

Going Beyond Audit

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the work undertaken by a cluster of Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLБ) to ensure that annual effectiveness reviews were more than a compliance exercise but a genuine attempt to improve their service to schools, hence the title of this article of "Going Beyond Audit". Historically, the cluster had met the reporting requirements set by the Ministry of Education (MOE), however to make the process more purposeful, reviews were broadened through the collection of a wider variety of qualitative and quantitative data. A feature of the qualitative data collection methods employed is the annual focus group interviews designed to gather feedback from representatives of client schools. As a result of the interviews, the RTLБ cluster has received positive affirmation about its service and additionally, identified some key areas where its service could be strengthened. More importantly, it has developed a robust and practical system of review by blending information sources and methodology. Feedback collected can be fed directly into strategic planning and is proving useful in shaping practice. The focus group interviews are also benefiting participants by expanding their understanding of the RTLБ role as well as enhancing professional networks. This article outlines the cluster's interpretation and implementation of authentic evidence-based practice (EBP).

Practice paper

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THE CONTEXT OF THE REVIEWS

The diversity of the Otaki Kapiti RTLБ cluster and complexity of employment arrangements are important factors to consider when looking at the development of their review processes. The cluster is situated within a large semi-rural geographical area. It serves eighteen primary schools and three colleges between Paekakariki in the south and Manakau in the north. Within the schools there is considerable variance in terms of school culture

and demographic profiles. The cluster employs ten RTLБ in total. Due to job-share arrangements this equates to 7.5 full time RTLБ positions. Included in the cluster is an RTLБ Māori who primarily serves Māori immersion units and schools. The RTLБ are hosted by five different schools and all RTLБ are active members of the cluster management committee; this enhances ownership and responsibility for the annual reviews. While useful information on individual RTLБ performance had previously been gathered, because of the diverse nature of the group, gaining an understanding of the effectiveness of the cluster as a whole had proven more difficult.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW MODEL

Over the last eleven years, the RTLБ had reported statistically to their management committee and the MOE. The majority of information provided related to referral numbers and types, year levels and the ethnicities of children on the RTLБ roll. In 2004, an Education Review Office (ERO) report on the RTLБ service across the country found that a significant number of clusters could not provide evidence of effective practice. As one of forty clusters included in this review, the Otaki Kapiti RTLБ cluster had received positive feedback from the ERO team. However the national finding prompted the RTLБ cluster to reflect further on the way effectiveness reviews were conducted and to make modifications to its own systems.

Initially, changes involved the RTLБ collecting and presenting an expanded range of quantitative data to its management committee and the MOE. The most noticeable feature was recording and presenting the achievement (or non achievement) of casework goals within broad categories. In an attempt to improve the efficiency of collection processes, a range of different forms and templates was developed and trialled by the cluster. At this stage, individual casework and cluster effectiveness was largely measured by goals achieved within casework.

In 2005, the cluster introduced qualitative reporting as an additional way of measuring

effectiveness. RTLB were asked to present a written narrative report to the management committee. The reports were based on a particular piece of case work and included information on the context, goals set, interventions and outcomes. They proved to be a useful way to demonstrate the complexity of RTLB case work as well as report on the collaborative consultative process that is central to the RTLB role. While the cluster found the combination of narrative and statistical reporting reassuring, as outcomes for students were often positive, the cluster was also aware that this type of reporting was not shaping practice or contributing to the overall improvement of the cluster as a whole. As a result, a decision was made in 2006 to evaluate the effectiveness of the RTLB service to local schools through a questionnaire. Specifically, the questionnaire would attempt to establish client expectation of the local RTLB service, identify parts of the service that were working well, and identify changes the RTLB cluster could make to improve practice. Obtaining information on client expectation was considered to be a vital prerequisite. A concern had developed that the clients understanding about the RTLB service may not be congruent with what the RTLB could offer; therefore interpreting feedback provided by teachers would remain unhelpful until further examination of client understanding was completed.

