Challenging Teachers' Practice through Learning

Reflections on the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education programme of research and professional practice

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ABSTRACT
When teachers participate in professional development and learning opportunities it enables them to reconceptualise their assessment and teaching practices with the support of facilitators and researchers. National programmes of professional development and research, such as the three year Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EEPiSE) programme led by the Ministry of Education, also created opportunities for researchers, professional development facilitators and Ministry personnel to reconceptualise their ideas, beliefs, values, and understandings of what it means to learn, and acknowledge the diversity of learners and learning. This paper highlights some of these learnings and explores ideas around supporting and challenging teacher practice through their own learning. It signals the need for both action research and action learning models of support to teachers, and highlights how "simple things" such as change in teacher talk and small adaptations to teaching practice lead to more complex changes within the classrooms and schools. Within the project an interplay between Ministry, researchers, facilitators and teachers enabled a richer indepth exploration within each school setting about the intent of EEPiSE and inclusive practices for all learners. The outcomes for teachers and schools was often portrayed through the increased learning achievements of their students; however, the realities of teacher daily practice often blur the correlation. The significant achievement of EEPiSE is the celebration that teachers, researchers, facilitators and Ministry combined efforts to continue to tackle and enjoy the challenge of learning for us all.

Practice/Research paper
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INTRODUCTION

Teachers are active learners through the very art and science of their day-to-day teaching in the classroom. As a result of being continually confronted with unique and changing situations, teachers question their own learning about their teaching. Working with an increasingly diverse range of learners, teachers' attitudes, beliefs, values and knowledge about learners, challenges their notions about "what it means to learn" and "what it means to teach".

It is not surprising then, that the most effective models of professional development and learning utilise a range of authentic environmental factors to best support teachers. These include (1) specific and unique situations that arise for teachers that challenge their practice, (2) authentic teaching contexts that have meaning for teachers and (3) support from an in-class or in-school facilitator or researcher working alongside the teachers to support their inquiry-into-practice. Systematic professional development in the environment where the teacher works and learns, enables change within the school to take place at two levels: systems, and professional teaching practice.

Creating opportunities for teachers to systematically examine the impact of their teaching on student learning is a valuable and powerful way to support teachers. If we are to understand what change in teacher practice is most effective for both teachers and learners, professional development cannot be separated from day-to-day professional practice. In order to bring about a desired and positive shift in student learning, teachers require the support to examine their own practice, and trial different ways of thinking and working, followed by an examination of any influences these have had on the way learners think about their own learning.

This paper outlines some of the findings of a Government-funded project (2003–2006) that aimed to support classroom-based teachers' pedagogical practices in relation to learners identified as requiring significant adaptation to the curriculum content. The project aimed to identify, develop and share effective pedagogical practices in primary and secondary schools for students who required significant adaptation to the curriculum content.

CAPABILITY BUILDING RECONCEPTUALISED AS LEARNING

When the New Zealand Government funded and initiated the *Building Capability in Special Education* project (introduced in 2003), it was intended that the project would target learners who had the most significant needs, irrespective of their educational setting, and to support teachers to develop their teaching practice. The unintended consequences of the initial project title highlighted the significance of the way we use language, and the meaning people attribute to it.

First, teachers had made it clear they felt that "building capability" signalled an assumption that there was little or minimal capability already in the sector; yet within New Zealand we already had many examples of very strong teaching and inclusive practices for learners with diverse needs. Second, the notion of "special education" suggested that there was an education apart from, and different to, the types of education that other learners in schools received. This created divisions within the educational sector, where ideology, politics, funding and intentions were conceptualised and practiced in different ways. A change in the name of the project to Enhancing Effective Practice better reflected the intended focus on effective practice and signalled a move away from *developing* capable teachers to enhancing effective *practice*.

