Dean James Miller completed the beautiful cover art at the age of four years 11 months while attending Sommerville Kindergarten in Howick, Auckland. Despite the challenges that autism and diabetes have presented to him, he valiantly forges his own fingerprint on life and achieves amazing successes.
Table of Contents

Editorial, Editorial Board and contact details ................................................................. 2

Understanding Ourselves as Learners:
An interview with Professor Joy Cullen – Roseanna Bourke
Interview .......................................................................................................................... 3

Transition to School:
A pilot project – Jan Salter and Jill Redman
Practice paper .............................................................................................................. 8

Ryan’s Story – Bronwyn Julian
Personal experience ....................................................................................................... 13

Talking with Families about Things that are Hard for Them to Hear – Stephen Robinson
Practice paper ............................................................................................................. 17

Relational Aggression between Primary School Girls – Jennifer Browne and Janis Carroll-Lind
Research paper .......................................................................................................... 20

Getting Things to Stick:
Exploring the narratives of young New Zealanders who experience specific learning difficulties
Sheryn Marshall, Clare Hocking and Jan Wilson
Research paper ........................................................................................................... 30

A Case against the Categorisation of Children and Youth:
Part 1: Theoretical perspectives – Peter Stanley
Position paper ............................................................................................................ 36

The Specialist Service Standards – Sue Nikoia
Practice paper ............................................................................................................. 42

Professional Learning through Practice – Jill Ford
Practice paper ............................................................................................................ 46

Stranger and Stranger in a Strange Land:
Living overseas and how it has influenced my understanding of students with "special needs" – Wendy Holley
Personal experience ................................................................................................... 51

Book Reviews ............................................................................................................. 53

Submission Guidelines .............................................................................................. 58

Subscription Forms ................................................................................................... 60
Editorial

Ehara he toa takitahi,
Engari he toa takitini

Our strength lies not in ourselves as individuals,
It lies within ourselves as a collective.

In furthering our collaborative efforts as an editing team, we welcome early intervention contributors and in this issue we highlight some of the work done with our youngest children.

The beautiful cover art is an inspiration to those who work with young children who face difficulties early on in life, demonstrating that they can achieve despite challenges, and that appropriate early intervention is an effective way to help them reach their goals and milestones successfully.

In this journal we feature an interview with Joy Cullen (Professor of Early Years Education at Massey University College of Education). Professor Cullen advocates for inclusive practice in early childhood and values the diverse forms of knowledge and collaboration that both parents and professionals bring in support of our youngest people.

The voice of a child and a parent is an exciting addition to this journal. Bownjulian, a parent, provides valuable insight as she bravely describes her journey through the maze of autism by telling her son, Ryan’s story. In our book review section we feature another parent story by Eva Lynn.

Kairaranga is a journal that aims to present different perspectives and challenge thinking, and two articles which do this are “Getting Things to Stick”, and part one of “A Case against the Categorisation of Children and Youth”. In the first article, young New Zealanders who experience specific learning difficulties give their accounts of the effect labelling has on their lives and relationships, while the author of the second article asks us to think critically about categorisation and its potential effect on relationships. Relationships are also considered when a practitioner needs to give information which they know may be difficult for parents and caregivers to hear. Stephen Robinson provides practical suggestions in his article for doing this in a constructive way.

Challenge and practicalities also feature in the next three articles. Inclusion is more than just being physically present in school or society. Wendy Holley’s article challenges us to explore the times we haven’t felt included, in order to understand what we can do to help society. Wendy Holley’s article challenges us to explore the times we haven’t felt included, in order to understand what we can do to help society.

Jo Davies’ article asks us to consider simple yet innovative solutions to set young children on a pathway to continued success and achievement at school.

Sue Nikoia’s article enhances our understanding of the need for ongoing quality services, in her discussion of the collaborative way the professional service standards developed. The practice paper written by Jill Ford, encourages us to reflect on our own learning journey as professionals, and the people who support and enlighten us on the way.

Finally we would like to take this opportunity to thank our coordinator of the past two years, Liz Brady, for all her work in making the past issues a manageable reality for the editing team. We wish Liz all the best as she embarks on exciting new endeavours. We also welcome the new coordinator, Valerie Margrain.

We hope you enjoy this stimulating issue and that it both affirms and challenges your educational principles and practice.

Vanesse, Paul and Michael

Kairaranga

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Understanding Ourselves As Learners:

An Interview With Professor Joy Cullen

Dr Roseanna Bourke

I think we all need interests. We need to be encouraged to pursue our interests. We need people who are interested in us. We need faith in ourselves that we can do things. And all learners, be they gifted and talented, or children with major disabilities, need the sort of support that helps them to have some understanding of themselves as learners (Joy Cullen, 2006).

Joy Cullen believes in people, believes in the power of learning and believes in herself; all central to her ability to tackle new challenges and pave the way for others. What she wants for educators and young learners is what she has for herself, a love for learning and the ability to pursue her interests. As educators, Joy believes it is our job to ensure that all learners can get a sense of themselves and a belief that they can learn. In understanding ourselves, Joy says we can learn more effectively – and she should know. Having attained a series of significant achievements in teaching and the academic world (including a masters degree, a doctorate from the University of Alberta and being appointed foundation professor in early years education at Massey University), Joy knows something about what it means to be a learner, and what it means to learn. After completing her doctorate in educational psychology focusing on learning disabilities, specifically learned helplessness, Joy was offered a one-year post-doctoral fellowship in child development by the University of Canterbury, a special award for the International Year of the Child (1979). During the 1980s she taught in early childhood teacher education in Western Australia, and in 1992 became Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Massey University. Joy is now Professor of Education (Early Years) at the College of Education, Massey University.

As a teacher in the 1960s and 1970s, Joy taught in the early primary years (5-8 year olds) and later, in the 1980s, her area of research and teaching focused on young learners in early childhood education and early intervention – although ironically she never attended an early childhood setting herself as a child. What interests Joy is how learning occurs in the early childhood years, irrespective of any formal or informal setting.

I had a childhood in which I was encouraged to show initiative and be reflective, and enjoy the outdoor environment and to have aesthetic interests. I mean, obviously these things reflect my values. I was brought up in New Zealand, so I reflect the New Zealand environment. And growing up in education post-war, the 1950s, we really didn’t have the resources we have today. I didn’t go to an early childhood service. So, again, that suggests to me that as learners it’s more than what happens within formalised learning centres that influences the way we are. I was brought up in a family of girls. I had a father who used to do things with us that he probably would have done with sons if he’d had sons, but didn’t. So, we learned to be quite self-sufficient really. That probably is important too.

When I met with Joy to talk about her work, she went to some lengths to clarify whether the focus would be on early intervention or early childhood as Joy was integrally linked to both. The resulting conversation highlighted that when talking about all learners, and about learning, there is no distinction. The point of difference is that the supporting team may be larger according to the diverse needs of the child. Ultimately the learner is still central to the process, and it is this that drove Joy to the greatest provocation of her career: all children can and will learn, so how do teachers, professionals and families support the learning for the child?

From her own personal experience, Joy learned two important lessons that would inform her work. When she saw what Early Intervention Services (EIS) meant for someone in her family, Joy identified two critical factors in the services. First, that valuing diverse forms of knowledge from both professionals and families was fundamental to supporting children. Second, don’t give up on children.

I have learnt two things from that. I learned to value the specialists because they did have an enormous amount of knowledge, and I discovered a lot, that everyone can learn something at whatever level. So, you don’t give up on children. We work with children with the skills and competencies they bring and yes, it is worthwhile to do that in itself.

But I also learnt that families are part of the scenario. And, of course, this has been really important in early intervention, with its strong family focus. You can’t take families out of the provisions of young children with educational needs. And somehow I think we’ve got to get the mix a little better in early childhood education. That’s why I was impressed with what I saw in Great Britain where they were looking at ways of finding supports for parents, and involving parents and acknowledging their expectations and wishes and expertise, and bringing them together with what the early childhood programmes had to offer. I don’t think we’ve quite got that right yet. I think there’s more to explore there in New Zealand.
I think we have made tremendous progress in the sector. It’s been an exciting time in which to work in early childhood education since the early 1990s when the first draft of Te Whāriki was distributed. So we can be proud of what we are doing to develop our own unique curriculum and research in this country. At the same time we must situate what we’re doing against international literature. We can contribute to the international literature, and we can learn from what is happening in other areas.

I have just recently been to Britain and I visited two of their flagship early childhood centres in Pen Green, the Early Excellence Centre in Corby and the Thomas Coram Children’s Centre for parents and children in London, both of which have Sure Start government funding for research into supporting learning. And I was very impressed with their outreach programmes, their working with parents and the supports that they had in place. They’ve gone much further down that track than we have. Certainly one of the goals of the New Zealand Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan, is to do with collaboration and I think the New Zealand centres of innovation are part of that. But we haven’t gone very far down the track of developing systems that bring families and early childhood centres together. I see this as particularly important for early intervention, and it’s one of those areas I’d like to see us give a lot more attention to in this country.

Throughout our conversation, Joy talked about the need for children with significant learning needs to have the opportunity to learn and the right to participate and interact with others. She said that focusing on the child as a learner was important, rather than the traditional focus of a “child with a special educational need”. Within this view, diversity for any child should be acknowledged and addressed.

I think we have these same goals, and in many cases the process is the same, but sometimes we need more specialised support and processes. Everyone needs a slightly different mix to support them. I mean you can see that within any family, can’t you? The children. Same parents, same past, apparently the same circumstances, but look how diverse the children are. So everyone is an individual.

I don’t actually go along with the extreme socio-cultural views that emphasise the collective and de-emphasise the individual. By and large, I favour a socio-cultural approach, but I would not ever want to filter out the individual because I think individuals are important. And encouraging individuality is very important. I think that’s something we’ve done well in New Zealand. We’ve been allowed to be individuals.

I would like to see the early intervention provisions supporting children as individuals with interests and competencies, rather than as just one of the group. I don’t like seeing them being stereotyped.

Teachers and specialists have different but complementary skills that are used to support the learning of children. To move from a medical or expert model to a more ecological model, the focus shifts from a deficit view of the child to seeking to understand the way the child learns in the environment and through interactions with others – peers and teachers alike. This shift of focus has an impact on the type of assessments used and the way the teacher interacts with the child. It also involves a different role for specialists. As Joy highlighted, it requires specialists to be seen, and used, as a resource for teachers working in collaboration with other educators and the family.

I would like Early Intervention teams to present themselves as resources to teachers, rather than experts. They do have expertise and I don’t want to devalue their expertise. It’s very valuable, but there is a psychological mindset, if you like, between thinking of the specialist as a resource there and the specialist holding all the expertise who is telling the teacher what to do.

I know from a project I recently worked on that teachers became empowered quite rapidly when they started to shift their mindset. They saw their educational expertise was being valued, they could use their educational expertise, and the use of learning stories was actually quite pivotal to this because THEIR assessment tool was valuable. And that was important because so often IPS are being dominated by specialist assessment tools.

R: So did that mind shift occur through them seeing the value in their work?

J: Yes. Yes. Seeing how, because learning stories comment not just on the child in isolation, they also comment on the child’s interactions with others, including the teachers. So, they could see what effect their own teaching interactions were having, what effect it was having on the child. That in itself was empowering. Another important outcome was the increased interactions with the education support workers, so that it became much more of a team support.

[Through learning stories, teachers] do an analysis. They’re looking at what has captured the child’s interests … what’s happening here? Then they’re looking at their own strategies and what is the next step from there. I have to be honest, when I started off this project I didn’t think that learning stories would be robust enough to pick up all the skills and aspects of it because I do believe that one needs to have that mixed balance of skills and interests in working with all children. It was really quite illuminating to see how these different learning stories written by the specialists, teachers and parents were focusing on the skills that were coming through and you could see a continuity across the stories.

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3 An IP is an Individual Programme (also referred to as an Individualised Education Programme/Plan, IEP; Individual Development Plan, IDP). The Individual Development Plan or Individual Plan is an early intervention programme developed for children with special education needs. It outlines the child’s goals and the resources, support, monitoring and evaluation required to enable the child to meet those goals over a defined period.
There were the multiple lenses of different people bringing their different frameworks, but they were picking up on skills, and the goals for the IP really flowed out of that quite readily. I wouldn’t say that was the only way to plan for children, but it certainly involved the teachers much more proactively than in some of the more traditional IPs. And that is the valuable thing.

R: Is that using the same assessment tool for all children?
J: Yes. I see learning stories as one of an array of assessment approaches. Our current assessment system, the whole learning story and narrative approach to assessment, if you follow that through with every child, is an enormous amount of work for teachers. They’re doing it with a great amount of enthusiasm and professionalism, and certainly it’s highlighting a whole new approach to assessment that has received international interest. Visitors from around the world are interested in the use of narrative assessment for children in early intervention.

So there is a very positive aspect to it, but that type of assessment, as opposed to the old-fashioned checklist variety, is enormously time consuming. One wonders how long teachers are going to be able to cope with all the professional tasks that are being required of them.

R: Do you think that it is contributing to a different way of teaching?
J: Oh, yes, in some centres. I mean you can still go into some early childhood centres, and see the sorts of practices you would have seen 20 years ago. There’s still that free choice play and the foregrounding of children’s interest. There are two ways of looking at children’s interest. One, in which you’re really working and extending them into developing projects, and the teacher is involved in that co-constructive style of learning. Or there is a much softer sense, if you like, of children’s interests where children are just able to choose what they do. The old-fashioned free choice, self-selection sort of programme. That type of programme has been researched and shown it can be very low-level play and it’s not extending anyone. If you place a child into that sort of environment, what are they going to gain from it? They make their choice, and they might engage in repetitive play.

While the choice of free play was identified as not necessarily achieving goals for learning, Joy does believe that learners need to explore their natural environments and access learning opportunities outside of the classroom. In the 1960s this was referred to as creative expression, and the basis of exploring and learning about the environment, under whatever guise, is still important.

J: It is relevant, actually, to my interest across the birth to eight years. I did a two-year teacher’s college course at the Auckland Teacher’s Training College and I was placed in an experimental group “creative expression”. This was a great era of creative expression in primary schools. It was at that time when Elwyn Richardson had published his book in The Early World through the New Zealand Council of Educational Research.4 It was very influential, particularly in the junior primary classrooms.

The lecturer in charge of my programme was Roy Sanders and he was president of the Auckland Playcentre Association then. He insisted as part of our background to work with children in schools that we needed to know what was happening and appropriate for children prior to school entry. So, we actually had visits to playcentres and kindergartens, and our course had a very strong child development focus. Lex Grey, who was sometimes called the guru of the Playcentre Association, was the Child Development Lecturer at the Auckland Teacher’s College, and he was also closely involved in this course. Not only did we have this very creative aspect to it, we used to go off on field trips, we would paint and write poetry, but we also were inducted into this very strong message that education didn’t just begin at five. We had to know about young children.

So, that was always a very strong part of my socialisation into the educational world. But it’s something I have never given up on. Obviously it’s something that influenced the choices I made along the way.

R: What were those choices?
J: All my teaching was in the junior primary area. I loved the two years I had in the bottom half of a two-teacher school. I had the infants, or what was called the infants in those days, five- to eight-year-olds.

As I said, it was the era of creativity so we could be very flexible. It was a very activity orientated programme. We had wonderful resources for children, a giant sandpit outside, blocks, and the children used to create with dough and paint. It was a wonderful era for people who were interested in working with young children because there were not the same constraints in terms of what you had to fit into the curriculum. You could spend large blocks of the day allowing the children to explore and create.

I can remember going for walks up the road and picking blackberries, coming back and trying to make blackberry jam … not very successfully! But doing wonderful paintings about the blackberries, looking at the colours … and it was an era, the 1960s, which promoted that sort of creativity.

This belief in outdoor play and the importance of children having the opportunity of interacting in the social and natural environments lead to one of Joy’s earliest learnings about teaching. When teaching in London during her early career, she was introduced to a very important guideline.

J: One that I’ve had throughout my career. There’s never one right way of doing things … I was exposed to a different education system. We had to take the children down to the park to get outside play. The schools didn’t necessarily have outdoor playgrounds, well of a sort that we would consider outdoor play with grass. There was a very different valuing, partly because of the climate, of the outdoors. So one has to respond to climatic factors and the traditions of the institutions.

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4 This was first published in the 1960s and was reprinted in 2001. Richardson, E. S. (2001). In the Early World. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
When discussing the long-term nature of why we're doing the things we do in early childhood education and early intervention, Joy places emphasis on research and analysis.

There's a lot of faith built into this. The positive aspect of the early childhood sector which I really appreciate is the fact that teachers are always positive and willing to take on ideas, to give tremendous amount of energy for something that's new, such as Te Whāriki. But at the same time, that can give them blinkers because they sometimes do that in a mission orientated way, rather than an analytic way. So I consider my role, as someone who is involved in the training of researchers in early childhood, to develop those analytical skills. I'm really pleased with the research students that we have in this university, and also in the other universities where post-graduate research developed, that we now are bringing a more analytical lens to what is happening in the early childhood centres.

Joy discussed the importance of all children being included in regular early childhood settings and observed the additional demands placed on teachers to ensure a family focused and supportive environment for these young learners. She believes that young children should not be “placed” but should be actively involved in these settings. Including learners is about the child's active involvement and participation in the activities in an early childhood setting, not just having them attend the centre. What works in one setting may not work in another. Joy observed the additional demands placed on teachers to ensure a family focused and supportive environment for these young learners.

**J:** It can become a coping situation if the demands are too heavy on teachers. The curriculum itself is very demanding. It takes an enormous amount of energy, to at the same time link in with parents and what they understand about children's interests – to involve parents in collaborating. It means teachers really have to be healthy and energetic, and analytical about what they're doing. They have to have an enormously sound knowledge base, a professional knowledge base, to be able to work informally with all the discipline areas such as literacy, mathematics, technology. All those things which early childhood teachers are expected to do now.

They need a knowledge base about children with diverse needs. I have always felt that while it's important to have a specialist service as a resource, teachers themselves need to feel that their educational expertise is valued. Nevertheless, there is an enormous amount known about promoting learning from the “special education” era, as opposed to an inclusive approach. That is where I want to get into the skills topic.

I did my academic education and special education in the 1970s when it was very much a skills-based approach. And that wasn't seen as the negative way in which it is often interpreted now, it was seen as something which was a very positive move. It moved from the stage of just labelling children to saying, "we can do things. We can improve these children's lot in life". A tremendous amount of research work, including my doctorate, was put into developing the educational programmes, to extend the skills and competencies of children.

Now, we look back and we say they were decontextualised, and it was disempowering, sometimes disempowering parents, or alternatively parents were asked to be doing a lot of this teaching themselves, but it was decontextualised from everyday activities. So we can see the weaknesses of it. But one of the important outcomes of that, an introduction to that research for me in the 1970s, was that skills ARE important. One of the issues to me, in seeing the inclusion philosophy in practice in early childhood education, is that if we filter out skills from our educational approach in working with these children, the danger is that children, will be included, but they will just sit on the edge of the sandpit and watch. They'll be on the fringe rather than being actively involved.

So teachers need all their educational expertise to know how to involve a child who may have, for example, physical disabilities in play, in active outdoor play with children. We don't want to put it all back onto the Physios and the Occupational Therapists (OTs) who have their special knowledge. Nevertheless, Physios and OTs in the New Zealand system who work with young children with physical disabilities have an enormous amount of expertise and experience. I would like to see some of that shared in a user-friendly way for teachers to have access to, to help them to increase the array of approaches they can use when working with children.

Acknowledging the skills, expertise and experience of all those involved in the early childhood sector, and using that combination to greater effect, was a thread throughout the interview. There is no one-right way to assess, teach or support children in their learning, so continual research into practice is necessary for ensuring the best possible education is available to learners and that a range of practices are encouraged. Joy’s wide ranging experience of teaching and research, and her travel and life experiences have influenced her views about early intervention and early childhood education. Themes from the interview included:

- we're allowed to be individuals in New Zealand
- it's more than what happens within formalised learning that influences the way you are
- we want all children to have learning opportunities that encourage active involvement and participation
- we value the knowledge of professionals and families alike
- specialists should be seen as a resource for teachers
- there is no “one-right way” in teaching and learning; therefore the ability to create and to encourage creativity is very important for both learner and teacher.

Through understanding and believing in ourselves as learners, we are better placed to support our own professional learning as well as the learning of all children. The final word goes to Joy:

If as educators we don't believe that we can make a difference, why are we here?
FURTHER READING

If you want to follow up on the ideas and work of Professor Joy Cullen, the following selected publications are useful and relevant.


Commentary on issues arising from a holistic, interests-based curriculum.


Discusses the rights of children with diverse needs in a play-based early childhood programme.


Reviews international and NZ research on early intervention, including SE2000 research.


Discusses the discourse of adult participants in inclusive education - parents, early childhood teachers, early intervention professionals, in relation to inclusion, human rights and the socioculturally-based early childhood curriculum.


Discusses challenges for early childhood teachers and early intervention professionals from a sociocultural perspective as they aim to work collaboratively within an inclusive philosophy and programme.


Reports on a collaborative professional development project with early intervention teams, teachers and parents.

INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Joy Cullen is the Professor of Early Years Education at Massey University College of Education where she is responsible for leadership of the Early Years (0-8) programmes. She has conducted national contract research for the Ministry of Education on early intervention services, as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the special education policy. Recently she has worked with EI teams and teachers to develop shared understandings and practices about assessment of young children with special needs.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Dr Roseanna Bourke is the Director of the Centre for Educational Development at Massey University and leads a team of in-service Teacher Educators. Prior to this she spent three years as manager, professional practice at the Ministry of Education. In both roles, her interest is to support educators develop and implement an evidence-based model of practice in education through research programmes and practice-related initiatives. Her PhD focused on students’ conceptions of learning and self-assessment and her research interests are in learning, assessment and the professional learning of teachers.