The cluster established a working party to develop the questionnaire, however doubts arose about whether a questionnaire would provide the quality and type of information needed. This decision was based on previous unsuccessful questionnaires where the level and depth of response was low. The cluster hypothesised that teacher participants were not motivated to complete the survey because they may not have seen a direct benefit. Through discussion and further consultation, the concept of using focus groups as an alternative way of gathering the necessary data was promoted. This method of data collected aligns closely with the theory of evidence-based practice (EBP).

Debate about EBP has long been occurring within academic circles. Interestingly, despite a lack of clarity about EBP, "almost everyone engaged in teaching and preparing educators would say that they employ evidence-based practice" (Siegrist, Leech, Bass & Patten, 2008, p. 147). At the heart of the argument was the question of what constitutes evidence and what does it actually mean to engage in evidence-based practice (Thomson & Anderson, in press). Walker (2004) suggests that the gold standard of evidence-based practice is that it is research-based, structured and clearly outlined in a prescribed manner. The RTLB cluster had begun to develop its own pragmatic definition of

EBP, understanding the EBP to be the collection of robust and relevant evidence that proves directly useful in shaping practice to ensure improved outcomes for students, teachers and schools.

THE FOCUS GROUP MODEL

The RTLB cluster enlisted the support of an educational consultant to help plan and facilitate the focus group interviews and provide feedback. Focus group interviews are frequently used to promote and organise discussion with selected groups of individuals to gain information on their views and experiences of a topic (Gibbs, 1997). The cluster chose to use focus group interviews in this situation due to an understanding that relevant and rich data could be gained, with fewer constraints than questionnaires. The potential benefit to participants was also a contributing factor to the decision: it was hoped that feedback from focus group interviews would constitute genuine evidence-based practice rather than a mere exercise in consultation.

The cluster identified key areas to be addressed within the focus group interviews. This included gaining the participants' understanding of the RTLB service in relation to:

- Access to the service
- Casework
- Professionalism
- Goal setting
- The collaborative and consultative process.

A series of questions was developed around these key areas and included:

1. What is your understanding of the RTLB service?
2. What were the main sources of that understanding?
3. Which services provided by the RTLB have you found to be particularly useful/helpful?
4. Have any of the services not been useful/helpful? If so, what were they?
5. Consider the cases that you believe had really good outcomes. What do you think were the main factors that contributed to their success?
6. If you were to use three different adjectives to describe the RTLB, what would they be?
7. Are there any general issues you would like to raise?

Selection of participants has varied according to the numbers within the potential selection pool. In the first focus group interviews in 2007, the Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) from all cluster schools were invited. As this was a relatively small group, all could be accommodated

within two interviews. In 2008, classroom teachers were the selected group. As this was a large group, stratified sampling was used to select participants. Stratified sampling is based on a blend of both categorisation and randomisation as it divides a population into homogeneous groups based on similar characteristics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In this situation it allowed random selection within the following set criteria:

- Classroom teachers who had worked with a RTLB during the previous year.
- Classroom teachers from a range of year levels.
- Classroom teachers from all cluster schools.

A possible difficulty associated with focus group interviews is that individual participants can capture or dominate discussion, or inhibit others, so that a full range of perspectives is not gained (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Cohen, et al., 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). The literature suggests that groups of six to twelve people is optimal (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Cohen, et al., 2000; Gillham, 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2000) and in this review, groups of eight to ten were used. This was considered a number most useful in maximising the engagement of all participants. Groups were not too large to hinder those who do not like speaking in front of a group, and large enough so that a wide range of information and perspectives could be gathered.

The third group interviewed in 2009 were senior managers from the secondary schools in the cluster. Again this was a small group so sampling was not required.