One of the project's specific aims was to facilitate the ongoing development of teacher expertise and confidence in teaching all learners. This meant that irrespective of placement, learners who required significant adaptation to the curriculum would have access to a supportive, inspiring and knowledgeable teacher – about *teaching*. Such teachers are already visible within the New Zealand context in primary and secondary schools, and in designated special schools. However, less is known about how a teacher in any given educational context develops and builds their expertise in supporting all learners.

While the focus of the project was on student outcomes, these were broadened and identified as incorporating students' social, cultural and learning achievements. These achievements were used by the teachers in the project to think about their own practice and to reflect on the impact *their teaching* had on student learning.

It was a different focus from a deficit orientation towards a learner that was premised on impairment or disability. This subtle change in focus caused many teachers to describe this project as 'one of the hardest I have been involved in'; simply because there was no standard response or textbook answer to the difficulties or dilemmas they faced in examining their teaching practice.

LEARNING DOES CHALLENGE ALL

The children and young people who were the focus of this initiative were those learners who had been identified as requiring significant adaptation to the curriculum content. To reach that level of specificity, a reference group consisting of Ministry personnel, principals, teachers, union members, People First representatives and Parent-to-Parent representatives, deliberated on how to identify the focus students without labelling them. This challenged the way Ministry personnel and, later, teachers identified the learners they sought to support. While on paper, the learners could be carefully described in words that described their learning difficulties, there was not a shared understanding about the identification of these learners as the project began. Nor did it become a focus.

The criteria for involvement in the project were that schools would self-nominate, had a number of learners who required significant adaptation to the curriculum, and were able to release teachers to take part in either the action research or action learning. Over the next 18 months, the principals, teachers and teacher aides were quick to realise that this was not an "easy option" for additional funding or teacher time. It was a time of challenge and change, created largely by facilitators and researchers supporting a teacher inquiry model into the classrooms and schools. The teachers were able to focus on their practice through asking questions and to examine their practice in relation both to themselves as teachers, and the achievements and learning of their learners. Examples of this inquiry are given throughout this special edition of *Kairaranga*.

Teachers and other educators are more likely to change when challenged by their own evidence (Ainscow, 2005). In fact, Ainscow (2005) goes further and argues that when teachers are faced with their own discrepant data (that is, they believe one thing about their practice but the data they collect tells a different story), they are more likely to find meaning in their own practice and therefore change it. He states that 'new meanings are only likely to emerge when evidence creates "surprises"' (p.146).

This project adapted the related approaches to supporting teachers as they questioned and examined their practices: action research and action learning.

Action Research

There are different forms of action research depending on the focus and the rationale for adopting the methodology. In this project, action research was used as a form of self-reflective inquiry. It was undertaken by teachers to improve their practices; both in terms of why they chose certain practices, and understanding the resulting impact of those practices on student learning. Through action research, teachers were encouraged to systematically make their practice "public" in order for it to be scrutinised at a level not usually associated with day-to-day teaching. This proved to help their understanding of their practices, and the contexts in which the practices were carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This form of action research is firmly located in the realm of the practitioner, specifically the reflective practitioner model (Schon, 1983; Robinson & Lai, 2006), and the teacher inquiry model.

Half of the schools were involved in action research (25 schools), with schools supported by four research teams from educational researchers in tertiary organisations.

Action Learning

A second strand of the project involved 24 schools in an action learning model. Within this model each participating school had a facilitator to support them. The facilitator was a Ministry of Education practitioner, either a psychologist or a special education advisor, who supported the teachers and their schools in a *learning* process, rather than a research process.