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Transition to School: 
A Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT
The importance of a smooth transition into school for children who have received Early Intervention Services (EI) but have not received the Ongoing Reviewable Resource Scheme (ORRS) funding has become of increasing concern to stakeholders involved with these children. The EI and School Focus (SF) teams of the GSE in Pakuranga collaborated creatively to provide seamless support for this group of children, in an effort to affect positive short and long-term educational outcomes.

Practice paper
KEYWORDS
Transition to primary school, new entrants, early intervention, parent school relationship.

Introduction
This pilot project rose from the need in the Pakuranga area to facilitate a smooth transition into school for children who had received EI support in early childhood, were not ORRS funded, but had ongoing significant needs. There had been increasing concern, especially for those children with challenging behaviour, enrolling at school without any support. Historically there had been:
• complaints from principals
• parental stress
• children starting school without adequate preparation
• inadequate Special Education Grant funding
• inadequate EI paraprofessional transition support—20 hours, was not enough for the necessary length of time to ensure an effective transition.

GSE’s local “rule of thumb” was not to accept a referral for school children until they had been at school for one to three months to allow them time to settle in and then re-evaluate the situation. By that time the difficult behaviours had often escalated and school and family relationships had deteriorated.

RATIONALE FOR THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT
Introduction
The ten-year Ministry of Education Strategic Plan, Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki (2002) involves the development of several key goals intended to ensure the continuous forward momentum of the early childhood sector. Recognition of the significance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has occurred through a number of policy documents, and the Strategic Plan is no exception, presenting proposals concerned with increasing quality outcomes in early childhood education (van Dam, 2003).

A major principle represented in the plan is the promotion of collaborative relationships as part of the transition process from early childhood settings to school.

It is the intention of this article to outline the significance of the Transition to School project and to provide a rationale for the implementation of a quality “seamless” early childhood setting to school transition process, where constructive collaborative relationships are developed and the result for students is positive, long-term educational outcomes.

The Importance of Starting School
Starting school is an important time for young children, their families and educators. It has been variously described as ‘one of the major developmental challenges faced by children during the early years’, ‘a key life-cycle transition both in and outside school’, and as setting ‘the tone and direction for a child’s school career’. It is ‘a turning point in a child’s life and a rite of passage associated with increased status’ (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p.1).

The Need for an Ecological and Holistic Model of Transition
Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-à-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners. (Bailey, 1999, cited in Dockett & Perry, 2001, pp.1-2).
In an ecological model, a child's transition to school can be understood in terms of the influence of, and intrinsic relationships between, a number of contexts, for example family, classroom, and community at any given time (Dockett & Perry, 2001). This model outlines and describes ways in which children influence the contexts in which they live and how these contexts impact experientially on those who inhabit them.

**The Concept of Children as Lifelong Learners**

Cullen (2002, cited in van Dam, 2003) promotes the view that when the transition focus is on the child's learning, misunderstandings about the differences between early childhood and school reduce, and the result is a more holistic vision of children as lifelong learners.

**The Promotion of Collaborative Relationships within the Transition Process**

Transition to school is fundamentally based on the establishment of a relationship between the home and school in which the child's development and learning is the key focus or goal (Dockett and Perry, 2001).

According to Mitchell (cited in van Dam, 2003), children inhabit and interact with their communities and hence it is vital that all education contexts should include a collaboration of communities i.e. improving the coordination between agencies and centres as well as promoting a coherence and continuity of the early years as young children make the transition from early childhood to school. This vision of coherence and co-ordination of education providers seeks to support learners with minimum disruptions during the transition process.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) vision of a seamless curriculum sets the challenge for early childhood education to make the links between Te Whāriki (strands and goals) and the key competencies of the national school curriculum by extending the Te Whāriki curriculum to the first years at primary school.

The vision of seamless learning communities involving multiple partners including parents, families, whānau, hapū, iwi, people from the different Pacific Island groups, other ethnic communities related ministries and their agencies, is essential in providing an early childhood service that responds to the diversity of communities, families and their children (van Dam, 2003).

**The Significance of the Pilot Project**

The need for additional support in transition to school was documented in local service profile meetings in November 2004. The significance of this project should not be underestimated and may be seen to complement the goals of the strategic plan for early childhood, Nga Huarahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002), which aims to better align policy in early intervention and schools for children and young people with special education needs by looking at what makes a smooth transition from early childhood to school.

**Implementation overview:**

1. The District Management Team agreed to allocate resources to the pilot as it aligned with the strategic direction of the district plan.
2. EI and SF teams developed the rationale, implementation process, criteria, application and parent consent forms.
3. All schools in the Pakuranga area were sent information on the pilot project with a covering letter explaining the initiative.
4. Following the referral process through the EI team, 11 children met the criteria and were offered support.
5. Once explained to the family and school, nine children were involved in the project and two schools opted to wait and see how the nominated children would settle in first.
6. Length of support varied depending on the enrolment date during Term 2, 2005, from three to 10 weeks. (See Appendix 1 for an overview flowchart of the transition process).

**EVALUATION OF TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT**

**Evaluation Questionnaire on completion of project:**

i) Feedback on the pre-entry meeting:
   a) It was an opportunity for open discussion with GSE and the family, around the child’s specific learning needs and strengths.
   b) Prior knowledge of the child was helpful in setting up systems of support, placement, and organising the teacher aide.
   c) Pre-entry visits to the school were able to be arranged.

ii) Feedback on fieldworker’s transition planning:
   a) The schools and parents reported an ease of contact with GSE personnel, and their level of support was appreciated.
   b) Schools appreciated having the EI fieldworker involved and contacting the school for the length of time needed for successful transition to the next service.
   c) The transition process was made much easier by having the EI fieldworker’s support.

iii) Monitoring during transition:
   Both schools and parents appreciated the ongoing support and discussion which resulted in constructive, practical strategies for the classroom; they felt encouraged and took children’s learning and developmental needs on board – One school developed a very detailed IEP and the necessary monitoring and data collection sheet.
iv) Changes for future consideration:
   a) Children starting later in the term would have benefited from a longer period of support.
   b) The school would have liked copies of reports from specialists, formal assessments and the ORRS application.
   
v) Examples of successful transition for the child:
   a) Academic learning was boosted.
   b) Settling into routines and general school systems happened quickly.
   c) Teachers understanding of the child improved.
   d) The child’s self confidence increased and their anxiety was reduced.
   e) Safety issues for a child were monitored more closely.
   f) Transition allowed the child’s needs to be met more successfully.
   g) School visits prior to the child starting were successful.
   h) Transition ensured that support targeted to specific needs was available.
   i) The child’s initial experience of attending school was a positive one.
   
vii) Examples of successful transition for the school:
   a) A more positive attitude developed towards the child.
   b) Transition allowed a more positive integration process for the child.
   c) There was increased awareness shown by other staff and they understood the need to plan for following year’s placement.
   d) The school did not need to resort to ‘special measures’ for the child, such as decreasing class numbers.
   e) The child was successfully integrated with their peers and not singled out as different.
   f) With a preventative plan in place, safety issues were addressed immediately.

viii) Outcomes/next steps:
   a) In a comparatively short time schools developed clear goals for the child and engaged the most appropriate support agency – GSE, RTLB, or determined that no further involvement was necessary.
   b) The schools had taken over responsibility for the child.
   c) Schools and teachers were willing to continue using Visuals for communication after seeing its effectiveness and the systems already set up.
   d) Good communication was established with the families and was more likely to continue throughout the year.

ix) Further comments from schools:
   a) These comments were mostly related to the next step for the child’s programming, however one school saw the transition programme as essential to ensuring that children with specific needs were transitioned into school as seamlessly as possible. They considered the pilot project had definitely been a huge step in the right direction and should continue.
   b) Some schools now had a clear direction to access additional support for the child.
   c) One school was confused about the EI teacher’s connection to GSE and did not realise they were part of the Pakuranga GSE team.

x) GSE Staff comments on the most valuable aspects of the project:
   a) With some support available in class, the teacher was able to get to know the child.
   b) The pressure on parents was eased.
   c) Transition enabled the school focus team to get to know the child and understand issues prior to a behaviour referral being made to their team by the school.
   d) Allowing a handing over period from EI to SF was a supportive process for parents.
   e) The SF and EI teams spent time together discussing and setting realistic criteria so that the process they ended up with, worked.

GSE staff commented that the differences between this process and previous transitions were the relationships that developed as EI and SF teams worked together. Transitions were made easier by offering schools some in-class support for the children whose needs bordered on extra funding for learning, but who did not qualify for this, especially those who did not receive ORRS funding. They also noted that with this process the schools became much more involved and supportive of the child and family.
CONCLUSION

This project was received with great enthusiasm by both EI and SF at Pakuranga GSE. It proved to be an opportunity for collaborative practice and effected positive outcomes for the children and schools involved. Schools acknowledged the support as it allowed them to plan more effectively for these children. At the conclusion of the project, the schools indicated that they intended to continue their support of these children and their families.

The children who received support settled into school well and the parents were happy about the transition process. The project has certainly proved worthwhile to replicate in other areas and hopefully will lead to more research on a national level.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR PROFILES

Jan Salter and Jill Redman both work with GSE, in Pakuranga, Auckland. An EI teacher and psychologist, they combined their skills to manage this pilot project on transition to school.

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APPENDIX 1
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT

Identification:
• Approximately three months prior to starting school.
• Initial brief discussion – child’s situation to be presented at the weekly Friday EI meeting and put forward for inclusion on their agenda.

Parental Consent:
• EI fieldworker to discuss the project with the parent/caregiver.
• Consent form (a new one) explaining the project and giving written permission for a formal application to be made to the project.

Selection:
• EI fieldworker completes the application form.
• Project panel meet to consider applications – weekly time slot put aside. (Panel to be made up of EI & SF team representatives.)
• Eligibility – meets criteria (determination of support).
• Approval or decline letter to fieldworker and parents (school notified on confirmation of approval).
• If approved allocation forwarded to SF team (ideally the person has already developed a positive working relationship with the school).

Transition Meeting:
• Approximately 10 weeks prior to school entry.
• Transition meeting to take place, including parents, EI and SF field workers and school.
• Transition Plan or IEP from Early Childhood Centre developed and shared between all those involved. To include frequency of visits between EI and SF field workers and clarification of roles.
• Transition visits started.
• Teacher aide appointed by the school.

Starting School:
• Informal monitoring as agreed in transition plan – EI or SF fieldworker.
• End of week two evaluation of progress between parent, GSE and school.
• Introduction of data collection sheet for completion by teacher/teacher aide.

Review Meeting:
• Dependent on individual child’s time scale for the project.
• Formal review meeting with family, school and GSE to evaluate transition process, success for child and recommendations.

Project Evaluation:
• Final review meeting of project with principal of school and GSE, using semi-structured interview.

KEY
SF: School Focus Team
EI: Early Intervention Team
IEP: Individual Education Plan
GSE: Ministry of Education, Special Education
Our son Ryan was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) when he was aged two years and seven months. At this time he was unresponsive to his name, had virtually no words and definitely no comprehension of verbal language. Ryan did not follow simple instructions or understand the consequences of his actions. I knew that other children of the same age were talking and understanding, and I kept thinking Ryan would understand, but that it might just take another six months. Ryan did not interact with other children, or make eye contact with others. He was not pointing. He did not use toys for the purpose they were intended – instead everything was lined up. Much to our delight, Ryan was a very cuddly boy.

Another boy with ASD attended the same kindergarten as Ryan, and he was using photographic visuals (palm-sized photographs) as a means of learning and communication. We were able to talk to his mother about ASD and share the same Educational Support Worker (ESW), who was competent with the use of visuals. At this time we were referred to the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) and to Acorn House, a support group for parents using photographic visuals with their child. The psychologist at GSE introduced us to the Photographic Learning and Communication Strategies System, which involves using visuals for clear unambiguous communication. After learning the strategies and seeing how the other children had progressed, I was keen to try this with Ryan.

From that point on, I took my camera everywhere. I used three rolls of film in the first week – the camera shop loved me. I took photos of everything around us, plus ones I thought we might need in future (I have always believed in being well prepared). We went to friends’ and relatives’ homes and took photos of them individually and in groups. We took photos of their houses, toilets, eating areas, cars and much more. My parents have both our children a lot and have always been very supportive of our use of visuals with Ryan. We had several sets of visuals: one for my parents, one for the car, one to take visiting, one for the kindergarten and one for home. Producing all these visuals has a financial cost, but what price could we put on minimising our child’s and our own stress level by helping Ryan to communicate, to understand, and to contribute to the world we all live in?

When Ryan was first diagnosed, his only forms of communication were finger pulling, squealing and tantrums. He constantly had a frown on his face. Although we were desperate for Ryan to talk, our main goal was to teach him to communicate with us in a way that removed confusion. Using photographs (rather than drawings) along with verbal prompts meant others could quickly understand what Ryan wanted. Initially verbal prompts were kept simple because we didn’t want to confuse Ryan by adding in small, high frequency words that had no meaning for him. We hoped these would come later, and they have.

We decided that our first step would be to start with food, drink and toy choice visuals. There were no words on the visuals because these would only cause confusion or distraction. We put visuals of the food Ryan was allowed at any time on a choice board on the fridge, and locked the food cupboards. We also gave Ryan choices of what he wanted to drink. We would ask him, “Ryan, what do you want?” We would take his hand, shape it into a point and by holding his hand, point to the items repeating, “Ryan, what do you want? Do you want water or juice?” At first Ryan wouldn’t respond so we would make the choice for him. As we took the visual off the board we would say, “Ryan chose juice. Well done, Ryan.” We would then give him the juice and reinforce this by saying, “Good boy, Ryan. You chose juice. Here is juice.” We would then show him the visual of the juice and the cup of juice. Sometimes we would choose the less preferred choice of water. It didn’t take Ryan long to get used to this and very soon he was making his own decisions. This process enabled Ryan to communicate with us when he wanted something to eat or drink, and reduced the stress felt by others when he could not communicate what he wanted.

We also gave Ryan toy choices. We locked all of his and most of his sister’s toys away in a room. People often asked, “Why use a choice board when he could take you to a cupboard and indicate in some way or another what it is he wants?” Or, “Why lock the food and toys away?” The answer to both these questions is that we needed to teach him to enter our world to communicate. We could have left the toys out so he could play with them, but he didn’t know how to play with them in an appropriate way. All Ryan’s choices were reinforced with much enthusiasm, including lots of clapping, and high fives.
After choices, we moved on to sequences. Whenever we went out in the car, we would put the visuals of our destinations on a board in front of Ryan’s car seat. We would go through these before we left, both visually and verbally. We would reinforce where we were at each destination by pointing to the visual and saying, for example, “School”. Next we would point and say, “School now kindy”. This was a very simple way of introducing him to sequences.

The next step was routines. We started routines involving only three steps, for example, get undressed → bath → pyjamas. We introduced bed time routines, morning routines and, finally, kindergarten routines. If we said, “Ryan, toilet”, and then took him to the toilet, he would get most distressed. We soon realised that it was important to show him the visuals, not just to verbalise, and to finish with something desirable, such as using a visual sequence that shows playdough → toilet → wash hands → playdough. It really helped. It was essential that we finished our sentences like this when giving Ryan an instruction, as children with ASD do not always understand that there is an end to something if it is not clearly stated. Before we did this Ryan thought that he had to stay in the toilet and could not go back to his activity.

The next step was to introduce a daily schedule which covered the main events that would happen in our day. At Ryan’s first kindergarten they would refer to the date each day so we included the date at the top of the daily schedule board. Every morning and throughout the day we would say, “Ryan, check your schedule.”

We feel it is essential for all the people working with a child with ASD to have regular meetings to plan for the child’s learning, address any problems and to generally make sure that everyone is working towards the same goals. Our early intervention team included me, the GSE psychologist, Ryan’s ESW and often my mother. When my husband was able to, he would attend as well. We had support team meetings every fortnight and I really appreciated these; indeed our future would not have been as rosy without our support team. The first agenda item for team meetings was to discuss particular behaviours – not necessarily bad behaviour but some behaviours needed to be addressed before further learning could progress.

The psychologist devised a programme for Ryan using the concept of themes. One that was a lot of fun was ‘the beach’. I made many aids to teach Ryan different aspects of the theme. I made a Velcro board indicating a sandy shore and rock pool. I would say to Ryan, “Where does the boat go? Where shall we put the starfish? How many fish are there? Where will the girl sit?” Ryan loved this activity. He would jump on to the blue area and say, “Jump into the water … splash … swimming.” We would ask him questions such as, “What does fish start with?” We found the beach words in early reader books. We would also have counting cards with objects found at the beach and work sheets and cards where Ryan had to match the word to the picture. We would give him scrabble-type letters and he made the words with them. Themes gave us a focus, and he learned a lot while he was having fun. Music was another trigger for Ryan’s learning, and he loves singing, dancing and musical instruments.

Ryan’s first kindergarten focused on a letter of the week. We also started focusing on these at home. I produced visuals with the letter we were working on. We would say the letter, name the object and make the sound the letter made. One of the best ideas I have had was to draw with chalk on the trampoline. I wrote the letters ‘A a’ and drew pictures of an ant, apple and Anthony from the Wiggles. I would hold Ryan in front of me with my hands on his waist, and I would say, “Jump on the letter A – A makes the sound a a a ant, a a a apple, a a a Anthony”. We would jump on each picture as we said it. We ended up going very fast to make it lots of fun. Ryan loved this activity and learnt extremely quickly this way. Soon he was sounding out and recognising letters and numbers. We covered capitals and lower case letters in the same way.

Identifying and labelling colours was something we thought Ryan would never understand. I remember before we started any formal type of learning, we worked on making Ryan more aware of the environment around us. We walked to the park a lot. On the way to the park we would feel the green grass and look up at the blue sky. We then moved on to walking slowly then walking fast, jumping, hopping, big steps, little steps and so on. We must have looked a sight to the people passing.

It was important when teaching him colours to only focus on the colour and remove other variables. We cut up paper of different colours into the same sizes and shapes. That helped him see a difference between the colours and not be distracted by the objects or shape. If we were showing him a blue car, it was the car he was focusing on and not the colour. Once we established a colour, we would look through books and identify the different objects in that colour. After that we started generalising with different objects out in the community. There is a red fire engine. The traffic light is red. When we put away toys such as blocks, I would say, “Pack away the blue blocks, now the green ones.”

We needed to work in small, deliberate steps, and constantly checked everything for ambiguities. Children with ASD have a unique learning style and we needed to make sure each step was cemented before we moved on to the next one. It took Ryan six months to understand the concepts of up and down. The learning steps could be so slow, but we needed to remain determined, and to keep it simple.

Ryan became adept at doing insert puzzles, and we needed to move him on to interlocking puzzles. That was an eye-opener for me. Ryan was only looking at the shapes and trying to match the female to the male piece. He was oblivious to the picture. Now he has the gist of it and can complete the puzzles well.

Ryan had three different ESWs during his kindy years. Each one did a fantastic job and joined in many activities with Ryan. These included swinging on the swings and completing the obstacle course. We would provide a visual sequence to show Ryan what would be happening, for example, trampoline → gym ball → crawl to the classroom. This emphasis on Ryan’s sensory issues allowed optimum learning to take place during the one-to-one work time. This work time, although more formal, was still fun and consisted of
activities like drawing Lazy 8’s for fine motor skills, completing mazes, joining the dots, drawing a line to an object, using brainy blocks, putting together sequences, and reading and writing. Since Ryan has learned to learn, he has been like a sponge.

Mat time for Ryan was very difficult. Children with ASD can experience sensory issues such as disliking the close proximity of so many people, bright lights and other distractions. Ryan has never liked sitting and waiting quietly, and we needed to help him cope with sitting quietly on the mat. To help Ryan, we shortened mat times and gave him a squeegee ball or a feather to hold to help calm him and satisfy his stimulatory or sensory issues. We also gave him rewards and acknowledgement to reinforce his sitting quietly. All of these tactics were backed up by the use of photographic visuals. Mostly, Ryan would be at one-to-one work time while the other children were at mat time. This arrangement reduced opportunities for distractions from the other children and Ryan was able to concentrate on his tasks. He did participate in the last mat time of the session because this was important to ready him for school. Ryan’s kindergarten was very receptive to our suggestions.

When we first started working with Ryan at kindergarten we added a sequence to his daily schedule to show Ryan what we would be doing each session. This let him know what was expected and what activities he could look forward to. For example, baking was scheduled for most mornings and it was something that Ryan really enjoyed. Mostly they baked scones, so I made new recipe cards with photographs for the kindergarten, and also made a book on baking at kindergarten for Ryan. This included washing his hands before and after baking, putting the scones into the oven, and then leaving them to cool down before they could be eaten. Baking at home was also a great way to teach Ryan shapes, colours, and actions. A lot of learning took place during baking – and we were able to eat our produce. Ryan still loves baking.

Ryan’s and his ESW’s day at kindergarten could easily be thrown into bedlam by unexpected events. One of these was a fire alarm. In order to alleviate Ryan’s distress and help him cope with this I made him a fire alarm at Kindy book. I also pointed out to him that not all fire drills mean a fire and the teachers and children needed to have practices. To help Ryan to make sense of the purpose of a fire drill, I added pages showing the damage a fire can do and how it can hurt people and property. Wet days at kindergarten were another difficulty – Ryan was unable to understand why he could not go outside. We made another short book explaining why, and provided alternative activities to do inside.