OUTCOMES

Focus group interviews have been completed for three years. There has been a good response from participants with most taking up invitations to attend interviews. In 2007, 80% of the invited SENCOs attended one of the two focus group interviews. Similar rates of participation were achieved in 2008 with classroom teachers. While establishing interview dates that suited all principals and members of college senior management was more difficult in 2009, interviews were well attended. Specific invitations to participants played a large part in the high participation rates achieved.

Data collected from the interviews has given the RTLB cluster clear information of client expectation of the RTLB service. It became apparent that this was well matched to that of the RTLB cluster.

The focus group interviews confirmed that the support provided to schools has been highly

regarded. Furthermore, in three key areas, the participants provided a wide range of useful information regarding the factors that they believed contributed to the successful delivery of the RTLB service to local schools.

Firstly, the clients identified a number of general factors that impact on success of the local service. Responses included were:

- the ease of accessibility to the RTLB service;
- the RTLBs' knowledge of school systems;
- the practicality of interventions.

Secondly, participants identified which RTLB services have been particularly useful across cluster schools. Typical responses were:

- working to support teachers with group or whole class interventions;
- training of teacher aides;
- assistance with transitions of students from primary schools to secondary schools.

Thirdly, participants were asked to consider RTLB cases where the outcomes had been particularly positive. Participants were then asked to identify what the main factors were that characteristically contributed to the successful outcomes of these cases. Typical responses included:

- thorough data gathering and analysis;
- liaison with families;
- perseverance and consistency.

The focus group interviews also provided specific feedback on areas that could be developed to enhance the RTLB service to the local schools. This included:

- building on parent/caregiver understanding of the service;
- acknowledging the difficulty of arranging meeting times;
- providing professional development opportunities for client schools.

The RTLB group has used the information gained from the focus group interviews to develop practice, for example, a parent/caregiver pamphlet has been produced. This pamphlet which has been published in both English and Māori, and provides information on how the RTLB service works and can be used by schools as they make decisions with parent/caregivers regarding an RTLB referral.

Principals, SENCOs and teachers have increased their knowledge of the RTLB service as a result of being involved in the focus group interviews. They have also developed their understanding of the possibilities and potential of an RTLB referral through hearing of other educators' experiences.

The facilitator has prepared written evaluative reports which have been presented to the RTLB cluster management committee. Copies of the reports have been sent to all the cluster principals and to the MOE as an attachment to the annual report.

ANALYSIS

The cluster is confident in the accuracy, social validity and reliability of findings. Key factors involved in this were that the RTLB themselves were not included in the discussion groups. This provided anonymity and confidentiality for the participants. Having an independent facilitator with a sound knowledge of the RTLB model and the ability to shape the questions and responses through clarification and encouragement also promoted honest and genuine feedback. Stratified sampling ensured a transparent selection process which again contributed to the robustness of the process. The process ensured that individual RTLB were not professionally disadvantaged or embarrassed: findings were reported as themes relevant to the cluster as a whole.

SUMMARY

The cluster now has a comprehensive system of effectiveness review that combines quantitative and qualitative data collection. Statistical data continues to be collected. A software package and cluster training have enhanced the efficiency of the collection and presentation of the data. Qualitative data collection includes presentation of RTLB case studies to their management committee and the MOE. There remains the opportunity for informal feedback from the principals, SENCOS and teachers, however it is the advent of the focus group interviews that has rounded off data collection for the RTLB group. In previous years, the group had found that data collected was not easily transferred into a development plan. Feedback from the interviews (and other sources) can be directly linked into the RTLB cluster's annual strategic plan. The successful outcomes of the focus group interviews mean that the RTLB effectiveness reviews are purposeful, practical and of benefit to both RTLB and client schools.

In conclusion, annual reviews allow the cluster to plan for improved service as well as report clearly to management committee, MOE and other interested groups such as ERO and fellow RTLB groups. Therefore the cluster's effectiveness reviews 'go beyond audit' and are an integral part of the cluster's effort to continually develop and improve their service to schools.

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AUTHORS' PROFILES

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