This model relied on an intuitive practitioner model, rather than that of a reflective practitioner. The distinction is that "intuition can provide a holistic way of knowing – it appears to be unconscious insight but it is not, therefore, without basis. Rather, its basis is the whole of what has been known but which cannot, by nature of its size and complexity, be held in consciousness" (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000, p.5). The complexity of an action learning model lay in the way the facilitators worked with teachers. The facilitators needed to encourage the teachers to bring their knowledge of the complexity of their work, including knowledge of their learners in their own educational context, to the foreground. This enabled the teachers both to articulate and rationalise their practice, leading to a focus on their own and others' practice. This was a powerful mechanism through which the facilitators and the teachers could explore 'the way we do things around here'. In many circumstances these taken-for-granted practices were both questioned and changed by the teachers. Ownership of the identification of the issues, and the associated ways to address these through collaborative problem-solving with the facilitators, kept the momentum for change alive. It also kept the teachers in the project. There was not one school that withdrew from the challenge.

WHO WERE THE LEARNERS?

In the same way that we cannot readily separate individual learners from their learning context, nor attribute causality to changes we see in learners' achievements, the learning that occurred for Ministry personnel, the researchers, the facilitators, teachers and learners may not easily be separated out. Nevertheless, this is consistent with a socio-cultural perspective on learning, where we would expect to see evidence that members of a learning community have changed, and to have changed by their interactions with others without necessarily being able to attribute cause and effect. This project provides multiple examples of these interactions that created and sustained different practices.

The title *Enhancing Effective Practice* was seen as an appropriate choice for a project that was to support teachers as they examined their own practice in relation to the achievement of their learners; specifically those requiring significant adaptation to the curriculum. The term "Special Education" was retained because the project used Government appropriated funding specifically for this purpose. The dilemma remained, and still does however, that in using the terms, we are signalling a different type of education for some learners. Do the needs of learners for example, determine who receives special education, or is it the practice of teachers that determines what special education is? This is an unresolved issue and one that continues to polarise the educational community. What was interesting though, is that for teachers in the project, and their learners, it was not a dilemma. The focus on effective practice, on the learners' needs, and on the way teachers changed their practices, highlighted that an ideological discussion did not deter daily practice, or day-to-day learning.

The Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EEPiSE) project began as a *Building Capability in Special Education* (BCiSE) project. It became apparent that the language used and the way a project is described affect the meaning and intention of those involved. The initial choice of name itself became a barrier for some teachers, and yet the intent and aims of the projects remained consistent. The integrity of the programme was maintained. Essentially, the research and professional development for teachers was used as a mechanism to support, engage and challenge teachers, and to facilitate and encourage the trials for different ways of working. A basic example came early in the project; one secondary school called a staff meeting to discuss how the teachers within the school would become involved. The first task for the facilitator was to have the teachers introduce themselves as, largely, these teachers did not know each other. Many secondary school teachers who operate in large schools may work primarily within their own departments or areas of practice. In a project such as EEPiSE that works across curriculum areas, and where ideas and concepts challenge both the cultures and practices within a school, such isolation of teachers and their practice becomes visible. Within this project we found that when teachers' practices have visibility, there is a greater likelihood action for change will be initiated within the school.

More poignantly, it became apparent to the teachers, and to the researchers and facilitators, that we could not examine teacher practice in relation to students with significant disabilities in isolation from the social context of the teachers' classrooms and school environments. Therefore the issue was not about the students. The focus was on teaching practice. Student achievement data became an indicator that could identify changes in teacher practice that appeared to be more effective for this group of learners.

Teacher Inquiry model

The Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education programme of research and professional development highlighted the importance of a Teacher Inquiry model. Through both the action research and action learning strands, teachers were supported to build their own problem-solving skills as teachers. They did not learn "things" but they did learn how to think about issues of teaching practice to support student learning.

Teacher inquiry is not a single program but a broad, generally agreed-on set of insider research practices that encourage teachers to take a close, critical look at their teaching and the academic and social development of their students. The goal of teacher inquiry is to build teachers' and schools' capacities to understand and solve problems of teaching and learning (Lewison, 2003).

While, as interested observers, we could say "a lot happened", it is more difficult to gauge the quality of the changes or their enduring influence on student learning. Change in teacher talk was one of the first indicators of a change in teacher practice. Change in talk demonstrated a change in teachers' thinking; about their learners, about their own teaching and about the importance of being able to articulate and explain issues of practice.