By the time he was three years old, Ryan knew a lot of nouns. He could name people and places, and many other objects. Ryan could name the toilet, but he had no idea what it was for. One of the first behavioural issues we started working on was toileting, which has been the longest and the most difficult, but also one of the most rewarding.

With reading and writing, it was also very important throughout all of Ryan’s learning that we ensured he understood the words that he was reading or writing. Children with ASD are great rote learners, but just because they can say or write something does not mean they understand it. From the age of three, Ryan could write ‘warning’ and we had told him what it said, but he didn’t know what it actually meant. I did not know where he had seen the word to be able to write it in the first place and I later found out that it is at the beginning of every video. When Ryan was four years and 11 months, we started him on writing sentences and made photographic visuals with step-by-step instructions to help him construct the sentences.

Ryan likes close contact with familiar people, and would constantly sit on his ESW’s knee. This was a habit we needed to discourage before he started school. To deal with this, we made a mat out of a laminated piece of blue paper with the words ‘Ryan sit here’ on it and one for his ESW marked ‘Fiona sit here’. We gradually moved the mats apart so that Ryan could get used to sitting by himself. In May 2003, Ryan started school. He had a gradual transition into a class with nine other children with ASD. We made him five books just to get him to morning tea time. These books were essential for Ryan to understand and cope with the routines in an environment totally new to him. At school, Ryan is reading and writing well but we need to constantly work with him to ensure he reaches his potential, and understands what he is writing. His reading level is well above his level of comprehension.

When we bought a video of the times tables and a wall chart for our daughter, Ryan commandeered them and taught himself multiplication to the 12 times tables and beyond. Ryan has also memorised the calendar for 2005 and 2006. He can tell you the day for whatever date you tell him, and can remember the date certain things happened – he is like my little diary. We always tap into Ryan’s interests and use these to further his learning, and we need to keep him interested and motivated. For his participation in our family shopping, we made a visual shopping list with numbers, photos and words for the vegetable shop. Ryan would read it, go and find the required items, and count them into a bag. Like all other children with ASD, Ryan has difficulty in understanding the world around him and it is up to us to help him in the best way that we can.

Now Ryan is able to read and understand many of his visuals are text. I will add photographs in times of stress or in new situations to help dispel his anxiety. Getting to where we are today has been a steady progression over several years. It may be tempting for parents and teachers to rush through the stages of visual intervention but it is important to remember that we could not achieve realistic or sustained results by using words and then sentences too quickly. Ryan could not read all the words in his books, but by having them there, it allowed whoever was going through the book to provide consistent information.

Tantrums were an everyday occurrence and were extremely difficult to manage. They evoked a great deal of unwanted attention from onlookers. Ryan has an older sibling so we needed to go out a lot and were unable to hide at home until his behaviour had improved. I started to plan ahead by making visuals or books. When Ryan has any change in routine or a special event coming up, I make him a book to help him understand and cope with it. Ryan loves these
books and they really work for him. We produced a book for waiting quietly at the doctors so Ryan would have choices other than going into the doctors’ rooms trying to play with their computers, which he had been doing. He needs to be provided with alternatives because he is unable to think of these on his own. Visuals often need to be made after behaviour has occurred in order to prevent it from reoccurring. After a number of accidents with eggs, we made a visual of broken eggs all over the floor. The ‘broken egg’ scenario has not happened since then.

Taking turns has been another difficult issue for Ryan. We helped Ryan understand the fact that others were allowed a turn, by making visuals of Ryan and his sister on the trampoline. We would put it in a sequence board, showing Ryan’s turn until the timer goes, then his sister’s turn, then Ryan’s turn, and we added in words – ‘Mummy’s turn, then Ryan’s turn.’ Although he did not always like this, he did understand.

Occasions such as Christmas, with all the different and spontaneous events, could cause immense stress for Ryan and all of us. Christmas now goes off without a hitch because the books we produce are extremely detailed. Ryan asks me to make these books and he likes to help. In the early stages, and sometimes even now, Ryan objected to visuals telling him what to do when it wasn’t what he had planned. He does understand the purpose of the visuals and, backed by the consistent reinforcement of the members of our team, he understands that he must comply.

When I think back to where Ryan and I started, I remember thinking, I am not a teacher – where on earth do I start – Ryan is depending on me – I know nothing about teaching. Even some of the terms used by the teachers were foreign to me, but if Ryan was to progress, I needed to take on the role of teacher as well as parent. At times the responsibility was overwhelming. I have learned a lot and I have two bits of advice for working with children who have ASD: be consistent and use photographic visuals.

The stresses and strains of dealing with ASD meant I did tend to give in too much. Often I would blame the autism for Ryan’s behaviour, which obviously had a lot to do with it, and because of this I was not strict or consistent enough. The turning point of Ryan’s compliance was the day Ryan’s psychologist said to me, “You need to take control and follow through. Don’t go with him when he pulls you – take him to the visual board and get him to show you what he wants.” From this point on we took control and became a lot firmer with Ryan. Despite the obvious reactions from him we stuck to our guns and both Ryan’s and our family’s life has improved considerably.

We don’t know what Ryan’s future will bring, but it is up to us to help him as much as we can. He still processes information differently and needs help understanding what is happening around him. We will keep using photographic visuals to help him with all of these issues. I believe he will do well in his life. We continue putting in the time and effort, and also ensure that he continues to be taught in the right environment and in the right way.

A lot of people ask me how Ryan’s sister copes with Ryan and his ASD. We are very fortunate, and Danielle is the best sister Ryan could ever wish for. She is extremely patient and she loves Ryan unconditionally. We have been open and honest with her from the time of Ryan’s diagnosis. I think having a brother with ASD has opened Danielle’s world. She attends special needs classes for swimming, trampoline and gym with Ryan. She accepts all the children there for who they are. I asked her if she would like to write a piece on ‘having a brother with autism’.

She wrote:
\begin{quote}
When your brother or sister has ASD it’s hard because you talk differently to them. They go to a different school and it’s hard because he gets a little more attention. It’s hard to explain why he is different. Sometimes when I’d explain about him, people would say, “Yeah I get it, he’s dumb”, though he knows his times tables already. He’s seven. My friend’s brother doesn’t know it, so Ryan’s not dumb! He could spell words when he was three that I couldn’t spell when I was six. He could open 30 windows in one computer session. So he’s not dumb after all … sometimes I’ll be talking on the phone, when there is a call on the other line, and it’s for my mum and she’s talking about my brother.
\end{quote}

We deliberately think in small, literal steps. We examine everything for ambiguities. Every day there are more things that I can verbalise which he will understand and follow, or comment on. This has been bought about largely by the use of visuals. They are a major part of our lives now, and always will be. However, visuals aren’t where it begins and ends. They can’t provide a cure for ASD, nor are they the magical answer. They do not work in isolation. Photographic visuals are, however, a very powerful tool for learning and communication. To be truly effective their use has to be taught and used correctly along with an understanding on how the mind of a child with ASD works. It also requires a one hundred percent effort and commitment from everyone involved with the child – and not just his mother. But isn’t that true of anything that’s worthwhile?

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**Bronwyn Julian**

**AUTHOR PROFILE**

Bronwyn Julian is mother to Ryan and Danielle and chairperson of Acorn House (parent support group), and a co-presenter of workshops on Photographic Learning and Communication Strategies (PLACS).

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Talking with Families about Things that are Hard for Them to Hear

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ABSTRACT
This article is based on the author’s personal experience of an uncomfortable discussion with a family. Issues are explored around the difficulty in anticipating how a young child with a learning delay will respond to speech-language therapy and how the practitioner will give accurate information. Two key journal articles on giving bad news are summarised.

Practice paper
KEYWORDS
Communication skills, interpersonal communication, family involvement, parent school relationship.

His mother came over to me and said, "Hello". His grandmother was with her, too. His mother explained that they were concerned about his progress with language and speech. He was still very hard to understand, and they wanted to know what I had been doing in my sessions with him. That morning in the early childhood centre, my thoughts were jumbled as I started to speak, and I stuttered at first. There was so much they needed to understand about typical development before I could start to explain why I had not been ‘teaching’ him for the previous six months, and it took me a few moments to collect my thoughts and find a way to do this.

His mother also wanted to know when the centre was going to start teaching him. He had recently turned four, and she was anxious because he would be going to school in a year. "Last year, he just played", she said.

They listened politely as I tried to form a coherent explanation. I did explain that young children learn through play, and I tried to explain that ‘play’ was the right thing for a three-year-old to do. I also said that the play activities at the centre were designed to encourage development and that the very able staff were supporting him with his learning in very appropriate ways. I am sure I said all this, but I am not sure they heard it.

They were right; he was hard to understand, with many sound substitutions, and what we could understand was very simple language for a child his age. There were seldom more than three words in a sentence and few grammatical markers in his speech. He had had ear infections but there was nothing else in his background to explain the delay.

On top of this, he was resistant to speech work. Most children I work with quickly become comfortable with desk work – sitting at a table and doing fairly formal speech-language therapy – and many of them look forward to our sessions: beating me at Memories, saying their practice words and getting a small sticker at the end.

Not him, though. He always played outside and it was next to impossible to coax him to come in like the other children I saw at that centre. I tried different approaches: asking him, telling him, and taking him by the hand and leading him. When I tried persuasion, he would look up from the sand he was digging in and say, "When me bigger".

The funny thing was, he was right. He had a lot of development to go through and he was not going to do it faster just because his mother, his grandmother and I thought he should.

After my long and nervous explanations to his mother and grandmother that day, I stopped pressing him for several months but kept in touch. When I visited the centre I would make sure I spent a few minutes with him, perhaps crouching down when he was busy in the sand, and commenting on what he was doing. The staff at the centre continued to look for opportunities to feed in language, too. When I saw his mother, I made encouraging comments about what I had seen recently.

The next term, when he was nearly four and a half, he was ready to come inside and play Memories with me or talk about vocabulary pictures for a few minutes, but not both. Pretty soon I was able to do some formal testing with him and finally I was able to write a programme. By then, he was prepared to have a go at the practice words and get a small sticker at the end. Memories was a challenge for him at first, and he knew a few diverting behaviours when the words were difficult to say. He might drop his hat on the ground then want to pick it up, or slip off the adult-sized chair and disappear under the desk.

He is nearly five and a half now, and everyone can understand him most of the time. He still says "me" for "I" occasionally, and I still see him for his speech sounds. He has made a good transition to school, and he is happy to come to a side room and do his ‘special talking’ now, although he still comes across as immature in his social skills.

It can be very hard, at the beginning, to tell those children who will get the spark and make quick progress, and those who will take longer, and make progress in small slow steps. It often takes time, months, perhaps, to try a few approaches and see if they work. Then, having spent all that time with a child it can be hard to step back and say, “they are not ready yet”. I find it hard to say it to myself, and even harder to explain it to others.
I am getting better at it, telling parents their child is a ‘slower learner’. I seldom use that phrase, though. I say they are learning and developing, but at their own pace. I can usually back this up with examples. I try to explain the underlying theory: development is accretive, each step building on the previous and none can be missed, but this can go over their heads. I have been thinking about this for a while. I used to get defensive, emphasising the positive and not wanting to admit the difficulties. I even find it hard to write ‘the negatives’. These days I can agree, and empathise, if a parent feels their child is ‘behind’ compared to most children.

While I was thinking about this child, and the difficult discussion I had with his mother and grandmother, I decided to see if there was any literature on giving bad news that would help me out. I searched the Internet, and asked the staff at the GSE library to have a look, too. I found a couple of business articles, such as how to tell an employee they missed out on a promotion, and the GSE library found a dozen or so for doctors, for example, discussing the delivery of a diagnosis of cystic fibrosis.

Professionals in education rarely have to give news with the implications that medical professionals do, but we do talk with families about things that are hard for them to hear. Perhaps the child has not made the progress we had hoped for, or we feel a situation is severe and calls for strong measures. Perhaps we are the ones to confirm their fears or put a name to their concerns. Sometimes they want a label for what is wrong with their child. Sometimes that is the last thing they want. Either way, the child’s education opportunities are likely to be reduced or limited in some way.

I thought back, trying to remember any training on this topic I had, or courses colleagues had reported back on. When I trained as a Speech-Language Therapist, I remember students role-playing discussions with family members, including giving the results of our assessments and explaining what it meant for the person. I also know that my colleagues working with challenging behaviour regularly have difficult discussions with schools and families, so I was surprised that the literature search had not found anything other than medical journal articles. Reading the articles we had found, I saw that while there is good advice and theory that seems sound, there are broad gaps in the research, especially around what works best for families. Most of the research looked at what works best for doctors.

However, there were two articles that were often referenced by the others, and are well worth reading. They are both accessible, thoughtful and helpful. One is a review of the medical literature on breaking bad news (Ptacek & Eberhardt, 1996), and the other offers a protocol for delivering bad news (Baile, Buckman, Lenzi, Glober, Beale, & Kudelka, 2000). It is worth summarising the main points of each, and considering how they can be applied to our education setting.

Ptacek and Eberhardt (1996) read 67 articles that had been published in medical journals since 1985. They summarised a number of the issues and the advice most often given.

1. Meet in a quiet, comfortable and private place.
2. Arrange a convenient time, so the discussion is not rushed and there will be no interruptions.
3. Meet in person – make eye contact, sit close to the person and avoid physical barriers such as a desk.
4. Give the person the option of having a support person present.
5. Prepare what you will say, and give them some warning that it may be unwelcome news.
6. Convey some measure of hope.
7. Acknowledge and explore their reaction, and allow for any expression of emotions.
8. Allow for questions.
9. Show warmth, caring, empathy and respect.
10. Be careful around your choice of words to ensure that they will understand you, avoid euphemisms or technical jargon. Euphemisms can make bad news sound good, and be confusing.
11. Give the news at the person’s pace, allowing them to dictate what they are told and when.
12. Summarise the discussion at the end – either verbally or in writing.

Baile et al. (2000) also acknowledged the gaps in empirical research around giving bad news, and explored the issues that had been identified in previous literature. Their protocol, ‘SPIKES,’ is difficult to summarise without losing important information, but the letters stand for six steps in giving bad news.

1. Set up the interview.
2. Access the patient’s Perception (finding out what they know already will help shape how the news is delivered).
3. Obtain the patient’s Invitation (finding out how much they want to know, and how they want to be told).
4. Give Knowledge and information to the patient.
5. Address the patient’s Emotions with empathic responses.
6. Strategy (what is going to be done about it) and Summary.

Their discussion around these points echo much of what Ptacek and Eberhardt (1996) found, and on the face of it, both articles can be adapted to educational situations to provide us with useful guidance. It is important not to fall into the same trap – working from what seems sensible but without research into the practical application of such a framework.
It is vital to have research focused on education in New Zealand: evidence to inform our practice. For example, there must be some cultural issues to be taken into account, and other differences, too. Research could investigate the experiences of education professionals in New Zealand, the range of training they had received (taking the best from each, perhaps) or any support they would like to have. Family perceptions could be canvassed. A more determined literature search might find articles with greater relevance to special education.

Looking back at the vignette I presented at the beginning of the article, and thinking about the strategies I have outlined, that situation would still have been difficult for me. To begin with, I did not have time to prepare the information or the setting. Perhaps I needed to talk to the boy’s family more, or at least check that they understood the approach I was taking and why. I could have been more proactive and if I had followed the advice of these two articles, I might have been more successful in keeping the family informed. This might have prevented them needing to approach me in that way, which was uncomfortable for all of us.

REFERENCES


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Relational Aggression between Primary School Girls

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ABSTRACT
This article presents the findings of a case study undertaken with the year 5 girls in one school to investigate their experiences and understanding of covert intimidation, as well as the effects and impact of these practices in the school setting. The findings of the study were obtained from the analysis of interviews, researcher-generated documents (worksheets) and surveys. They suggest that covert intimidation does exist in the school setting, and more particularly that these practices are an integral part of relationships between girls, through which they resolve the anger and conflict that arise in their friendships. These practices are located in the heart of girls’ relationships and operate beneath the surface of ordinary school life. The conclusion of the study is that the term relational aggression should be used as a descriptor to help bring the phenomenon of covert aggression into the open. Open acknowledgment of these practices will help address these behaviours between girls so that they can learn open and honest ways of relating to each other, particularly in the resolution of their conflicts.

KEYWORDS
Girls, aggressive behaviour, harassment, victimisation, social behaviour, bullying, peer relationships.

INTRODUCTION
Many New Zealand schools have implemented school-wide prevention programmes as a response to bullying in the school environment. These programmes include the Eliminating Violence – Managing Anger Programme, the No Blame Approach, Kia Kaha, and the Cool Schools Peer Mediation Programme. However, while acknowledging the existence of indirect practices such as intimidation or manipulation, many of these school-wide programmes have not specifically addressed the practices that are more commonly found between girls. Sullivan (2000) suggests that indirect bullying by girls possibly gets neglected because it takes subtle forms and there is little outward sign of harm. Other researchers assert that it is partly due to the perception that indirect bullying is not bullying in the true sense. Boulton and Hawker found in their UK study that only about half of teachers and junior pupils, and one fifth of secondary school pupils, considered ‘deliberate social exclusion’ to be bullying (Stanley & Arora, 1998).

THE PHENOMENON
In the last decade, researchers have provided a series of definitions to describe the phenomenon of aggression or bullying of a non-physical nature. Crick and her colleagues describe ‘behaviours that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion’ as relational aggression Crick et al., 1999, p.77). Galen and Underwood (1997) discuss social aggression as behaviours that damage another’s self-esteem or social status, including non-verbal behaviours such as negative facial expressions or bodily movements, as well as more indirect forms such as slander and social exclusion. Dellasega and Adamshick (2005) simply define relational aggression as ‘the use of relationships to hurt another’(p. 63). Simmons (2002, p.23) provides a hint about the dynamics involved when she notes that, ‘covert aggression isn’t just about not getting caught; half of it is looking like you’d never mistreat someone in the first place.’

It has commonly been thought that these practices occur more frequently during secondary school years. However, teachers have expressed concern and have sought help from the researcher in her role as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) in five primary schools as a result of relational aggression through covert intimidation. This research study rose from the desire to more effectively...
support girls in our schools to develop the social skills and behaviours necessary to resolve difficulties in interactions.

The three aims of this qualitative case study were
1. to ascertain whether year 5 girls did in fact perceive themselves as experiencing covert intimidation from other girls.
2. to understand the meanings the girls gave to their experiences.
3. to explore the effects and impact of those experiences.

THE METHOD

This study aimed to investigate whether covert intimidation occurred among a group of 23 year 5 girls aged between nine and ten years who were drawn from four composite year 5 and 6 classes. The study sought to examine what the effects and impact of these practices were in the school setting, which in this case was a medium-sized, inner city, decile 7, contributing state primary school.

The case study contained four data gathering techniques.

Survey and worksheet
The survey questionnaire and worksheet obtained information about the girls’ experiences and understandings of covert intimidation (see Appendices 1 and 2). This information helped to check assumptions about the incidence of the practices and the girls’ understandings, and provided more detailed information on which the remaining data gathering methods were based. The survey and worksheet not only provided information about a phenomenon that could not easily be observed, but they provided the girls with the opportunity to reflect more deeply on social interactions in the school setting. Completion of the survey and worksheet was able to be carried out privately and confidentially. Additionally, the writing, due to its reflective nature, empowered the girls to make more informed choices about the extent and kind of information they were willing to share in the group discussions.

Semi-structured group discussions and semi-structured interviews
A total of seven girls from one class, six from another and five girls from two others made up the five discussion groups, which had a membership of five or four girls in each. This membership was a tender topic for some students, with one student opting out of the discussion groups, so guiding the composition of the groups was the year 5 and 6 teachers’ knowledge of the dynamics between the girls. Additionally, girls were able to make confidential requests for changes in the groupings through the class post boxes and several girls did this. Further supports were put in place to ensure that any distress experienced by the girls was addressed. These included the deputy principal and a counsellor making themselves available, post boxes being placed in all the classrooms and informing parents of the days that their daughter’s discussion group would take place.

The discussions, which took place in a private room, were guided by the researcher, who used a semi-structured interview schedule to gain information about the girls’ understandings of practices of covert intimidation, as well as the effects and impact of those practices (see Appendix 3). The discussion groups, which were bound by structured group processes such as negotiated group rules, including confidentiality, provided the girls with the means to relate the reality of their social lives without the constraints of forming a written message.

The adults’ perspectives of the phenomenon were gained through tape recorded, semi-structured interviews with the four year 5 and 6 teachers (see Appendix 4).

| TABLE 1 |
| Conceptual Framework Derived From Data Analysis |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. girls’ understandings of covert intimidation</td>
<td>Characteristics of the perpetrators</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Characteristics of the victims</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The girls’ attitudes to covert intimidation</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. girls’ experiences of covert intimidation</td>
<td>Is it a problem?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Where it occurs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Close friendships</td>
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<td>3. the effect of covert intimidation reported by girls</td>
<td>Victims’ reactions</td>
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<td>Reporting experiences by victims</td>
</tr>
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<td>4. the impact of covert intimidation reported by teachers</td>
<td>The difficult nature of covert intimidation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The influence of covert intimidation</td>
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<td>Actions taken to address covert intimidation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The impact of school actions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed in recurring stages throughout each data collection phase. This meant that subsequent data gathering was used to check the initial interpretations. Using Merriam’s data analysis method, the data was coded and organised into categories from which key concepts were derived (1998). Table 1 sets out the key concepts and associated categories used in data analysis. The key concept of the girls’ understandings of covert intimidation was formed from the following categories: the characteristics of the perpetrators, the characteristics of the victims and the girls’ attitudes to covert intimidation.
The girls' attitudes category incorporated six subcategories based on the girls' explanations for covert intimidatory behaviours. These explanations were: preserving power and reputation, conforming to the pressure of the group, emulating other girls, gaining friends and getting rid of friends, providing a release, and acting according to natural impulses.

