classroom, our circle of influence, and hence we felt we had given both the students and ourselves a fair chance. We wondered if we would have a chance to share what we had learned with others.

It was timely when senior management approached us to share our knowledge with the staff at our school. We were very hesitant to do the professional development by ourselves as we thought the staff may not be very receptive if professional development came from colleagues. We asked Bronwyn to assist us with this, as we thought that the staff might perceive her as an "expert" and make shifts in their teaching practice. However Bronwyn, while agreeing to support us in developing the professional development, refused to present it herself, as she thought it was better coming from practitioners experiencing the everyday reality of the school, rather than from someone who wasn't part of this. Finally, we braced ourselves for two sessions on writing and one on socials skills, each one and a half hours long. Contrary to our beliefs, we found that most staff members were very keen to hear of our success story and have taken back to their classrooms some of the strategies we presented. We have also had beginning teachers observe our literacy sessions and they have commented on how useful it has been.

Our principal Nola Hambleton commented:

This exercise has reinforced a belief, long held by the senior management of this school, that sharing of expertise within our own learning community, by staff members who know and understand our students, is the most powerful tool in effecting change. From my observation of the two staff members involved in the project I noted an increased understanding of the value of cooperatively interchanging ideas and practice, an increased ability to clearly define the outcomes they required and a subsequent growing in confidence in their ability to move their students forward. As a result they were then able to confidently share their findings with the rest of the staff who themselves largely adapted their own teaching and learning. This I see as a beginning; the scaffold on which school-wide effective practice can be built. Undoubtedly they enhanced their teaching with new skills in engaging students in their learning while trying to minimise distractions of behaviour and low concentration spans. The pleasure of the students in their progress, as outlined in this article, is evident.

We consider ourselves lucky to be a part of this involvement with EEPiSE. Thanks to the patience of our facilitator we have come out with the confidence that we can make a difference in the learning of our students.

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