Patterns of staff professional learning were established in schools. Teachers who started the project talking about "that data thingy", a year later were discussing the collection, analysis and interpretation of student data to analyse their teaching and its effectiveness.

The teachers involved in the project may not have been fully aware that, as with any professional development and learning, changed thinking changes the status quo within their own classrooms and across the school. It did in this case and while change was not always comfortable, it certainly made the teachers think. As Fullan (1991, p. 117) has argued, 'educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and as complex as that'. Yet for many teachers, it was not simple to *get to the point* of change. The stories in this special edition illustrate that when we operate in complex environments, and work through multiple issues, it is far from simple.

As outlined in the many papers in this edition that illustrate the EEPiSE work, teachers as learners grappled with ideas about learning, teaching, assessment and diversity. These teachers challenged themselves and others about their classroom and school cultures, policies and practices. The notion of "inclusionary practices" is itself one example of the need to challenge accepted practices. The pilot study highlighted a variation in the way schools clustered their students according to a "disability". For example, one school which had 25 children verified as having high or very high needs and received subsequent ORRS (Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes) funding, integrated these learners throughout the classes within the school. In contrast, another school that had seven students verified to be eligible for ORRS funding, clustered their students into one unit. The principal of the latter school initiated a visit to the former school in order to learn how the school supported these learners within the regular classrooms.

For some teachers in this project it was about seeing the impact of small adaptations, while for others it was an awareness that all children have the right to experience success like their peers. To some extent therefore, teachers talked about their own learning. Some teachers in this project worked on strategies to adapt the curriculum so that students could learn in their classrooms, while for others, learning conversations evolved with a focus on collaborative problem-solving. They developed further understanding in how to provide the necessary resources to enhance a child's learning, and demonstrated an increased awareness of how to adapt the lesson to suit children's needs. Some teachers used Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to set learning goals while others established systems within the school such as regular meetings for teachers' aides, or regular meetings for teachers of support programmes. Even so, for many teachers working in secondary and primary schools there still remain silos of learning and teaching.

However, the project did enhance collaborations and cooperations between teacher and external educational agencies. There was evidence that an increased positive relationship developed with facilitators through the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) and teachers; and between resource teachers: learning and behaviour (RTLB) and GSE and teachers. The fact that there was no "one right answer" to the challenge of changing teacher practice enabled greater sharing of ideas, resources and energy.

Inquiry into practice

While the Ministry project team knew there was "no cook book approach, and no one right answer" to the dilemmas teachers face in supporting the learning for all students, there were some teachers who signed up for the project looking for that one programme, or one way of doing things that would magically increase student learning and positively influence student behaviour. Increasingly, the teachers in the project started to realise it was them, not a specific programme, that made a difference to how they felt about teaching, and how they felt about their learners. In the early phases of the project many teachers felt let down, as did some of the facilitators, that they were not provided with the recipe for success. However, as they realised, creating solutions was as much about identifying and exploring the real problem, and that the teaching solutions were often to be found within the school. These solutions were shared by the teachers in a range of ways, including the culmination of school-led symposia across the country. Many of the papers presented in this edition come from those symposia. Even so, what will work well in one context and in one school will not necessarily be the answer for other teachers in other contexts. There is still no single solution to complex challenges of teaching practice.

The context for learning, and the teachers and learners in these contexts, are important elements in deciding what to do when faced with a teaching or learning dilemma. This has long been recognised and led Gersch, Kelly, Cohen, Daunt and Frederickson (2001) to observe that 'the same presenting problem in other circumstances or in other schools could arguably require a different response to be effective'.

What these classroom teachers have done, in their own contexts, and through this EEPiSE project, is to show that "giving it a go" in a structured, systematic form of inquiry, can make a difference for them as teachers and learners. The ultimate outcome for these teachers and the project is that their students' social, cultural and learning opportunities and achievements are enhanced and positively encouraged.

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