The category of close friendships included the subcategories of addiction, conflict, exclusive pairs, trust, betrayal in the context of close friendships, and forms of covert intimidation. The subcategory of forms of covert intimidation was split into further sub categories of: exclusion, words as weapons, insincerity, intolerance of difference, body language, threats and coercion, groups, clubs and gangs, secrets, rumours and lies, and hiding behind others.

The third key concept of the effects of covert intimidation on the girls was derived from the categories of the victims' reactions to covert intimidation and the reporting of the experiences by the victims. The final key concept, that of the impact of covert intimidation on the girls as described by teachers, was shaped by the categories of the difficult nature of covert intimidation, the influences on covert intimidation practices, actions taken to address covert intimidation in the school setting and the impact of school actions.

FINDINGS
The girls' understandings and experiences of covert intimidation

Girls who were perpetrators of covert intimidation were described as being bossy, conventionally pretty, smart, confident, wearing trendy clothes and having impressive material possessions. They were popular among their peers and with their teachers. They were girls who often had a strong verbal ability. This ability not only secured the approval of their teachers, who often regarded these girls as trustworthy and plausible, but it also helped to obtain useful information which could be used to hurt and humiliate others. The teacher's unwitting participation was an aspect of relational aggression that was well understood by some of the girls. As one girl reported:

*They use the teacher as a shield – and then behind their backs they’re – they’re just really mean.*

In their discussions on the subject, the girls identified the need for power as being central to the practices of covert intimidation. The girls equated power with being in control of people and they clearly saw that this was the factor that gains the top girl or popular girl the allegiance and respect of the others. One girl understood this principle very clearly when she discussed how she took her revenge for being excluded in the following way:

*I would take her friends away so that she would have no friends.*

These practices were understood to be essential for controlling the social order of events.

Although most of the girls in the study reported that they had experienced being a victim of covert intimidation, they observed that girls with no friends were more likely to be targets because they had no one to protect them. Other girls more likely to experience the aggression of their peers in this way included those who were different in some way and those who were quiet. In speaking of the practices, many of the girls described the dilemma they felt between the pressure to participate in actions against their peers, frequently out of fear of being isolated, and the risk that the actions would be turned on them. Two-thirds of the girls reported that they had been mean to other girls in this way.

When the girls spoke in general terms about stopping the practices of covert intimidation, they were more likely to express the view that they could stop it. When they shared information about specific situations, they spoke with a sense of powerlessness about their inability to change the course of events. It was seen to be inextricably bound up with friendships, which made it too complicated to deal with, or if it involved exclusion from a group, most of the girls appeared to have little hope that it could be stopped.

In a survey in which 22 of the 23 girls participated (one girl was absent on the day the survey was conducted), 16 reported that they had been bullied through indirect practices, while four affirmed that they had bullied another girl within the last year. Of the 22 girls, 14 reported that the bullying had been a problem for them and they discussed the pain and difficulty it had caused them, while six girls stated that it had not bothered them or that the "little bit of bullying was not a problem". Almost half (45%) of the girls' responses to the survey question about where bullying occurred, reported that it occurred in the playground.

One girl described how it can occur under a teacher's nose.

*When they start bullying, they see the teacher's near … and bully you to make sure you don't tell.*

As well as occurring before and after school, covert intimidation also occurred in the classroom, particularly in the form of refusing to work with certain girls, whispering secrets and writing private notes.

During discussions with the girls, it quickly became apparent that covert intimidation was very central to the close friendships between the girls. Many of the girls spoke with great sadness about the difficulties they had experienced in their close friendships with others. Small upsets often reeled out of control and became big issues, the hidden agenda of which was to gain control of a group, or to end a close friendship due to the competition of other alternatives. As one girl said:

*It wasn't really the bullies that came to me, it was me who went to the bullies because they were my friends if they didn't have other girls around them … I couldn't (ignore them), they were my friends on their own but they would try to impress other girls.*

This description also describes the ripple effect that these actions can have on others.
The girls reported that covert intimidation came in many guises. These included words, subtle body language and actions such as forming clubs that aimed to exclude, hurt feelings, threaten, coerce, ridicule differences, break confidences or make others feel that they were invisible. One girl’s experience of asking if she could play exemplifies this situation. She reported that the response took the following form:

What’s that strange noise? Where’s it coming from? Who is that? What is that? Can I hear something?

The girls also reported that some girls were good at hiding behind others by making them carry out their deeds. As one girl said:

Well people that do bully, they say, “if you bully this person, I’ll give you this or you can be my friend.”

The effects and impact of covert intimidation on the girls

The effects of covert intimidation were apparent during the research process. One girl felt too threatened to participate in the discussion group as a result of past experiences of victimisation from other girls. Several girls made personal approaches to the researcher providing names of girls they did not want to be in a discussion group with. In the discussion groups the girls described an array of responses to these acts of aggression from their peers. They ranged from responding with strong assertive responses to being frightened to challenge the aggressors for fear of further victimisation. Other responses included staying away from school, ignoring the behaviours or giving up on the situation and leaving, as well as trying to make new friends. Some had tried heart-to-heart talks with mixed success.

While some girls reported that they had had favourable results from discussing their experiences with their family, friends or teachers, many other girls had not benefited. Only a third of the girls reported that they had asked for help as a result of their relational aggression experiences, although more than half (55%) had shared their situation with family members, friends or teachers. Most of the girls either found their mothers’ or grandmothers’ advice, such as to ignore the bullies, difficult to implement or feared that their parents’ actions could lead to further bullying and did not want their parents to get involved.

Talking with their friends was also difficult for some of the girls, particularly those who were in and out of small friendship groups. Finding girls who could be relied on to respect confidences was of great concern. Perceived and real threats to end friendships were also cited as a good reason not to seek support from adults in the school or the school systems set up to respond to bullying. Threats persuaded one girl not to seek help from a mediator. In another incident, a class meeting to address the matter worked against the victim when the perpetrator convincingly twisted the story. Another girl related an unsatisfactory outcome when she asked a teacher to mediate.

… I got mediation but with the teacher. They said all these lies … I didn’t know what to say ‘cause I hadn’t done it but nobody – if they had done it – nobody would say they did.

Despite these experiences several girls stated that they felt it was important to tell teachers because they appreciated the fact that some girls bully others because they count on them not reporting incidents to teachers. Other girls reported that their problems had been resolved with teachers taking actions. More satisfactory outcomes seemed to occur for the victim when the incident was recent, occurred in close proximity to the teachers and the victim was in an obviously upset state.

The impact of covert intimidation was explored in the study through examining the teachers’ understandings of covert intimidation in terms of the effects on the girls. While the teachers acknowledged that they struggled to fully understand the nature of the phenomenon, they were able to describe a range of impacts on the victims of relational aggression. Most teachers were of the view that the experiences resulted in low self-esteem and diminished self-worth. They cited incidents of girls becoming clingy and befriending younger children to be in a position of strength, and of girls who panicked and dissolved into tears when challenged by small problems. Others appeared to have little confidence and avoided new or challenging situations. Marred academic performance was observed, as was the behaviour of concentrating on academic pursuits to compensate for lack of social involvement.

The intangibility of the practices often left the teachers in a quandary as to what to do about the issue. The teachers’ plight in responding to the incidents was summed up by one teacher:

You talk to them and you have not seen anything. They’re very clever at … this is why it worries me so much because bullying relies on secrecy and if you can’t winkle it out, how are you going to stop it? But you know it’s happening, you just do.

Teachers have difficulty gauging the frequency of the behaviours and establishing the actual version of situations, due to the ability of some of the girls to turn things around, underplay the events and make light of the actions. One teacher suggested that many of the girls find it difficult to identify clearly what is happening when the practices are directed at them, and so will focus on one small incident which frequently sounds trivial and is easily dismissed such as telling tales. Another teacher reported that because relational aggression involved relationships, the difficulties experienced were complicated and not always able to be reconciled. Another teacher expressed the belief that relational aggression will always be part of the way girls interact because it is part of human nature. These views and the fact that relational aggression by its very nature can be ignored have contributed to the situation where most schools have been slow to respond to the problem.

Despite these difficulties, most of the teachers interviewed imparted a strong sense of optimism that social education supported by school actions could make a real difference to the lives of these year 5 girls. These views were supported by taking actions in the school to address the behaviours associated with relational aggression. The actions included
This study set out to investigate year 5 girls’ experiences of covert intimidation practice and to explore the understandings they have about covert intimidation practices. The findings of the study suggest that covert intimidation in the school setting for this particular group of year 5 girls was a phenomenon with which they were familiar. It was part of the social fabric of their lives both in and outside the classroom, affecting their interactions with each other and their friendships. The girls clearly understood that the practices were unique to their experience as girls, with encounters involving both verbal and non-verbal aggressive behaviours that form a clandestine subculture. This culture is described by Simmons (2002) as a hidden culture in which, ‘bullying is epidemic, clandestine subculture. This culture is described by Simmons (2002) as a hidden culture in which, ‘bullying is epidemic, distinctive and destructive’ (p.3). This study supports findings in the literature that the indirect nature of bullying by girls possibly is ignored because it takes subtle forms and there is little outward sign of harm (Sullivan, 2000).

The findings of studies carried out by Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukiainen (1992), Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Simmons (2002) concur with one of the findings in this study, that relational aggression is located within girls’ friendships. These friendships are the site of both highs and lows. While girls find friendships to be positive and rewarding, which results in a desire to spend every moment together, they are also fraught with difficulties as girls try to resolve their needs for connection, recognition and power. The conflict that often results is, according to Simmons (2002), deeply problematic for girls because there has long been a view that girls do not experience conflict. Historically society has ignored anger and aggression as being part of girls’ behavioural repertoires, labelling girls instead as catty, deceitful and conniving. This originates from the belief that women’s primary role in life is to nurture and such a role is incompatible with aggressive behaviour. Brown and Gilligan (1992) believe that it is this period of middle childhood where girls learn that the expression of strong feelings will earn disapproval from their world. In striving to achieve perfection in this dimension, girls are prevented from voicing true feelings and most particularly feelings of anger or aggression. Relational aggression allows girls to vent their anger beneath a façade of “niceness”. This is confirmed by one of the participants who said:

… you sort of try and hurt them on purpose and make it seem like it was a mistake …

This study further set out to describe the effects of covert intimidation practice on year 5 girls and to consider the impact of covert intimidation practices in the school setting. The findings suggest that most girls in this study felt unable to challenge the injustices inflicted on them. Their responses of giving up, trying to ignore or getting away from the situation expressed their sense of helplessness. An explanation for this helplessness is found in a study by Osler and Vincent (2003) who reported that girls spoke about being subjected to disciplinary exclusion as a result of lashing out after suffering in silence or trying unsuccessfully to stand up to the bully. The finding that the experiences of covert intimidation resulted in girls having little confidence, avoiding new or challenging situations, underperforming academically replicates other findings. Crick et al. (1999) cite their and other researchers’ findings that relational aggression was significantly associated with current and future rejection, and this increased over the school year. The subsequent lack of opportunities to experience belonging and acceptance in close relationships has been shown to be associated with feelings of loneliness, low subjective well-being and non-adjustment (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen and Lagerspetz, 1998).

Results of this study suggest that an important first step to redress this situation and help girls learn new and more appropriate ways to express their anger and resolve the conflicts arising from their relationships is to bring the issue out into the public arena. The use of the term relational aggression is a term that clearly describes what the behaviours are concerned with and supports the issue being openly discussed.

Schools can play an important role in ensuring that the experience of girls in terms of relational aggression is heard, acknowledged and considered important. Perhaps a more important implication for schools is that although females are thought to have lower prevalence rates of aggression and antisocial behaviour than males, current research suggests they are actually at greater risk of psychological maladjustment (Espelage, Mebane and Swearer, 2004). While Crick and Grotpeter’s earlier research clearly showed relational aggression to be more characteristic of girls, ‘in which the goal is to hurt others by damaging their reputation or their relationships’ (as cited in Espelage, Mebane and Swearer, 2004, p. 16), the findings of this study support Espelage et al.’s more recent view that relational aggression plays a unique role in youth psychological and social adjustment. Furthermore, Delasega and Adamshick (2005) contend that ‘middle school is the learning laboratory for relationship skills that can last a lifetime’ (p. 74).

So what can schools do? Social education programmes can raise the awareness of children from the age of five about the appropriateness of a range of social behaviours. Behaviours which comprise the practices of relational aggression can be named, listed and discussed as inappropriate in the school setting. A strong school-wide focus on prosocial behaviours as alternatives to the covert
practices of relational aggression can have expression in school assemblies and through strategies such as "caught in the act" awards. Forums can be provided through class circles and other forms of discussion groups. Not only do these methods ensure that the girls' voices are heard, but they provide opportunities for all students to learn more appropriate ways to problem-solve difficulties in social interactions. Girls must be supported to ask for help to resolve their relationship difficulties. When teachers are proactive and respond, girls' concerns are validated and, just as with overt forms of bullying, when teachers are seen to take action, perpetrators become more considerate of their actions.

Finally, in a profession where so many teachers are women, there is the need for us to reflect on our own relationships with each other in light of our middle and secondary school experiences. Most importantly, we must discard the belief that practices of relational aggression are natural and unavoidable, and take action to support our female students to learn new ways of relating to each other through learning how to be open and honest, so they can express their emotions and formulate solutions to their conflicts.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR PROFILES**

Jennifer Browne is a psychologist working in the school focus team in Auckland. Previously she has worked as an RTLB, a Guidance and Learning Unit teacher and has had experience both as a classroom teacher and special class teacher. This article describes the research carried out to complete a Masters of Educational Psychology.

Janis Carroll-Lind is a senior lecturer in inclusive education at Massey University College of Education. She also teaches an on-line paper on the role of the mentor teacher. Prior to her current position, Janis has been an early childhood and primary school teacher, an adjustment class teacher for children with behaviour difficulties and a Resource Teacher Special Needs.

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APPENDIX 1
Survey Questionnaire
SURVEY ON BULLYING AMONG GIRLS

I am interested to find out if girls bully other girls secretly in this school. I want to find out if there are ways that some girls make other girls unhappy by being mean to them. This kind of bullying is not the pushing and hitting kind of bullying. It is a kind of bullying where girls say and do things to stop other girls joining in games or being part of a group of friends. Some girls might whisper secrets to make a person feel bad, or they might laugh at them or say things about how they look. Sometimes girls get other girls to do these mean things by telling them they won’t be their friend if they don’t. These are just some of the things that can happen but you may know of others.

This is confidential so do not put your name on this paper. No one will know what you write and the things you write will not affect you or anyone in your class. Spelling is not important for this and if you need help and don’t understand, put up your hand and I will help you.

Please answer the questions as honestly as you can.

If you don’t want to answer a question you have the right to leave it.

Age  years and  months

Ethnicity (tick the ethnic groups you belong to)
- Chinese
- Korean
- Indian
- Samoan
- Māori
- Pakeha
- Cook Island
- Other

(Circle one)

1. Has bullying between girls been a problem for you at school?  Yes  No
2. Have you been bullied by girls at school this year or last year?  Yes  No
3. Have you bullied another girl this year or last year  Yes  No
4. If Yes how often have you been bullied by girls? (tick one)
   - only once
   - once a month
   - once a week
   - every day
   - more than once a day
5. When does the bullying by girls happen? (You can tick more than one box).
   - on the way to school
   - before school
   - at playtime or lunchtime
   - in the classroom
   - after school
6. Which girls get bullied by girls the most? (Circle the ones you think).
   - quiet girls
   - girls who are different
   - girls who argue lots
   - naughty girls
   - bossy girls
   - popular girls
   - girls with no friends
7. Which girls bully other girls the most? (Circle the ones you think).
   - girls who are different
   - girls who argue lots
   - naughty girls
   - bossy girls
   - popular girls
   - girls with no friends
   - girls who are popular with teachers

(If you haven’t been bullied by girls go to No. 13)
8. Did you tell anyone when you were bullied by other girls?  Yes  No
9. Did you ask for help?  Yes  No
10. Who did you tell?
11. What happened when you told someone?
12. How did you feel when the bullying was happening?
13. What kinds of things do girls do when they bully other girls?
14. Why do you think some girls pick on other girls?
15. What could girls do to stop the bullying. Write down any good ideas you have tried or can think of.
16. Do you think you can do something to stop other girls bullying girls?  Yes  No
17. Do the teachers ever see this bullying?  Yes  No
   If Yes, what did they do?
18. Does your school do anything when girls bully other girls? If Yes, what happens?
19. Does this stop the bullying?  Yes  No
20. What do you think can help stop this problem of girls bullying other girls?

Thank you very much for thinking so carefully about this.
APPENDIX 2
Written Worksheet
Worksheet: about girls bullying other girls in this school.
This bullying is the kind of bullying where girls say and do things to stop other girls joining in games or being part of a group of friends. Some girls might whisper secrets to make a person feel bad, or they might laugh at them or say things about how they look. Sometimes girls get other girls to do these mean things by telling them they won't be their friend if they don't. These are just some of the things that can happen but you may know of others.

Write about a bad time when a girl or a group of girls were mean to you in this way.

You may want to write about a time you were mean in this way to another girl.

If this hasn't happened to you or you haven't been mean to someone else write about a time when you saw it happen to someone else.

How did it start?
If it happened to you (or you saw it) what did they do?
(If you are writing about something you did, write what you did)
What did they say? (If you are writing about something you did, write what you said.)

What did you think?
How did you feel?

What happened at the end?
If it happened to you did you ask for help? Yes  No (circle one)
If you answered YES, who did you ask and what happened?
If anything changed when you asked for help, were things better or worse? In what way?
If you have anything else you want to write about this problem or girls being mean to other girls write it here.

Do you think YOU can do something to stop other girls bullying girls?
Yes  Sometimes  No (circle one)
What kinds of things can you do?

Sometimes girls who have been bullied have also been mean in this way to other girls?
Is this true for you? Yes  Sometimes  No (circle one)

Thank you for thinking so hard about this.

APPENDIX 3
Interview Schedule: Students
Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Students
Focus Groups
Definition of Covert Intimidation: Sometimes girls say things or do things to stop other girls from joining into a group or an activity. Sometimes the things they say and do stop other girls being friends with each other or they leave some girls without friends. This means these girls feel sad and lonely. Often girls do and say these things so that only the girls involved see or hear. Adults often don't know that it is going on.

In this discussion I am hoping you can tell me about the kinds of things girls do when they are mean to girls in this way. I am interested to know what happens when they do this and why you think it happens. When you are talking about things that girls do it is important that we use X instead of saying people's names.

1. Do you think this behaviour is a problem?
   How big a problem is it for you?

2. What do you see girls do and what do you hear them say when they bully others in this way.
   - Can anyone tell me about the things they have seen or heard? What do girls do and what do they say?
   - Some girls hit and kick others – is this part of secret bullying?
   - Is this being mean to other girls mostly with friends or does it happen between girls who aren’t friends.

3. Without using girls names which girls do this kind of thing most often?
   - Is it the girls who the teachers think are good or is it the girls who get into trouble a bit from the teachers.
   - Is it one person by themselves or is it often more than one person?
   - Can it be a group idea?
   - Is the bully more often a popular person, an unpopular person, a naughty person or a bossy person or another type of person?

4. Without using girls names which girls are bullied like this most often? Girls who are:
   quiet different
   those who have no friends new girls
   those who argue a lot those who are quite naughty
   those who are bossy those who are popular

5. If you have been bullied by other girls in the way we have been discussing can anyone tell me:
   - What happened to you?
   - How did you feel when it was happening?
   - What did you think and say to yourself?
   - Did it change how you felt about school, your class, yourself?
   - Do you think it changed how you act now in the playground or in the classroom?
   - Have you ever tried to stop this mean behaviour?
   - What sort of things did you do? Did they work? What didn't work?
   - Does anyone want to talk about something they did to someone else?
- How can you tell the difference between a girl joking and playing about in a friendly way and in a mean way? What do you hear? What do you see?
- Can girls who have been bullied go on and bully others?

6. What should be done about girls hurting other girls in this way?
- What have you done when you've had this problem? Did you ask anyone for help?
- Did anyone do or say anything to stop this mean behaviour?
- What do you think should happen to girls who are mean to others?
- What should people do to help the person who is the victim of these behaviours?
- What happens when you stick up to the bully? What things do you say and do?

7. Why are girls mean to each other in this way?
- Have you any idea why some girls pick on other girls?
- Why do some girls get bullied and other girls don't?
- Do you think that this kind of bullying can be stopped? How? By whom?
- Do you have any ideas how to stop girls being mean to each other in this way?
- If we could have a perfect world how would you like things to be between girls and how would you like things to be for you?

APPENDIX 4
Interview Schedule: Teachers
Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Teachers
(Participants have the right to ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview)

Definition of Covert Intimidation: practices which aim towards socially isolating others through intentional exclusion from groups. It involves behaviours that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion. Often these practices are observable by the victim and by the victim’s and perpetrator’s peers, but can go unobserved by adults.

This interview seeks to gain insight into your perspectives of the phenomenon of covert intimidation among girls. I am particularly interested in your views as to why you think these practices occur and what you consider the consequences and implications to be.

1. Background questions
   - How long have you taught in this school?
   - What type of teaching position do you currently hold?
   - What particular interest areas and areas of responsibility do you hold within the school community?

2. Awareness and knowledge of covert intimidation amongst nine-year-old girls.
   - Do you think bullying of this kind occurs among nine-year-old girls?
   - What sort of behaviours have you seen?
   - What sort of behaviours have been reported to you?
   - Are there any particular characteristics of girls who bully other girls?
   - Do girls bully other girls as individuals or in groups?
   - What status do bullies of girls have amongst their peers?
   - Are there clear lines between bullies and victims or can bullies be victims and victims be bullies?
   - Are there any particular characteristics of girls who are victims of bullying by other girls?
   - Some girls said that some girls who are popular with the teachers are often the ones who bully. Have you observed this? How could you explain it?

3. Why does it happen?
   - Ideas and views as to why covert intimidation practices occur between girls.
   - What factors contribute to some girls bullying more than others, some being bullied more than others and some girls not being bullied by girls at all and some girls hardly being aware of bullying occurring?

4. Consequences and Implications
   - I want to read you a range of responses from the girls who have been bullied. Do you have any thoughts about the implications of these responses?
   - Observations of changes in the behaviour of girls who have been bullied by other girls. Are the changes immediate and short or medium term?
   - In what areas have the changes been observed? (For example confidence, attendance, learning performance, motivation, task avoidance, friendships).
   - Thoughts as to the long term implications of girls who experience covert intimidation practices and those who perpetrate the practices.

5. Teachers and school response to covert intimidation practices
   - Have you experienced girls reporting this behaviour to you?
   - If so have you taken any action?
   - What kinds of action have you taken?
   - Were those actions effective? In what way?
   - Does the school have procedures in place to deal with covert intimidation practices among girls?
   - If so what procedures are there?
   - Are they able to be easily accessed by the students, do you think?
   - Do you think that the girls think they can easily access them?
   - In what ways would you say these procedures are effective in addressing this behaviour?
   - Do you think girls feel safe at this school? If yes, why?
   - If no, what do you think needs to happen at this school to ensure their feelings of safety?
   - In your view do you think it is possible to educate and socialise girls to interact without engaging in covert intimidation practices?
   - Do you have any other comments you would like to add?
Getting Things to Stick:
Exploring the narratives of young New Zealanders who experience specific learning difficulties

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ABSTRACT
This narrative inquiry sought to explore the views of eight young New Zealanders, aged nine to 14 years, who had experienced specific difficulties with learning. Narrative research procedures were used to gather and interpret the stories the young participants told about their experiences. Findings revealed that young people become aware of their own learning difficulties and need to understand why they experience problems. The study also found that this understanding is developed in relationship to the information and support offered by knowledgeable adults, who understand that it is possible to be intellectually competent yet have trouble learning numeracy and literacy skills. Furthermore, it was found that by identifying themselves in roles in which they experience competency, young people express a more positive and holistic identity than that of being "learning disabled". Opportunities to achieve mastery in activities they enjoy doing enables young people to develop innate abilities, which underpin a positive sense of identity and well-being and are likely to provide a link to success in adult life.

INTRODUCTION
Specific learning difficulties in children who do not have intellectual impairment can present as a puzzling phenomenon. This study was undertaken to investigate the views of a small group of New Zealand children and adolescents who had experienced specific difficulties in learning literacy and numeracy skills. To understand learning experiences from young people’s perspective, it is useful to gather information directly from students themselves (Gollop, 2000; Nuthall, 2005). While children are often perceived as unreliable informants, studies which have directly sought young people’s views demonstrate that they make dependable participants and have something worthwhile to say (Bird, 2003; Curtin, 2000; Scratchley, 2004; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Similarly, in this study young people’s views were valued for their potential to offer adults fresh insight on issues related to specific learning difficulties.

COLLECTING THE NARRATIVES
The study was conducted as a narrative inquiry, an interpretivist methodology founded on the notion that people are innate storytellers who make sense of life events by forming them into personal stories (Atkinson, 2002). Narrative research procedures were used to gather personal narratives as a means of exploring the participants’ perspectives of the research issue. Children develop the art of storytelling early in life (Engel, 1999), and we anticipated that the young people would make able informants, with their narratives about experiencing learning difficulties providing a rich source of data.

In addition to being data, narrative researchers view participants’ stories as phenomena worthy of study in their own right. Narrative analysis examined the form (structure) as well as the content of stories told by participants. Attending to the narrative voice of the participants was a central part of the analytical process.

The broad question that guided the inquiry was, “What could be learned from the narratives of a small group of New Zealand children, in relation to their experiences of specific learning difficulties?” Addressing this question meant being open to hearing about activities participants felt they were good at doing, as well as any issues they might raise in relation to schoolwork. A secondary question asked whether understanding the unique perspectives of young people might generate new insights for adults.

The eight young participants recruited for the study attended either a state or a private school, at primary, intermediate or high school levels, and were all following a regular school curriculum irrespective of their learning difficulties.
Recruitment criteria excluded children and adolescents whose learning delays were associated with intellectual impairment. Also excluded were young people experiencing learning or developmental delays associated with sensory, physical and medical disabilities, or significant conduct disorders.

Young research participants have the same right to privacy and confidentiality as adult participants, but special ethical considerations applied. We were conscious of the power imbalance that inevitably exists between adult inquirers and young participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, 2000). Accordingly, participants were invited to complete a consent form, respecting their right to agree or decline to participate irrespective of the written consent already obtained from their parents. During interviews, which were conducted by the first author, care was taken to enact a friendship rather than an authoritative role.

Narrative interviewing procedures are usually unstructured, allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences using natural conversation and storytelling (Richmond, 2002). This approach proved to be particularly suited to the needs of the young participants, providing a relaxed, informal way to gather their views and opinions. The analytical process began by synthesising each interview transcript into a personal story. Respect for the viewpoint participants offered was shown by crafting stories from the interview transcripts based entirely on their words. Participants were invited to check their own story to ensure that it reflected what they wished to say. The plot of each whole story was further summarised in a core narrative, encapsulating each participant’s unique voice and message. The kinds of stories told by participants and the key narrative themes emerging were examined.

INTRODUCING THE STORYTELLERS

The young people participating in the study, aged 9 to 14 years are known by pseudonyms of their choosing. Alex (12), an intellectually gifted boy, initially found schoolwork easy and recalled being shocked at age ten to realise he was struggling to keep up with his peers. He chose to accentuate his talent as an artist. Amy (13) provided the first surprise of his love of art and was optimistic about his future, based on his talent as an artist. Initially found schoolwork easy, struggling with reading and spelling at a high school level, he was making friends and things were, “changing in [her] social world”. Sam had a strong personal sense of his many talents and an optimistic view of his own future as an engineer or a doctor.

Bob (11) reflected on his early failure in learning to read. By age seven, he experienced the embarrassment of finding he was the only one in the bottom reading group, even surpassed by a new immigrant student just beginning to learn English. Bob emphasised his motivation to succeed and related how, with his parents’ constant encouragement and remedial tutoring, reading had become his favourite activity.

Bowin (13) remembered starting school with great confidence and feeling accepted by his classmates, but from age six, his experience was marred by difficulties with spelling and maths, and bullying. He lost confidence and cast himself in the role of “rejected loner”. A turning point occurred at intermediate school when he discovered that he was talented in science, English and a wide range of extracurricular pursuits. Ella (14) enjoyed primary school, seeing herself as a capable student despite her spelling difficulties. However, at high school, her learning difficulties affected her achievement in academic subjects. Apart from enjoying PE and sport, Ella declared that she now, “hated school altogether”. In contrast Jodie, who had experienced significant learning difficulties ever since beginning school, emphasised that she enjoyed school. Nevertheless, Jodie (14) found studying for and not succeeding in exams disheartening, saying, “I like school, but some days are hard”.

Jordan (13) experienced learning difficulties, particularly with maths, but felt her biggest challenges at school were social. Her early school years were marred by social exclusion by other girls and not understanding why. She found, that as she became more confident in herself and her abilities, she was making friends and things were, “changing in [her] social world”. Sam (9), an intellectually gifted young boy, felt that without his learning difficulties he would be seen to be smarter. Despite his learning frustrations in the classroom, Sam had a strong personal sense of his many talents and an optimistic view of his own future as an engineer or a doctor.

Narrative analysis revealed that learning difficulties acted as a negative interruption in the progressive course of young participants’ life stories, with the potential to compromise their sense of identity and well-being. However, exploring the stories highlighted the individuality of their experiences. Despite their learning difficulties, some were hopeful, optimistic and upbeat, while others were angry, frustrated or disheartened. One example of contrasting views was that, despite facing significant learning challenges, Jodie enjoyed school while Ella, whose difficulties were described as mild, hated school. The insight we took from these contrasting perspectives is that, as adults, we need to be aware that a young person’s perception of how things are going for them in an educational setting may not relate to our assumptions about their degree of learning difficulty or learning potential.

NARRATIVE THEMES

While the focus of the study was aimed towards participants’ personal perspectives, we were open to the possibility of ‘universal themes emerging from individual narratives’ (Bruner, 1996, p. 137). During the analytical process, narrative themes were identified and collated into collective categories. Main narrative themes related to understanding self, being understood by others and being seen to be competent. Overall we found that there was an interdependent relationship between the children’s awareness of their own learning difficulties, and the awareness of their parents, teachers and remedial tutors.
**BECOMING AWARE**

All of the young people spoke of developing an inner awareness of their learning struggles, most as young children, independent of their difficulties being identified by adults. They also told of becoming aware of their learning problems while in primary school. Bowin remembered thinking as a six-year-old, 'something's a bit wrong here – I'm not really doing this well.'

Paired with their awareness of having difficulty was their lack of understanding why. Amy reflected that between years 1-3, ‘I didn't really know myself [why it was hard] but I felt that I couldn't do this, 'it's too hard'. I thought it was just like that … because I didn't know any different'. Not understanding the reason for their learning problems sometimes created stress, not just for the child concerned, but also those around them. Alex remembered being a nuisance in the classroom, ‘I think once I hit year 6 I sort of stayed with the learning capabilities that I did have … but I didn't learn any more, which is why I had a sudden shock of having a difficulty learning, as the rest of the class had moved on. I was having tremendous difficulties, which led to behavioural problems … because I couldn't concentrate I was annoying other children in the class. Because [of] things like … that I just couldn't work. In some cases I didn't know how to do it … so I'd sit there doing nothing … which means I would annoy someone else to try and get their attention.

Most participants indicated that it was their mothers who sought an explanation of their learning problems. This usually involved being evaluated by an educational psychologist, as Alex recalled, ‘I [went to see] this lady [psychologist] for behavioural problems … because I couldn't concentrate I was annoying other children in the class. Because [of] things like … that I just couldn't work. In some cases I didn't know how to do it … so I'd sit there doing nothing … which means I would annoy someone else to try and get their attention.

**UNDERSTANDING WHY**

Information and support offered by educational psychologists and remedial tutors (in one case an occupational therapist) played an important role in helping the children make sense of their learning struggles. For most participants this meant being given the label ‘dyslexic’. However, participants used the labels they had been given as a form of explanation for their learning struggles, particularly with their teachers and classmates. Jordan used the term ‘dyspraxia’ to explain to her teacher why she was struggling to grasp what was being taught: ‘I had to do it because he was saying 'Oh, why don’t you get this?' and things and I said: ‘Because I have dyspraxia’’. Alex did not mind being given a label.

Rather than just having the name “difficulty” I think it’s better to have a name for it [dyslexia] because “difficulty” could mean I actually have a difficulty in any area at all. And so it’s a learning difficulty with an actual name which gives people some idea what it actually is.

Likewise, Bob did not mind being labeled ‘dyslexic’, but made an important point about the difference in tolerability of certain labels saying, 'I don't like walking around like with a giant sign on my head saying 'I have learning disabilities'. I just like to be called normal'.

Understanding why they were struggling with their learning made a difference to most of the young participants. It enabled them to reframe their sense of themselves as learners.

**SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS**

As well as developing an understanding of their own difficulties, a core message in participants’ narratives was the importance that their learning difficulties were understood by others. Most of their stories indicated that class teachers who recognised their learning struggles for what they were, something other than exasperating behaviour, established a positive learning relationship with them. The positive support offered by such teachers was highly valued by young participants and they remembered with appreciation those teachers who encouraged their learning efforts. For example, after experiencing a difficult time in primary school, Bowin credited a supportive intermediate teacher with creating a positive turning point in his life.

My first year was really good [at intermediate school] … it was! I still had problems learning things, like words and spelling and stuff like that and maths, but I had a teacher who was really nice and she got me a long way.

At intermediate school, with the encouragement of an understanding teacher and a supportive reading mentor, Amy developed her literacy skills to become a functional reader. At high school, the English teacher’s willingness to make accommodations to class assignments made it possible for her to complete tasks.

We're doing a reading thing at the moment. We have to read books but I've actually got just like a book of short stories that I'm doing because I find it easier to read short stories and write a bit about those short stories.

It was not surprising to find that participants perceived supportive teachers to be helpful. Positive learning relationships enabled them to move forward in their learning. Conversely, when teachers did not understand their learning struggles, young people reflected that this added to their stress and made things more difficult because they were unsure how to meet these teachers’ expectations.

Ella’s anecdote illustrated why it would have been helpful to have her teacher understand how her mild dyslexia affected her ability to perform certain classroom tasks.

It's hard to write like essays and stuff and write out questions especially like now at high school. Our [social studies] teacher dictates a lot to us and when she dictates I can't spell any of the words ‘cos they're like real hard words – then I get left behind … it does make it harder. I've actually got to think when the teacher's dictating – I've got to actually think about what I'm doing – and then I get tired and then it gets hard – and nobody else can read my work. Like when I try to spell a word I'll spell it wrong, but I'll be able to read it and only I will be able to read it.
Spelling was not an automatic skill for Ella – she needed to think consciously about how to spell the words at the same time as trying to listen to the teacher and write down what was being dictated. What was a standard classroom activity from the teacher’s perspective, from Ella’s was one that required considerable cognitive focus and effort. She was all too aware she was unable to meet the standard of performance required.

All of the participants offered narratives that clearly described how their learning difficulties played out in the classroom. Understanding students’ individual difficulties makes it possible to work out strategies to manage them. For instance, most of the participants said they used the spell check on their home computer for homework assignments, but only Alex used a laptop in class.

**TUTORS WHO UNDERSTAND**

One of the challenges associated with identifying children’s specific learning difficulties is that they are generally more different in their learning characteristics than they are alike (Levine, 2002). Young people in the study described having trouble in different areas of their learning to different degrees. Four of the participants were competent readers, four were not, but one struggled with spelling, three mentioned issues with handwriting and four had difficulty with mathematics. Most found concentrating in class tricky, particularly when it was noisy. Three spoke about their behavioural issues, such as being a distracting influence in class. One characteristic all eight participants referred to was difficulty with memorisation. Most spoke of their strategies for trying to get information to stick but found that hard work and perseverance did not necessarily make a difference. Bowin explained:

> I find the hardest thing is recalling. What I’ll do is – I’ll get to maths and we’ll do the day’s work, no problem, remember it – next period ‘straight out the door’ – it’s gone! I can’t even remember it. And so what I have to do is - do it and do it – but the thing is, it doesn’t matter even if I do it for five minutes or do it for a whole hour – it still goes away as soon as I get home and try and do it the next morning.

The young people suggested that those who have not experienced the frustration of trying to remember previously learned information cannot understand what it is like. They found that one of the most helpful aspects of remedial tutoring was that tutors understood their learning difficulties and were able to offer different learning strategies from those taught at school. In Bob’s opinion, it was useful that his remedial tutor had experienced dyslexia herself, because she understood what kind of learning approach was needed.

> You have to have a [remedial] teacher that has actually studied spelling problems to be able to learn better spelling. [Teachers at school] give you spelling words and they’ll just say, “well repeat these, sound them out and tomorrow you’ll know them”. Then maybe tomorrow you will know them, and then the next day you’ll go, “what were my spelling words?” and you won’t even be able to remember what your spelling words were. So you’ve got to have something that really sticks.

Nine-year-old Sam felt that remedial tutoring had helped improve his spelling but he also highlighted the importance of tutoring to develop his learning ability in mathematics. While Sam did not feel he performed so well in maths at school where he found it hard to concentrate, he reported having exceptional ability when working one-to-one with an understanding tutor: “I’ve basically just done year 9, year 10 and year 11 but I’ve done a tiny bit of year 12”. (His work books demonstrated this was so.)

**FRIENDS WHO UNDERSTAND**

As well as being understood and supported by knowledgeable adults, being understood or accepted by classmates was another prominent theme in most stories. This highlighted the dialectical relationship between the participants’ sense of self and peer acceptance. Bowin and Jordan spoke of feeling different from their peers and their sense of difference was reflected back to them in uneasy relationships with their classmates. They perceived that when their peers did not understand their struggles with learning or with social skills, this led to teasing, bullying and even social exclusion. Bowin offered a powerful analogy, which showed the impact that being called dumb “thousands and thousands of times” had on his sense of psychological well-being.

> And I see it like fighting in a ring with someone. You start off and they start insulting you and it’s like being kicked … it doesn’t hurt that much – the more they do it the more it starts to hurt and hurt and hurt until finally you fall down or collapse – but the thing is if you can pull up. If you can just find that strength … to just keep going you develop an immunity to it.

Others mentioned that anti-bullying programmes in their schools made a difference but being called “dumb” was a common experience, even by friends. Ella was mainly teased by her friends and therefore chose not take it too seriously.

> I get called ‘dumb’ all the time … when I do stupid things like fall over and hurt myself [shows bruise on arm] and when I ask someone, “how do you spell” something and they say, “oh, you’re so dumb”. I don’t really mind that much.

Ella wisely reflected that the taunt “you’re so dumb” was used because “they don’t really know what dyslexia is, and they just think that it means you’re dumb”.

Amy, on the other hand, enjoyed significant social status among her peer group and was neither teased nor bullied. In fact she commented that people rarely believed she had learning difficulties when she told them. Jordan and Bowin mused that as their own concept of themselves began changing for the better, they experienced increased social acceptance by their peers.
A CULTURE OF UNDERSTANDING

Many of the stories indicated that a school culture of acceptance and understanding made a difference as to whether young people felt it was safe to be seen to have learning difficulties. Alex reported that his previous school “did not believe in dyslexia”, and he felt a student he knew with similar learning difficulties was treated unfairly. In his current school, he found that it was “no big deal” to be known to be dyslexic.

People that I wouldn’t suspect to be [are] supportive. There’s this girl I know, and we’re sort of friends, but I told her I was dyslexic and she goes, “oh really, I am as well” and so everyone’s actually really open about being dyslexic … and it’s all not like a private thing that you don’t want to tell anyone about.

Being accepted by their peer group confirmed that they were essentially, as Sam succinctly put it, “average old kids”. Similarly, in their narratives about activities at which they excelled, young people expressed a positive sense of self.

BEING SEEN TO BE COMPETENT

A key insight that emerged from young people’s narratives about the activities they were good at doing was that it was important to them to be seen to be competent. Amy linked her sense of competence to leadership and advocacy roles in the scouting movement and her local community. Alex enjoyed outdoor activities but linked his sense of competency to his talent as an artist. Ella and Jodie described themselves as competent young sportswomen. Bowin combined his love of the outdoors and adventure with his skill in martial arts, to characterise himself as an action man. Sam saw himself as good at many things across a broad spectrum of academic, physical, artistic and creative activities. Jordan was good at creative writing, and Bob was proud of his ability to read lengthy science fiction books. By placing themselves in occupational roles in which they were successful, these eight young people were able to express a more positive sense of identity, than that of being “learning disabled”.

DISCUSSION

Without talking with young people directly, in an informal and non-judgmental manner, it is difficult to ascertain how learning difficulties play out in their everyday lives, especially at school. We found, as anticipated, that when young people were invited to discuss their learning experiences from their own perspective, they offered detailed information about their individual learning difficulties as well as their particular strengths. Knowing that children make competent informants, adults need to ensure that they include young people’s self-knowledge in processes designed to evaluate or address their learning needs.

We had not anticipated that “understanding and being understood” would emerge as such a dominant theme in the study. Finding that young people need to understand, and have others understand their learning difficulty suggests (notwithstanding the importance of funding support services) that increasing universal understanding and awareness of specific learning difficulties would make a difference in children’s and adolescents’ lives.

Our finding that a primary issue for most participants was having their learning difficulties understood, highlighted the importance of supportive learning relationships with their teachers. Teachers already engaged in the business of supporting students with specific learning needs can be assured that their efforts are highly valued.

Conversely, most of the young people told of negative experiences with teachers who did not understand their difficulties. This suggests that there are some teachers who do not understand the particular issues faced by students with specific learning difficulties. Participants were aware of their learning difficulties during primary school, reinforcing the importance of all primary school teachers understanding the characteristics of specific learning difficulties, and consequently the struggle some children face in learning certain skills. It is the responsibility of teacher education providers to ensure that student teachers develop this understanding.

There are ideological debates in New Zealand education circles about the categorisation of specific learning difficulties: this was touched on by some participants. From the young participants’ perspective however a culture of understanding in schools was more conducive towards their learning needs being identified and supported, rather than the label used. Participants in this study did not mind being given a diagnostic label, because it enabled them to refute accusations of being “dumb” but, as adults we need to be sensitive to impact of the terms we use.

The insight gained about the importance to young people of being seen to be competent in areas where they have special ability supports the findings of other studies. This suggests building competency in skills and roles beyond the classroom can help to build self-esteem and resilience in young people who have trouble with academic learning (Gilligan, 2000; Passmore, 2003). Adults would be advised to ensure that time and resources invested in addressing learning weaknesses is balanced by opportunities for young people to develop their talents. As seen in studies with adults, talents and abilities are likely to provide a bridge to a successful life in adulthood (Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003).

The focus of this study was concerned with the perspectives of young people whose learning difficulties had been formally identified and who were receiving varying degrees of educational support. It could be usefully extended to include learners who, unlike the participants in the present study, do not receive any support. Similarly, the views expressed in this study were offered by a small group of young people drawn from similar socio-cultural backgrounds. It would be useful to investigate this issue from the viewpoint of other young New Zealanders. There are many stories, from other perspectives, yet to be told.
CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate young New Zealanders’ perspectives of their difficulties with learning. We found that it was important to participants to understand their own learning issues, as well as to have these understood by others. While participants experienced difficulties as students which compromised their sense of self, their experiences of being competent in other areas of their lives linked to a more positive sense of identity. Without negating the importance of funding issues related to provision of special education support, we found that what makes a difference for young people is developing an understanding of their own learning experiences, having other people (parents, teachers, peers) understand and support them appropriately, and having the opportunity to develop mastery in activities that they are good at doing and enjoy.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR PROFILES

Sheryn Marshall has previously worked as an occupational therapist, specialising in pediatrics, with a special interest in children with specific learning and coordination difficulties. She graduated with a Master of Health Science (Hons) from Auckland University of Technology, March, 2006, and is currently interested in continuing to explore and write about occupational narratives offered from other perspectives.

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A Case against the Categorisation of Children and Youth

Part 1: Theoretical perspectives

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ABSTRACT
This is the first of two articles that provide a critique of categorisation and of the biomedical interpretation of personal adjustment issues experienced by children and youth. In this paper the appraisal is made by the devising of an imaginary mental illness, through the presentation of some important theoretical frameworks, by considering contributions from contemporary developmental psychology, and through a brief linguistic, historical and policy analysis. These viewpoints are severely critical, both individually and collectively, of categorisation and the medical model. The critique is further strengthened by a professional practice perspective that will be published in Kairaranga in September.

Position paper
KEYWORDS
Clinical diagnosis, adjustment disorders, diagnostic and statistical manual, psychological assessment, mental disorders.

INVENTING ACADEMIC DEFICIENCY DISORDER
It is remarkably easy to invent a mental illness or special education category. You start with an idealised state of personal well-being and then you catalogue the various ways that real people deviate from this fictional standard. My invention of academic deficiency disorder (see Table 1) is referenced to the perfect university student: a paragon of tireless efficiency without a shred of self-doubt. Once a list of personal attributes and dimensions is assembled it should be given a medical-sounding name (and acronym), and preferably one that includes a value-laden term such as disorder, disturbance, dysfunction or deficit. The job is then just about done, and academic deficiency disorder might find a place in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), which is the standard catalogue of mental illnesses and conditions, and which has been described as ‘the most powerful book in psychiatry and clinical psychology’ (Maddux, 2002, p. 15).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A At least six of the following symptoms of deficiency have persisted for at least six months to a degree that is maladaptive and inconsistent with developmental level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Often rushes work as assignment deadlines approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Often thinks that other people in tutorial groups have more intelligent things to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Often feels tired when confronted with major academic tasks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Often finds other activities more attractive than academic work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Often anxious that they will be “found out” as not capable of university study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Often experiences some disappointment with how assignments turn out or are graded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Often feels a little depressed and anxious as a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Often worries about the costs associated with academic study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Often concerned about the future and whether the study will lead to employment.</td>
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The ease with which categories can be created is only rivalled by the enthusiasm with which people ascribe complaints and diagnoses to themselves and others. When I was in practice as a psychologist, a book was published on hyperactivity in children and I remember a number of parents declaring that the author was talking to them directly and personally, “He’s summed up Jason to a ‘T.’” In effect, the text provided a definition of childhood and the application of a label did little more, or less, than individualise, and pathologise, a universal experience. It seems that many people have a negative confirmatory bias, where they search their present circumstances and pasts for evidence to support a diagnosis, or other pejorative judgment, while simultaneously discounting signs of competence and success (Seligman, 2002).
Categorisation is a human thing to do, and even among those who rally against it there will be those who use the terms ‘at-risk’ and ‘resilient’, and who refer to a child on the Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme as an ‘ORRS’ child. Very few of the psychiatric and special education labels that are applied to children and youth are statements of fact in the sense that conclusive biological dysfunctions have been identified for them (Albee, 1999; Jensen & Hoagwood, 1997; Thakker & Ward, 1998). There are important exceptions, such as the intellectual difficulties associated with phenylketonuria (PKU) that have clear genetic causation (Santrock, 2000). Obviously, both physical constitution and dispositional factors and environmental events contribute to behaviour. What is being objected to here are attempts to portray common children’s issues as largely or exclusively caused by physical factors. A further instance of this sort of practice is when some changes in brain structure are cited as the origin of personal problems, such as the larger ventricles in the brains of people with schizophrenia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, a variety of experiences can impact on brain structure (including becoming a London taxi driver, apparently) and, according to Bentall (2004a), whether the changes are seen as pathological is a matter of selective judgment.

Francis, First and Pincus (2000), who are among the principal proponents of DSM-IV, acknowledge that this diagnostic system is inherently limited because it simply provides lists of signs and symptoms and, to use their own words, ‘it is not based on a deep understanding of mental disorders because in most cases we lack that understanding’ (p. 6). Francis et al. (2000) also assert that in the future the exact nature and causes of psychiatric disorders will be revealed through ‘the powerful tools of neuroscience and clinical research’ (p. 7). Sameroff (2000) responds to this conclusion by saying that it can be interpreted in two ways: first as a statement of fact and second as an expression of a biological belief system. Interestingly, recent advances in basic research are showing that some specific biological problems could be reflected in a number of psychosocial difficulties (Singh, 2001). In other words, the technological findings appear to be contradicting, rather than supporting, current categorisations.

SOME THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The foregoing analysis leads to a central criticism of DSM-IV; that it is actually a misappropriation of a physical medical model to psychological problems. This theme is strongly echoed in the critiques of the DSM-IV as pseudoscience (Doucette, 2002; Houts, 2002), by postmodern perspectives on the nature of reality and knowledge (Danforth, 2002; Maddux, 2002), and through political commentary (Szasz, 1974; Schaler, 2004). The charge that DSM-IV is essentially unscientific has two related components. Firstly, this system of classification is atheoretical, or in layperson terms, it is unclear what it’s on about but it provides a presumption that personal problems are illnesses and people with these problems are sick. True science is concerned with, and about, theory development. The second point is that an integrated theoretical position (as we have with evolutionary theory) minimises the number of categories in a taxonomic system rather than continually expanding them. Over the past 40 years there has been a 300 percent increase in the number of the diagnoses available across DSMs I to IV (Houts, 2002). Little wonder then that authorities like Bentall (2004b) have concluded that psychiatric categories are no more scientific than the pastime of astrology.

We regularly encounter poor scientific thinking in the community. Common examples include the confusion of foods with drugs (“Sugar is rocket fuel for my son”) and the attribution of special properties to pharmaceuticals (“Ritalin taught Toby to read”). More significant perhaps are the mistaken perceptions of the power of genetics. Genes are seen as far more than scripts for proteins (Santrock, 2006). Everyday parlance can suggest that they contain finished behavioural performances that are just waiting to be displayed and confirm our deepest suspicions, hopes and fears. This view of the gene has substantial historical precedent in preformationism, a thesis that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which proposed that perfectly-formed human shapes existed in sperm or in the ovaries (Pinto-Correia, 1997). The observation that needs to be made here is that while misunderstandings about drugs and genes may flourish in the community, it can come as some surprise to find unscientific thinking in the work systems of many psychologists and psychiatrists.

Postmodernism offers a more strident critique of DSM-IV and the medical approach since it questions the very validity of having scientific aspirations and the search for objective truth (Danforth, 2002; Maddux, 2002). The idea that there are real mental illnesses, and that they are part of the nature of things, is depicted as a discovery narrative. Such an account might be set alongside a social invention narrative, where truth is seen in terms of what people find useful (Houts, 2002). A classic example of the social invention narrative in operation was the decision in 1973 by the American Psychiatric Association to delete homosexuality as a disorder. Same-sex attraction ceased to be an illness because psychiatrists voted for its removal (Bayer, 1981); although, as it happens, everything in the DSMs is there by consensus. Houts (2002) contends that there are at least three parties to any diagnosis – the patient, society and professionals – and all of them can perceive benefits in it. The patient can obtain an explanation for their troubling behaviour, they may receive services and they are entitled to the sick role. Society and others such as relatives, and pharmaceutical manufacturers, gain when a “disturbed” person is either changed or removed, and for the practitioners there is order in what they do, as well as the more obvious prestige and monetary consequences.

Any analysis of the benefits or functions of diagnosis, as is promoted by a social invention analysis, also allows for the systematic study of costs or detractions, and the personal disadvantages that can be associated with labelling are legion (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Goffman, 1963). For parents there can be significant, if temporary, relief by obtaining a diagnosis for their child but the long-term implications for the young person themselves may include social marginalisation and rejection, and diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy. In a discussion of the concept of recovery from psychiatric disability, Carpenter (2002) comments
that the process is as much about coping with the negative reactions of others as it is about dealing with the disability itself. Carpenter also contends that the medical model contains a presumption of chronicity, or long-term engagement with psychiatric ailments, despite the contrary evidence of numerous longitudinal studies.

Szasz’s (Szasz, 1974; Schaler, 2004) political critique of the application of a medical model to what he describes as problems of living is based on a deceptively simple semantic distinction. Mental illness is a myth because a mind cannot be sick. Any complaint that is ascribed to the mind is by way of a metaphor and so the search for mental illnesses is illogical, as is the pursuit of mental health as a goal. According to this view, psychiatric categorisation is a highly suspect practice and it is here that Szasz makes a second important distinction. Diagnosis is not so much concerned with the description of disability as it is about the prescription of how people should live. The meaning is in the intent and the medically-masked process of categorisation conveys a defective personal identity, which then allows for other paternalistic, coercive and abusive responses. Like the introductory chapters of DSM-IV, which they oversaw, Francis, First and Pincus (2000) possess an especially disarming and inclusive writing style and they state that the 5cm thick Manual should not be ‘taken as literally as some fundamentalists take the Bible’ (p. 6). Szasz also sees relevance in religious parallels and he says that ‘it is a social fact that the idea of mental illness as a real illness is even more firmly rooted in the modern American mind than is the idea of God’ (Schaler, 2004, p. 385). Arguably, the situation in this country is little different.

THE RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVE ON DEVELOPMENT

Over the last thirty years there has been a transformation in how child and adolescent problems are conceptualised (Masten & Powell, 2003) and this has contributed enormously to our appreciation of why some young people develop problems and others do not. Doll and Lyon (1998) provide a summary of some of the relevant concepts from research and theorising about resilience, which also apply in other disciplines such as developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995), and these are context, time, interaction, mechanisms and politics. The child is seen as inseparable from the situations, such as family and school, in which they live. It is understood that people travel along pathways over time and an assortment of risk and protective factors can affect their competence and ability to cope. As well, these risk and protective factors are thought of as dynamic forces that interact with each other. Another point, concerning mechanisms, is that there are processes in operation that move the young person more towards either positive or negative adjustment or outcomes. Lastly, the authors assert that an understanding of problem behaviour provides guidance for actions and interventions and demonstrating this is a political act.

I would like to elaborate a little more on two important notions from the new conceptualisation. The first of these concerns dose effects, or asset/liability gradients, which in the positive sense simply means that the more good things there are in children’s lives the more likely they will be able to respond to age-related tasks and demands. The child’s physical health and well-being is clearly a critical component here and it operates in an interactive way with the other dimensions and contexts of functioning. Recent research commentaries (such as, Luthar & Zelazo, 2003) are strongly affirming that a caring parent figure is foremost amongst beneficial environmental influences. According to Masten (2001), competent care giving is ‘ordinary magic’ because it is a common human system that is also very special. Risk factors hurt children by damaging basic adaptational processes especially care giving, and for this reason alone it is more accurate to talk of emotional “injuries” rather than mental illnesses.

A second seminal concept concerns the nature of child and environment relations. According to the new view, children and the significant adults in their lives modify each other’s behaviour to better and ill effects through innumerable daily exchanges (Sameroff, 1995). The Oregon Social Learning Centre Model of parent/child interactions (Reid, Patterson, & Synder, 2002; www.oslc.org), exemplifies such a pattern of microsocial processes and events. This transactional interpretation contrasts with approaches that either solely or largely attribute behaviour to factors in the child or to qualities in the young person’s social settings (Stanley, 2003). It is much less deterministic as it entails an understanding of children as an active organisers of experience, participating in their own development (Campbell, 1990).

It is likely that how we now think about children, development and context has left the medical model behind. Risk approaches, and DSM-IV is an elaborate compilation of risk factors, appear simplistic and one-dimensional. However, it is a fact that unfettered risk approaches are also much more straight-forward and they are much easier to understand. Contemporary perspectives on development, by comparison, are highly complex and they offer no certainties. In the place of clear and confirmatory diagnoses we are offered hypotheses about “probabilistic interchanges” and the suggestion that very challenging behaviour is a variant of regular responding. The choice is between easy answers, where one thing (biology) is seen as invariably causing another (behaviour), and explanations that correspond much more closely to the diversity and dynamism of daily experience. It is not always appreciated that this is a real choice, as these represent different levels of understanding, and that it is not intellectually tenable to have what some may see as a balanced viewpoint and to accommodate both the medical model and contemporary developmental considerations.
LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND POLICY

I have some interest in psychology and counselling as language forms and the vernacular of special education is a study in its own right. Some of the features of the genre are a multiplicity of terms, a love of acronyms and an incessant contemporary striving for innocuous names. Normalisation produced pressure for the use of politically correct language when referring to minority or marginalised groups (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003). It resulted in person-first language and such labels as mentally challenged, physically challenged, and differently abled (Beard & Cerf, 1994), and sometimes it may mean victimisation for those whose language is ‘a month or so out of date’ (Hall, 1997, p. xi). It is possible that the quest for nonstigmatising terms is a hopeless one and that every new generation of labels becomes pejorative with the passage of time. Today we shudder at ‘idiot’ and cringe at ‘mentally defective’, and already we are uncomfortable with ‘slow learner’ and unsure about ‘ORRS’. This mission has a second irony; some of the traditional terms such as crippled and handicapped are better at attracting charitable contributions (Neilson, 2005). Proponents of categorisation can contend that the practice aids communication and facilitates understanding (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) but a contrasting argument is provided by Zigler and Hodapp (1986). They comment that the innumerable categorisations that presently exist are ‘a veritable Tower of Babel’ (p. 54), that gets in the way when professionals talk to potential funders and the public. These authors also cite Maslow (1948), who said that when people have a name for something they think they comprehend it and they do not continue to give it due attention.

In education, as in life, there is a simple equation: categorisation equals separation (Ashman & Elkins, 2002), and this has been repeatedly shown in history. Taylor (2002) cites this country’s first piece of exclusionary legislation, the 1873 Act to Prevent the Introduction of Imbecile Persons into the Colony of New Zealand. Specifically, the Act sought to prohibit the immigration of people ‘being either lunatic, idiotic, deaf, dumb, blind, or infirm’ (p. 29), who might draw on public funds in the five years after arriving. In many countries in the early decades of the last century, genetic explanations of individual differences had a special prominence. Connections were seen between intellectual disability and mental illness, poverty, and criminality, and a perception of the feeble-minded as a parasitic and predatory class was not unusual (Zigler & Hodapp, 1986). The eugenics movement and the rise of the residential institution were closely related to biological views of behaviour and present day advocates of categorisation and segregated placements should probably be mindful of this history and of the other extensions of locating cause in the person such as highly dubious chemical and physical “treatments” (Breggin, 1991), and even euthanasia for people with disabilities (Read & Masson, 2004). Of course, how society treats people who are different inevitably reflects an assortment of changeable social, political and economic motives, as well as current best practices, and others may need to take cognisance that this also applies to normalisation and inclusion.

The wielding of authority over vulnerable people, including children and youth, is challenged by a raft of interrelated philosophical, professional and policy initiatives in New Zealand. These include developments in the diversity movement, the rise of strengths-based practices in the social services, the acceptance of new conceptions of client and practitioner relations, and the publication of government policy guidelines that embrace all of the foregoing emphases. Cultural groups and people with disabilities are alike in their resistance to dominating discourses, demands for emancipation and autonomy, and explicit rejection of deficit models (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; O’Brien & Ryba, 2005; Sullivan, 1991). Strengths-based approaches celebrate what clients can do, rather than being preoccupied with personal liabilities, and dismiss labels associated with pathology (Glicken, 2004; www.jamesfamily.org.nz). Client and practitioner relations characterised by consultation and collaboration, and family-based work in particular, are receiving increasing emphasis, and in this context categorisation is also seen as an impediment (Fraser, 2005; Stanley & Stanley, 2005; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). New Zealand’s Agenda for Children: Making life better for children (Ministry of Social Development, 2002) is for all parties who develop policies and provide services for children and it promotes an inclusive, whole-child approach and evidence-based, preventive programmes. Similarly, Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa: Action for child and youth development (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002), which applies to those aged from 12 to 24 years, advocates an ecological, risk and protective factors approach that acknowledges diversity and avoids ‘defining the young person as “the problem”’ (p. 20).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we might consider another, and a more personal, perspective that is provided by Van der Klift and Kunc (1994), and that has relevance to the complex question of categorisation. These authors describe the “helper-helpee” relationship as inherently unequal and loaded with demeaning messages. When we offer help, our capacity, worth and superiority is affirmed. By contrast, when we are the recipients of assistance we inevitably feel deficient, inferior, a burden and obligated. The problem with categorisation is that it cements in place these unproductive properties that can pertain to professional relationships. Rather than responding to our young clients in authentic and respectful ways, ‘our perceptions are based on stereotypical myths’ that obscure ‘the complexity and individuality we take for granted in ourselves’ (Van der Klift & Kunc, 1994, p. 399).
REFERENCES


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The Specialist Service Standards

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ABSTRACT
The Ministry of Education (MOE) funds a range of specialist education services for children and young people with special education needs. To ensure consistent quality service provision, generic Specialist Service Standards have been developed through a collaborative process involving representatives from the broad range of special education stakeholders. The standards are built around the GSE Service Pathway and reflect the valued practices identified in the collaborative process.

The purpose of this article is to share with the wider education community information about the Specialist Service Standards and what they will mean for specialist service provision.

Practice paper
KEYWORDS:
Professional standards, professional practice, collaborative consultation, service quality.

BACKGROUND
The MOE mission is to raise achievement and reduce disparity. In support of this, the MOE funds a range of specialist education services for children and young people with special education needs. These services are provided through a number of Specialist Service Providers, including GSE and other school sector and early intervention providers.

Until now the Specialist Service Providers, and the specialists they employ, have worked to differing sets of standards. This multiplicity of standards contributed to a lack of consistency in service provision.

In some instances specialists were required to work to different standards depending on the specific service being provided and the sector it was being provided in. For example, GSE specialists worked to different standards depending on whether they were providing early intervention, behaviour or communication services. GSE communication specialists also worked to different standards depending on whether they were providing the service in early intervention or the school sector. The absence of a generic set of standards complicated service provision both for the specialists providing the services and for those responsible for monitoring them.

The purpose of the Specialist Service Standards project was to develop generic, quality service standards that would apply to all MOE funded specialist services. The intended outcome was that children and young people receiving specialist education services would have the benefit of consistent quality service regardless of location and/or provider.

Part of the task was to develop recommended monitoring processes that would apply across all providers and services, enabling improved monitoring of consistency and quality. The aim of a monitoring system was both to provide better accountability for public expenditure and to inform ongoing service improvement.

Project planning took into account that a generic set of Specialist Service Standards might not be adequate to cover the quality measures required for all of the specific services funded by the MOE, for example GSE already had service specific behaviour standards. Where additional service specific standards were identified, those standards were to form a sub set of the generic standards as shown in Figure 1.

Apart from the GSE Behaviour Standards, no specific standards have been developed. Should any be identified at a future date, the planned review process will enable them to be added to the Specialist Service Standards document.

Figure 1. The relationship between the generic specialist service standards and the service specific standards.

‘GENERIC’ SPECIALIST SERVICE STANDARDS

Additional service specific standards – for example
Communication

Additional service specific standards – for example
Early Intervention

Additional service specific standards – Behaviour

1 School sector Specialist Service Providers have previously been known as Fundholder Schools and as Special Education Service Providers.

2 Early Intervention Specialist Service Providers have previously been known as Accredited Service Providers – Early Intervention.

3 Specialists employed to provide specialist education services include: speech-language therapists, early intervention teachers, psychologists, special education advisors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, advisers on deaf children, conductive education conductors, sign interpreters, orientation and mobility specialists, behaviour support specialists, registered music therapists, Māori advisors, and Pasifika advisors.
THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Specialist Service Standards were developed through a collaborative process involving representatives from the broad range of special education stakeholders.

All stakeholders were invited to nominate people for the project. While not all nominations were able to be accepted, care was taken to ensure a balanced representation across the various stakeholders groups including parents, parent and disability advocacy and support groups, specialist providers, and specialist disciplines. Where gaps in representation were identified, steps were taken to recruit appropriate representatives, or to provide an alternative forum for contribution.

The only stipulation made by the MOE prior to the project beginning was that the standards be built around the GSE Service Pathway. The Service Pathway identifies steps in the specialist services for children and young people. The steps are those of access, engagement, assessment, analysis, programme planning, implementation, review, closure and follow-up and reflection.

There are two types of Specialist Service Standards.

1. **Professional Practice Standards.** These describe the components of quality practice and are the standards that all specialists will work to.

2. **Management and Organisational Standards.** These comprise the policies and procedures management need to have in place to support the Professional Practice Standards.

![Figure 2. Specialist Service Standards](image)

Development of the Specialist Service Standards was undertaken in two phases. Phase I, from February to June 2005, developed the Professional Practice Standards. Phase II, from July to December 2005, developed the Management and Organisational Standards. Phase II also undertook the task of developing recommendations for a monitoring and review process and a recommended implementation plan.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

A small project team which included a manager from an Early Intervention Service (Ei), a special school principal, a GSE District Manager, a GSE Practice Advisor – Māori and the project co-leaders who were both GSE staff members, planned and managed each phase of the project under the oversight of an advisory group. The role of the advisory group was to oversee the development process and the project outcomes.

Regional focus groups developed the Professional Practice Standards supported by members of the project team. The use of focus groups allowed the project to tap into the rich diversity of knowledge, experience, skills and perspectives of special education stakeholders. Focus groups were made up of parents, specialists, management, Māori, parent advocacy group representatives, disability group representatives, principals, teachers and teacher aides.

The project team collated the standards identified by each of the focus groups. The collated standards were then fed back to the focus group members as draft Professional Practice Standards. Focus group members consulted with their various communities of interest. The feedback from these consultations was used to inform the final draft of the Professional Practice Standards. The consultation process is shown in Figure 3.

During the focus group meetings it became evident that parents and people from the different Pacific Island groups were under represented in the collaborative process. To address this issue, two parent-only focus groups and a meeting for people from Pacific Islands was organised.

The project team also invited feedback on the draft Professional Practice Standards from a range of educators in mainstream schools including principals, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), teachers, specialist teachers and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB). In addition, a small sample of students was surveyed to find out what they valued in specialist services.

![Figure 3. The consultation process for the Specialist Service Standards](image)

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4 See National Service Description, A National Service description for Special Education Services (Ministry of Education, Special Education, 2005) for more details about the Service Pathway.
Focus group members value services that:

- are child and family-centred, inclusive, strength-based and ecological
- recognise parents, families and whānau expertise and knowledge about their children and young people
- are culturally appropriate
- are evidence based, collaborative and empowering
- value all children and young people and provide them with opportunities to participate in society and access the curriculum.

Focus group members value specialists who are:

- open, honest, trustworthy, respectful and responsive
- sensitive, empathic, respectful and responsive
- reflective and accountable
- able to communicate well and share their knowledge with all participants.

Focus group members value learning environments that:

- are socially, emotionally and intellectually stimulating
- have high expectations of children and young people
- provide for choices
- welcome and accept children.

The standards developed for each step of the GSE Service Pathway reflect these valued, quality practices. The standards emphasise:

- the availability and sharing of relevant, up-to-date information in a culturally appropriate format
- clear referral criteria
- coordinated services
- a collaborative team approach in which families and whānau are empowered and have an important role
- ongoing, systematic assessment that provides a range of data to inform decision making
- current, documented individual programme plans which contain meaningful outcomes, promote achievement, and are implemented in the context of daily activities and regularly monitored
- closure processes that are positive for children and young people and their families and whānau
- carefully planned transitions
- the noting and celebration of successes
- the use of feedback and reflection to inform ongoing practice.

In developing the standards, attention was also given to the New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference (2001), the relevant codes of ethics and the requirements of the Health Practitioners Competency Assurance Act (2003) to ensure that the standards aligned with all relevant requirements. Some practitioners brought copies of such documents to meetings and referred to them during the development process. A brief literature search was also undertaken. Findings from the literature review were used to guide both the development of the standards and the implementation planning. Māori input was sought at all stages of the project to ensure the standards reflected the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and were appropriate to the culture and aspirations of tangata whenua.

Although value based, the development of the standards had clear links to the GSE model of evidence based practice that links the knowledge, experiences and skills of the family and whānau, the specialist practitioner, and the research literature.

Phase II of the project followed a similar process to Phase I. Focus groups developed draft Management and Organisational Standards. These were collated and used for consultation with the broader communities of interest. Feedback was used to develop the final draft of the Management and Organisational Standards.

The main differences in Phase II were the use of three rather than four regional focus groups, and a focus on management representation to reflect the task of developing Management and Organisational Standards.

The draft Specialist Service Standards have been peer reviewed by a variety of people with expertise in the field of special education. Feedback from those reviews indicates that the collaborative approach to developing the Specialist Service Standards has been successful from both process and outcome perspectives.

**WHAT WILL THE STANDARDS MEAN FOR SPECIALIST SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE PEOPLE THEY PROVIDE SERVICES TO?**

All Specialist Service Providers, and the specialists they employ, will work to common, generic Specialist Service Standards5. The Specialist Service Standard will be monitored internally and externally. The monitoring will have a formative focus with the goal of ongoing quality improvement.

For recipients of specialist services, the Specialist Service Standards will mean more consistent service provision. Given that the standards have been built on quality criteria valued by families, whānau and educators, service provided under the Specialist Service Standards are expected to better reflect client expectations.

5 Until the GSE Behaviour Service Standards are aligned with the Specialist Service Standards, GSE behaviour specialists will continue to work to the Behaviour Service Standards.
Focus group members involved in developing the Specialist Service Standards expressed:

- a strong belief in the potential of the standards to improve the quality of specialist services across all providers
- a high level of ownership of the standards
- a desire to continue to build on the positive partnerships that evolved during the collaboration process.

In support of these beliefs, they also expressed a desire to be involved in presenting the implementation training workshops for management and specialists so they have the opportunity to demonstrate their support for the standards.

The hope is that all Specialist Service Providers will recognise the potential of the Specialist Service Standards and work positively to bring this to fruition.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Specialist Service Standards have been signed off by the GSE National Management Team. Locally based implementation training workshops for all Specialist Service Providers will commence in June 2006.

The challenge for Specialist Service Providers is to pick up on the standards developed through the collaborative process and to continue to build on the collegial relationships forged so that effective practice can be shared for the benefit of all children and young people with special education needs.

The Specialist Service Standards provide a way forward for achieving this.

Ma te tauihuru o tou waka
E u te waiora
Kia mahue atu
Nga mea whakahirahira
I roto i te koriporipo

May the prow of your canoe
Cleave the waters of life
And leave in its wake
Mighty deeds

REFERENCES


AUTHOR PROFILE

Sue Nikoia is a psychologist and registered teacher. She is currently working as a practice advisor for the Ministry of Education, Special Education. She is a member of the project team that were responsible for developing the Specialist Service Standards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to the many people – students, parents, specialists, educators and others who contributed their valuable time and expertise to the Specialist Service Standards project. It is your commitment to our children and young people, and your willingness to give of your time that has made this project the success it has been. These really are your standards.

A special acknowledgement also to Avis Macadam, Mary Smith, Jo Davies, Susan Foster-Cohen, Judith Nel, Grant Gunning, Sonja Bateman and the late Pam Croxford, my hard-working co-members on the project team during Phase I and/or Phase II of the Specialist Service Standards project.

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Professional Learning through Practice

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ABSTRACT
This practice article explores the relationship between practice and professional learning. Are these two distinctly separate activities, competing for the time of a staff member, or are practice and learning linked? If so, what is the nature of this link and how can we best align professional learning with practice outcomes? Using an example from the everyday work of a GSE Special Education Advisor (SEA), this article explores how a professional might link learning and practice for improved student outcomes. It illustrates how learning might occur as a staff member reflects on day to day work challenges, sets related learning objectives, and chooses and uses a wide range of activities to learn through practice.

Practice paper
KEYWORDS: Professional practice, evidence-based practice, professional development, learning activities, reflection, school readiness.

PRACTICE AS A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
Learning as defined in evidence-based practice (EBP), communities of practice (COP), situated learning and reflective practice all challenge traditional views of professional development. Understanding professional development as only attending courses and conferences fails to address the need to transform information into professional knowledge and practice. In GSE, a broader definition of professional development is accepted. Professional development can be defined as a range of learning activities through which professionals maintain and develop themselves throughout their career to ensure that they retain their capacity to practice safely, effectively and legally in their scope of practice (Disley, 2005).

Day-to-day practice provides professionals with the rationale for learning, that is, moments when the problems and issues are clear, but the best course of action is not. When making EBP decisions, practitioners must draw on evidence from research, professional knowledge and information from the student, family, whānau and/or school (Holley, 2003). Professional knowledge is a central aspect of this process (Rappolt, 2003). It is situated in experience and occurs as a function of the activity, context and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1990) and is understood through critical reflection with others who share the experience (Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003). Professional learning occurs in the broader context of COP; of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and who interact regularly ‘to learn how to do it better’ (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

The Cochrane Effective Practice and Organisation of Care Group has summarised the literature from research trials about what is and is not effective in changing professional practice, i.e. supporting professionals to adopt effective practices and to move away from ineffective or harmful practices (Greenhalgh, 2001). Didactic education (formal teaching as in lectures), was shown to have low levels of effectiveness while interactive hands on education, based on the desire to be more effective in practice, was shown to be more effective. Interactive learning was most effective when real clinical problems were the basis of learning and where learning was linked in with the context of the service, improved teamwork and organisational development (Greenhalgh, 2001).

To explore how practice and learning activities may combine to support professional learning, a practice example is outlined below. This is not a true story but it draws from many true practice stories shared in GSE offices. The story spans one year and is told from the perspectives of the student, family, education provider and a GSE staff member, because professional learning should lead to better outcomes for all these groups. Some details have been omitted in order to focus on how learning occurred rather than what was learned.

The beginning of the story is not the start of service provision. Joel was verified with Ongoing Resource Reviewable Scheme funding at age five and has attended school and received ongoing services since that time. Below is Joel’s school experience from his perspective, and that of his family and school, and the GSE key worker.

JOEL IN JULY
Joel is seven years old and he lives with his parents. His interests at school are playing with doors, playing on the computer, running, going to the swimming pool and taking his shoes and clothes off in inappropriate places. He communicates by gestures, doing what he wants, and ensuring that the other children do not touch him. There are new teacher aides at school who try to assist him but they do not know what he likes yet because they are new.

JOEL’S FAMILY IN JULY
Joel’s parents, Jan and Graham, just want Joel to learn to talk, to stop running away, and to travel in the taxi and keep his clothes on. They find Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings hard, especially when Joel’s behaviour is discussed.
They appreciate the support from the team, which includes people from the school, GSE, a private behavioural therapist, the IDEA Services (formally IHC), Tautoko Services, and a needs assessor, but Jan and Graham find it difficult to keep track of all the people. Joel has a new specialist teacher this year and he will have to move classes at the end of the year which concerns his parents. They employ a private behavioural therapist who works with Joel at home and school, but find this is a drain on the family budget.

SCHOOL IN JULY

Joel’s behaviour at school can be stressful for staff. He is intent on running out of the classroom and the door has to be locked. At times Joel has been physically prevented from running. Two people are needed to supervise Joel at interval so he doesn’t run away. Although he works well in his private behavioural therapy sessions, these skills don’t flow over into the rest of the school day. Joel does not participate easily in the class programme, despite the introduction of consequences by the class teacher and teacher aide. Joel’s specialist teacher left to go on parental leave last year. His new teacher has not worked with a student who has autism before, and finds it hard to manage Joel’s behaviour and to engage him in curriculum tasks.

DAVE IN JULY

As a relatively new SEA to GSE, Dave works with school-aged children in a school focus team. He is committed to enabling children who have special education needs access to quality learning experiences at their local school. He previously taught a class of students in the United Kingdom all of whom had physical disabilities. Joel is the second student with autism that Dave has worked with.

The school experience described above presents Dave with a context and culture for learning. He needed to learn which ideas and interventions would provide effective support for Joel, his school and family. The learning process he may have used is explored below.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND SETTING LEARNING GOALS

In adult learning theory, professional learning is facilitated by cyclic experiences that involve direct concrete experiences, observation and reflection, as well as abstract concept formation from which behaviour may be modified and tested to aid new experiences (Kolb, 1984).

![Diagram of professional development learning cycle]

Kolb and Fry (1975) argue that the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points and that it should be approached as a continuous spiral. It is suggested that the learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the action in this situation. Dave’s learning objectives came from his observations of Joel at school, home, and from his own critical reflection where he identified a need to add skills quickly in relation to autism and behaviour management.

His learning goals included the need to:

- develop Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) specific knowledge and strategies to support others to teach Joel and to manage challenging behaviour
- develop the confidence to work with the school and family despite concerns that others knew more about ASD
- examine ethical and legal issues around restraint of children - Dave had concerns about the restraint he observed being used at school
- learn to manage his workload to ensure that time is available to work with Joel without other students missing out
- understand the role of other team members working with Joel in order to work as key worker for the GSE team, including consulting the speech-language therapist (SLT) to look at ways of establishing functional communication, the occupational therapist (OT) to look at property modifications and sensory assessments, the psychologist for behaviour management planning, and Tautoko for home programming.

LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE, TEAMING AND REFLECTION

Some of Dave’s learning goals were met directly through his work with Joel and the team; through visits to home and school, formal observations and interviews, reading previous case notes, attending team meetings and making joint visits with the SLT and OT to school. As the pivotal member of the team, Joel had an important role in teaching Dave. Dave worked with the school to build positive relationships with Joel. He learned to engage Joel in learning tasks, facilitated peer interaction with Joel, taught others to manage challenging behaviour, decreased the use of restraint at school, selected a new school site and worked with a team to plan transition to the new school.

Dave was able to identify a number of points he learned through other people in the team.

1. Joel taught him to watch, be patient and look for his special interests, strengths and attempts to communicate.
2. Joel’s parents taught him to see Joel as a child first.
3. Tautoko Services showed him how to build a connection with Joel. Dave used these skills to learn to play with Joel, using the boy’s interests to connect.
4. The SLT taught Dave about the challenges Joel faced in communication and gave him strategies to use. He watched the SLT work with Joel and his teacher aide, as she encouraged the use of comic strip strategies to plan a series of tasks during the school day.
5. The OT conducted an assessment using *The Sensory Profile* (Dunn, 1999), involving Joel’s parents and school staff. Dave accompanied her and recognised some of the sensory challenges and interests that Joel faced, and linked these to his choices of task, people and behaviour.

6. The private behavioural therapist taught him how to work with Joel to keep him on task.

7. The psychologist taught him about applied behavioural analysis (ABA) and how this can be used in the inclusive school setting (La Vigna & Donnellon, 1995).

8. The SLT had recently attended the Tips for Autism Course, and the reading material for this was shared providing an easily accessible overview of ASD, educational implications and effective strategies for schools.

**LEARNING THROUGH SUPERVISION**

While practice itself provided multiple learning opportunities, and learning goals were articulated in the ILP, supervision was also a critical learning activity. Supervision is defined as a structured, safe, reciprocal relationship for reflecting on practice and self-in-work (see *The National Supervision Framework*, Ministry of Education, Special Education, 2005). Dave’s supervisor lacked experience in working with students with ASD but this was acceptable because Dave and his supervisor were able to explore what he needed to learn and who could assist in that process. Dave and his supervisor contracted to meet fortnightly with additional phone contact between sessions if required.

Dave found working with Joel very challenging. Despite the positive outcomes, this work was stressful and challenging. Dave needed to explore his feelings of efficacy in this work and seek feedback from his supervisor and other team members. At times he felt he should pass this work to a more experienced staff member. Other supervision topics included ethical issues around restraint, whether Joel should move schools, managing the ongoing stress for school staff, working with other providers, managing the workload and applying knowledge from literature to practice. Dave consistently took a strengths-based approach to this work and used supervision to maintain his personal belief that improved outcomes were possible for Joel in a regular school. Workload/caseload management was an important issue, and this was discussed with his manager but monitored over time with his supervisor.

**LEARNING THROUGH A RANGE OF INDIVIDUALLY PLANNED LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

In supervision Dave planned other learning activities to match his learning goals. He undertook his own reading and research into ASD, which involved accessing websites and library materials. A search of the GSE library catalogue located many items relating to autism. Another colleague suggested *Educating Children with Autism* which provided a strong evidence based approach (National Research Council, 2002). The Professional Resources database provided critically appraised resources relevant to work with students who have ASD including *The Sensory Profile* (Dunn, 1999), *Solving Behaviour Problems in Autism: Improving communication with visual strategies* (Hodgdon, 1999), and *Writing Social Stories* (Gray, 2000).

Dave joined the ASD list serve established by the professional practice advisor ASD. As a GSE staff member, Dave was already involved in or able to access different COP through his school focus team, other SEAs (by an email list), and other staff who work with students who have severe and challenging behaviour (through office contacts). Dave posted questions on the SEA email list to seek support and ideas.

Staff in Dave’s team are required to conduct a peer review of practice or a client review each term. He arranged to conduct a client review with a staff member specialising in behaviour, who visited school with him and reviewed his work with Joel. A second peer review of practice centred on the need to review the use of assistive technology for Joel so the technology coordinator met with Dave and looked at the options trialled with Joel to date.

Dave’s formal professional development was to attend the ASD conference. He also put his name on the Autism NZ mailing list for information on relevant ASD related courses. He brought back video presentations on a range of ASD topics to share with other staff. Dave also linked with the local ASD parent support group.

The outcomes of Dave’s learning can be explored by reviewing the stories of Joel, his family and school, and Dave one year later. During this time Joel, his family and team worked together to find a new school placement, support his transition, and to engage him in social and learning tasks in the new school. Although not attributable purely to Dave’s learning and professional practice the improved outcomes for Joel, his family, and school are evident.
JOEL ONE YEAR ON
Joel has a new school. His interests at school are playing with doors, playing on the computer, running, going to the swimming pool taking his shoes and clothes off, helping his teacher aide do jobs around the school, reading his early readers, doing his printing and, sometimes playing alongside other children. He is starting to talk at school and has favourite classmates and teachers. He greets Dave by name when he visits the school. His teacher aide uses his comic strips to prepare him for what to do next, and when he has completed two things he receives a reward. Joel can sit and work at his desk for short periods, put up his hand when he has finished and take his work to show his teacher. Now Joel knows his taxi driver, who puts on his favourite tape to travel to school. He received a certificate at assembly for his story writing, produced using clicker software. Joel still runs away sometimes, but other people at school and in the community know him and bring him back.

JOEL’S FAMILY ONE YEAR ON
Joel’s parents know the support team well. They know and trust the school principal and feel confident that if they call the school or GSE they will have a rapid, positive response. Joel’s mother Jan has joined the local ASD support group and uses the sensory strategies and comic strip conversations at home, too. Because of the progress that Joel has made at school, his private behavioural therapy has decreased. He still has some challenging days at home and school, and Jan is looking at starting some respite care for Joel.

NEW SCHOOL ONE YEAR ON
Other children at the school greet Joel when they see him in the playground. They know to ignore his different behaviour. Joel’s teacher and teacher aide enjoy teaching Joel and know what to do and who to ask when things are difficult. The other teachers in his school know Joel well and will include him in their lessons if he runs into their room. The neighbours living close to the school and the local swimming pool, know who Joel is and who to contact if he runs away. The school considers Joel to be a valued school member and is willing to make the accommodations he needs to be included.

DAVE ONE YEAR ON
Dave has not simply gained information about ASD. He has a working knowledge of approaches and strategies for practice and a sense of self-efficacy when working with students who have ASD. He has strengthened learning networks which prepare him for Joel’s next challenges. He also knows what he needs to learn next and what supports he would like to have in place at the office such as easily accessible office material on ASD. He plans to put a collection of reading resources together next holidays.

CONDITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE
If learning occurs through practice then it is useful to consider what conditions have added to or detracted from this learning.

Conditions that supported the practitioner’s new learning included:
- the sharing of learning activities that were understood and used by the team
- effective relationships between practitioners and managers
- an office culture of critical reflection in a climate of safety and acceptance
- self regulated learning rather than externally imposed learning goals and tasks
- managed workloads
- clearly defined roles between management and supervision
- a collective vision that improved outcomes are possible
- experience in the broader team and organisation for the work of communities of practice.

Conditions that would have been helpful for practitioner learning include guidelines for effective education services and other evidence-based resources for children with ASD, written in user friendly language.

LEARNING AND STUDENT OUTCOMES
Joel’s story illustrates student outcomes – he can ride happily in the taxi, participate in curriculum activities, he runs away less and is safer when he does, sits at his desk, is starting to talk, read, and build relationships. Outcomes can also be seen for the school and family, and for Dave. In collaborative teams, Joel’s progress cannot be solely attributed to Dave’s learning or practice, as many factors contribute to outcomes. It does however suggest a link between Dave’s work, effective team practices, effective teaching and positive student outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Timperley, 2005).

CONCLUSION
Professional learning and development plans and activities should be individualised, based on the needs of the staff member, the job requirements and the needs of the specific student(s) in their contexts. This approach allows professionals and managers to ensure time spent in learning activities adds value to practice.

This practical example illustrates how a professional can learn through practice. A range of learning activities, including practice itself, planning with management and supervision form the central core of learning when based on individual learning needs and real practice challenges. COP and other professional learning activities add depth and wider learning networks to these core learning activities. By linking practice and professional learning and development through cycles of self regulated, contextual learning, professionals can develop and apply professional knowledge to improve outcomes. Broader team and organisational conditions that enhance professional learning should be identified and supported within teams.
REFERENCES


AUTHOR PROFILE

Jill Ford is a service manager for the Marlborough/Kaikoura GSE team, and a registered OT who has worked in schools for over 20 years. Previously she worked as a practice advisor on national projects including supervision, evidence-based practice, portfolios, ASD guidelines and COP.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was written in consultation with other practice advisors to illustrate how these approaches fitted together in the real world of practice.

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Stranger and Stranger in a Strange Land:
Living overseas and how it has influenced my understanding of students with “special needs”

Wendy Holley, Psychologist, Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE), Nelson

ABSTRACT
This is a series of light-hearted reflections from a person who has worked in special education her entire career. After moving from the United States to New Zealand, she uses her experience adjusting to her new country, to better understand the perspectives of the children and young people with whom she works.

Practice paper
KEYWORDS
Communication skills, social interaction, cultural differences, life skills.

Having worked with students in special education in various capacities over the years, I believed I had a fairly good understanding of what life was like from the other side of the Individual Education Plan. The truth is, I had no idea.

I was an educational psychologist in the United States, where being American is quite normal. I considered myself typical, without ever giving it much thought.

That all changed when I moved to Wanganui, New Zealand. This article is written for those of you who want to reflect on your relationships with students who have “special needs”. I write because I believe that each of us has had personal experiences where we were disabled. By taking from these events and the empathy they provide us with, we can bridge the gaps between people and their differences.

From my own experiences I now understand how much of being “handicapped” is often the particular set of circumstances we are asked to function in. I could be considered perfectly fine in one situation and disabled in another. Nothing in me changed when I got off the plane, but I have been treated differently ever since. My primary disability, if you will, is my accent. It is the first thing that people notice, the jumping off point for assumptions of how much I know or don’t know, and the predictor of how well I will be accepted into various folds.

Just like many children, trying to succeed in a new setting, I perfected my use of survival strategies. I would nod and smile, pretending I understood, because I did not want to look stupid. I repeated bits of phrases (“Ah, yes … chockablock”) to keep the flow of conversation. In no way did this mean that I understood what had been said. Looking back, similar to some of our students, I believe I comprehended three to four words in every sentence. Terms that I had not come across before would throw the rest of the conversation out of comprehension. Is ‘chuffed’ a good or bad thing? What about ‘gobsmacked’ and ‘knackered’? I relied on gestures and visuals, and the general context of discussions. I asked that everything be written down. How embarrassing when I’d say, “I’m sorry, could you spell that?” and got, “Sure: B-e-n.” I now listen to National Radio; now that I understand what people are saying, that is. In the beginning, between all the unfamiliar cities, political figures and sport icons, I did not have enough prior knowledge to even begin to learn.

I wished that people would check for my understanding: have me paraphrase what they had said to confirm that I knew what I was expected to do. Draw me a picture, model the steps, anything. Sometimes I thought it would have been easier to move to China, where it would be that much more obvious that I was from a different culture. Here, I am also from an English-speaking land, and assumptions are made about what I do and don’t know. (How many times have I done the same thing, not getting to know Billy the child and person, because I know so much about autism?)

I have always believed in the importance of life skills for students with disabilities, but never more than when I needed them myself. You see, because I was a new resident of New Zealand, Kiwis were more than happy to fill me in on their culture. Unfortunately, they started with things like the history of New Zealand, the current political structure, and the geography of the South Island. What I really needed was: what do I wear to work? Where can we buy groceries? How do I drive on the other side of the road? How do I set up a bank account, and how in the world do I reply when people say, “EFTPOS” Is the green money worth more than the red? Do I need to tip in restaurants? Who can I say “Bugger” in front of?
When people didn’t help me with these things, it was only because they … assumed. First off, I look like everyone else. Sometimes this worked in my favour, as I could sneak through with the others, drawing little attention to myself. Sometimes this was a disadvantage, when people forgot to accommodate me because they had forgotten that I had “special needs”. I cannot tell you how many meetings I have shown up at the wrong time or on the wrong day, because I thought that half three meant 2:30, or that ‘Tuesday a week’ was in two days instead of nine. Or the time I did bring a plate … instead of bringing a dish to share.

I have also discovered how difficult it is to have differences that are immediately obvious. In my case, as soon as I open my mouth. People make assumptions the minute that I sound different – of what I know and how well I can relate to their situation. The challenge is to keep their belief in me from affecting my belief in myself.

A colleague shared a story with me of how her accent impacted her work. In her office, people could not distinguish between her “Murray” and her “Marie”, which made it difficult since one of each worked in the same building. Similar to a child undergoing speech therapy, she had to relearn her pronunciation of each, in order to communicate more effectively in her new environment. She had not known she had a problem until others needed her to change. I wonder how many of the students we work with have experienced this.

I have talked to many teachers about the ‘invisible curriculum’, the set of social and behavioural rules that some of us pick up with ease and others miss completely. This too came alive for me when I was living in a new country. I know, for example, that I have been perceived as rude, brusque, forgetful, pushy, and disrespectful. What I am not so sure of is when or how. When I make these mistakes, please do not see them as behaviour problems or personality traits of mine, or all others like me. I honestly misunderstand the expectations in the environment. Please use these moments as teaching opportunities – do not assume that I am pick up your culture incidentally.

Like a student diagnosed with autism, I am often working twice as hard each day, doing the same learning as my peers, as well as trying to make sense of social norms and unspoken rules. I am fortunate to be fully mainstreamed, as it were. My learning has come that much faster with the constant modelling of high functioning Kiwis.

I’ve moved again, this time to Nelson. And I’ve had to adjust again. You see, in Wanganui, there weren’t many Americans, so I was treated as a bit of a novelty. In Nelson, Americans are notorious for buying up real estate. So, opinion of me changes again, based on a second label connected to the first one, which I swear does not fit. rich. Perhaps this is similar to the child with a disability who comes with loads of funding and is accepted wholeheartedly into the school. Later when she moves into a decile 10 school, that has limited funding to support her, everyone really wishes she would go somewhere else.

I ask each of you to take a moment to draw on some of your own experiences. Whether it was a trip overseas or a point in your life when you were so stressed that you had word-finding difficulties. At one time or another, we have all been labelled, whether we believed that label applied to us or not. Let these experiences show you that we are all humans, struggling in one way or another. People do not really have “special needs”. They have the very same needs as the rest of us – to experience love, acceptance, success – and we have only to figure out the ways to meet those needs. In them, in all of us.

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Kairaranga Book Reviews

ALLIES IN EMANCIPATION: SHIFTING FROM PROVIDING SERVICE TO BEING OF SUPPORT.

Editors: Patricia O’Brien and Martin Sullivan

It is a great to see a book with a New Zealand focus surveying the policy and personal features of disability. Yet many of the writers are from overseas and provide a wider understanding beyond New Zealand issues. For those readers of Kairaranga with an interest in disability and education the focus may seem too adult orientated. But given that this is the world that disabled children are entering, it is important to look ahead in order to provide relevant school programmes today.

The book is split into three sections with the first six chapters looking at theorising disability support. Here the authors outline developing notions of service and support, and critically assess the values that would seem to underpin genuine support as opposed to support that has lost its way in compliance. Support based on aspiration changes the notions of empowerment and well-being. One interesting study looked at the changing beliefs of people as they underwent different courses on disability, for example, a graduate diploma in special education for teachers. Margaret Mclean demonstrates how professionalisation of special education can lead to teachers maintaining ableist frameworks which prevent students from being seen as children first. Her model is a useful tool for teacher educators to assess their own courses and field work with respect to how effective they might be in transforming peoples beliefs about disability.

The second section reviews areas of support based on adults contexts – employment, tikanga Māori, institutionalisation, friendships and intimate relationships, and developing supportive alliances. There is also continuing reference to the New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a world of difference. Whakanui Oranga, but there is no sign of the critique that will help explain why such a supportive document is not giving better traction to change. Have you seen a copy and looked at the sections that make explicit reference to the education sector? Another frequently cited document is the report To have an ordinary life: Kia whai oranga ‘noa’ (National Advisory Committee of Health and Disability, 2003) which would clearly seem to indicate that those identified as disabled have told those who provide support what they are looking for out of life. It is Lorna Sullivan in her chapter on changing approaches to service delivery that identifies the key issue.

...disabled people continue to be recipients of services that have been designed and implemented to compensate for their lack of economic viability rather than support them to extend the control they have over their lives to become more fully human (p.164).

Or to put it another way, it makes claim to citizenship rights that are based on entitlements that remain regardless of impairment (Bray & Gates, 2000). Sullivan argues that while such assumptions about economic viability are sustained, any claim by services to being ‘person-centred’ is rhetoric. This issue has always been a challenge for education as well, given that schooling has always had an eye to the future of current students.

In the final section the focus is on making sure the voices of those disabled are heard in different spheres of life, whether it is through self advocacy, developing roles in research or through secondary relationships between parents and professionals. It is the two English authors Claire Tregaskis (disabled) and Dan Goodley (non-disabled) who summarise this section on getting the relationships right.

...exploring the possibilities engendered by working together is enabling us to test out just how far we can move towards a model of being and of working in which similarity and difference can co-exist... (p.184).

Previous disability theorising has focused on the importance of difference but, as these two authors imply, similarity and difference are the basis of any relationship, the question is what importance is given to the features that bring people together and those that maintain their uniqueness.

The editors have done a great job at pulling together a range of challenging and thought provoking chapters that are relatively short and come with their own reflective questions to support discussion.

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**REVIEWER PROFILE**

Michael Gaffney

Michael is a lecturer at the Children’s Issues Centre, University of Otago, Dunedin. He has a wide range of research interests, including how disability theory might apply to school and early childhood settings.

**BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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**PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOLS: EXPLORING THEORY AND DEVELOPING PRACTICE**

Janice Wearmouth, Ted Glynn and Mere Berryman

The content of this book is true to its title. Overviews are provided of various explanations of student behaviour (societal, cultural, biological, psychological) and suggestions are made regarding assessment, and interventions at an individual, classroom and school-wide level. The perspective taken is that behaviour is the product of interactions between the person and the context and reference is made to Bruner’s (1996) cultural-psychological position. How students see the world is determined by their culture, and when teachers and schools affirm cultural beliefs, values and ways of learning and interacting, then education can be a transformative experience for all who are involved. Often, however, the members of minority groups have to leave their culture at the school gate and there are serious consequences in terms of negative self-perceptions and behaviour. The challenges for educators are to listen to students, families and communities, and to provide safe and stimulating learning contexts that are truly inclusive.

_Perspectives on Student Behaviour in Schools_ has at least three major strengths or attractions: it introduces an array of approaches to problematic behaviour, it contains a large amount of New Zealand content and it makes the reader think hard about relevant issues. The text provides introductions to applied behaviour analysis and cognitive behavioural approaches, applications of ecosystemic and attachment theory, assertive discipline and Roger’s behavioural self-management, the assessment of learning environments, and restorative justice. The New Zealand content includes discussions about Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB), the Eliminating Violence programme, Angus Macfarlane’s Hikairo Rationale and Ingrid Dunckley’s suggestions for extreme behaviour. There are also references to Mason Durie’s _whare tapa wha_ model, the work of Rose Pere, Mere Berryman and Russell Bishop, and Ted Glynn’s previous contributions to education such as _Pause, Prompt, Praise_, and the Mangere Guidance Unit – a forerunner to the Guidance and Learning Units and the current RTLB service.

Wearmouth, Glynn and Berryman (2005) contains numerous provocative observations. A central point is that our conceptions of behaviour determine our responses to it; ‘Where the problem is located determines the location of the solution’ (p. 89). Extending this point, the authors argue that the assumptions associated with using psychometric tests with students are inimical to inclusion. The purpose of norm-referenced assessment is to identify difference, typically with stigmatising effects, whereas inclusion promotes integration while celebrating diversity.

The authors also make a distinction between the practical and ethical justifications for actions involving children. A segregated placement may be the most suitable option for an individual student but that does not make it right to treat children in this way. Similarly, we know that some psychostimulants have a calming effect on children but this does not mean it is ethical to give drugs to dependent young people.

_Perspectives on Student Behaviour in Schools_ takes a strong stance on culture and inclusion. It is important to acknowledge, however, that opposing positions are possible. For example, Kaufman and Hallahan (1995) characterise inclusion as a bandwagon, and Brown (1991) severely questions cultural relativism. Wearmouth et al’s critique of explanations of behaviour that centre on the child without regard to the environment, such as the medical model, is highly pertinent. Nevertheless, this should not blind us to other dimensions of development and to individual differences. Gender of itself, arguably, is as pervasive in its effects as culture, as is demonstrated in the well-established differences between males and females in internalising and externalising responses. There could also be a danger in ecological analyses of education, of expecting too much of teachers and schools.

In relation to the text, it may be that many teachers have neither the will nor the skills to engage with students and families in some of the ways that are suggested in the book such as working together as co-creators of knowledge.

Wearmouth et al. might be enhanced by some additional perspectives. The first of these is what experienced and successful teachers know about behaviour in schools. Behaviour management is an absolutely central concern for them and they develop a heightened sense to the disruptive potential of seemingly inconsequential events, such as transitions between activities and changes in the weather. As well as some whiteboard wisdom, it would be helpful to have access to current research on maladaptive pathways and the new generation interventions, such as multisystemic therapy (http://www.mstservices.com), which can successfully realign upward developmental trajectories.

This material is relevant because it is difficult to make lasting change for young people who are at-risk of negative life outcomes solely with school-based interventions. The authors argue for respectful, collaborative and culturally sensitive relations with caregivers and empirically-supported
parenting programmes, like The Incredible Years (http://incredibleyears.com), can have these qualities while also possessing the ethical imperative of being among the most effective options that are available.

The counter positions and possible additions aside, Perspectives on Student Behaviour in Schools is recommended for its breadth and insights, and above all for its focus on students as people. Adults may see children as largely in the process of becoming, but for the young people themselves, schooling is a present and pressing reality. How they see things is important. Inevitably, there will be tensions and conflicts in schools as the student population has become more diverse and because mass systems of education have an assortment of objectives. Too often, student management has meant marginalisation and alienation based on factors that are believed to be associated with the child. Rather than this, the authors recommend that we afford understanding, appreciate the connections among people, and recognise and value individual and cultural integrity.

REFERENCES

REVIEWER PROFILE:
Peter Stanley
Peter Stanley is a senior lecturer in the Department of Human Development and Counselling, University of Waikato at Tauranga.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA
Title: Perspectives on student behaviour in schools: Exploring theory and developing practice.
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WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Eva Lynn

A lady was trying to sell a new product – a pill to cater for all cures! ... Jessica thrust the pamphlet at William ... and said, “Take it Dad – I don’t have mental health, do I?”

What it Feels Like is a remarkable story of a parent’s unique journey in child-rearing. It is a special record of Eva’s thoughts and feelings from the birth of Jessica, her daughter, who has Asperger’s syndrome, to her adolescence: from the terrifying revelation at age two that life would never be normal, to the joyful realisation at sixteen that life was not going to be as difficult as formerly envisaged.

The book was written for the general reader, but is also a valuable resource for teachers or special education personnel, as it provides a different and very personal perspective on a disorder which is difficult to understand. The objective is not to educate or inform the reader about autism, or Asperger’s Syndrome in particular, but to express in a profoundly personal biographical way the emotional roller-coaster ride involved in parenting a child with autism. On the journey the book also distils some precious and insightful gems.

Themes include: the need for professionals to respect the wisdom, and the finite nervous energy reserves, of parents; the importance of remaining teachable, flexible and open to learning from one’s children; and the risks of stereotyping and black and white ideological thinking.

Before I had children I had my own opinion about boarding schools. However life and maturity have a funny way of changing opinions.

The triumph of hope and commitment over pessimism and resignation is also a strong thread, as is the strength and resilience of the family unit.

The book is written as a series of vignettes, or anecdotal ‘pearls on a string’, linked thematically, but also on a semi-chronological time-line. The style is clipped and economical; one moment humorous, the next barbed, the next touching and insightful. Included are significant events such as birthdays and leaving home to attend a special school feature, as well as everyday events such as visiting the hairdresser or buying an ice-cream. The book has a momentum, and is difficult to put aside once started. I made the mistake, following the book launch, of showing my personally autographed unopened copy to my daughter who was in Jessica’s class at intermediate school, and I didn’t see it – or her – again for many hours!

Eva has consciously written positively about her experiences, but there is a disarming honesty in her account, and sometimes what is not said is as eloquent and poignant as what is said. No one else but a parent who does the bulk of the caregiving could have the reservoir of priceless memories shared here. Eva has carefully and lovingly kept all the records over the years that bear testimony to the immense dedication she and her husband William have had in trying to find answers and resources to provide Jessica with the best possible opportunity of developing normally.

I recommend this book as an inspiring, thought-provoking and very original piece of work. I am proud and privileged to be working in the same Ministry of Education, Special Education office as Eva, and also with Ingrid Dunckley who wrote the foreword and who has supported the family over the years. Tony Attwood, a well-known writer on autism, has written,

Families and professionals have to understand the point of view of people with Autism in order to work with them effectively.

I believe this book successfully achieves its aim of communicating “what it feels like”.

Weaving educational threads. Weaving educational practice.
ADRESSING PUPILS’ BEHAVIOUR: RESPONSES AT DISTRICT, SCHOOL AND INDIVIDUAL LEVELS
Janice Wearmouth, Robin Richmond and Ted Glynn

UNDERSTANDING PUPIL BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOLS: A DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES
Janice Wearmouth, Robin Richmond, Ted Glynn and Mere Berryman (Eds.)

INCLUSIONS AND BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES
Janice Wearmouth, Ted Glynn, Robin Richmond and Mere Berryman (Eds.)

The three volumes in this series give a comprehensive overview of the field of behaviour in New Zealand and international perspectives. With Ted Glynn and Mere Berryman as editors, and as contributors, there is a sense that New Zealand perspectives are well represented and that these perspectives are also compared and contrasted with other international views. The cultural aspects in the volumes are represented in New Zealand, UK, and American contexts with contributions from Russell Bishop, Ted Glynn, Angus MacFarlane and Mere Berryman.

Inclusion in the field of behaviour is the key theme of the third volume. The preface of this volume highlights the framework in the text which covers research, policy, practitioner and cultural issues, while considering inclusive practice. The first chapter by Wearmouth and Glynn is a powerful chapter that covers both historical views, and researched current thinking and debate on inclusive practice. It then describes their view of behaviour; that it is situated in the pupils’ environment and in their relationships with adults and peers in this context.

The preface for each volume provides a brief overview of the articles in each text. These prefaces provide a limited sense of coherence across the three texts. Each article has its own introduction and conclusion that allow for a quick preview and review of the chapter. The structure and content of the three volumes allow for the in-depth study of policy, research or practice related to behaviour, with the advantage of being able to reference other texts through the comprehensive subject and author index in each volume. Each article provides its own list of references.

It is interesting to compare these three volumes with the recent single volume text written by the same editors, and also reviewed in this issue of Kairaranga. This consolidated version of the three volumes gives an overview of similar content, and is perhaps more accessible and coherent, but the three volumes reviewed here give a greater coverage and provide an in-depth link to references and research.

The three volumes are a worthwhile addition to the bookshelves of those interested in the research, policy or practice of behaviour in New Zealand. The linking thread of a socio-cultural perspective provides a base for discussion of a further range of behaviour perspectives such as the psychological or medical approaches that are also included in the texts. The texts have a wider audience than just the university courses they support. Teachers, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, Learning Support Teachers and Ministry of Education staff would find value in these texts as reference material and as support for their practice and interventions.

REVIEWER PROFILE
Stephen Macartney is an educational psychologist with experience in working in behaviour teams for GSE and formerly SES. Stephen has also previously worked as a deputy principal and teacher. He currently works in GSE National Office.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DATA
Titles and Authors:

Publisher: David Fulton Publishers in association with The Open University and the University of Waikato.
ENRICHING FEEDBACK IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM: ORAL AND WRITTEN FEEDBACK FOR TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

Shirley Clarke

Need a working handbook that will practically inform your formative assessment practices in the primary classroom? Here we have an author who is an expert British practitioner engaged in action research in primary classrooms. Her latest work draws on a large scale, formative assessment project to raise standards of education in a group of schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Shirley Clarke knows the theory and practice of formative assessment and has structured the book to allow the reader to enter her discussion of this topic at any one of the ten chapters. At the end of most chapters there is a summary of key principles that provoke debate by their clarity and brevity such as the statement 'Formative assessment depends on a constructivist classroom'. Clarke gives in the body of the chapter a list of 12 descriptors she believes are important to constructivist teaching behaviours. Ideas include:

- the curriculum determines what must be taught, not how it must be taught
- the prime concern is whether learning intentions are being met
- lesson content should change to best facilitate pupil learning.

Do we agree?

Throughout the book there are numerous examples of children’s work and how it is improved through oral and written feedback. Useful ideas such as the Table on Feedback Strategies: Audit cover the manageability and impact of the techniques on a child’s learning and progress. The audit also shows the teacher how they should proceed, and provides a handy, swift guide to the results of giving written and oral feedback.

In another table on improvement prompts, Clarke gives a range of prompts, a set of learning intentions, extract’s from the child’s writing, reminder, scaffold, and example prompts for the child to choose from. In this concise, practical way, teachers and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) are given a way to work.

Don’t think this is just about classroom teaching: the contents include a chapter discussing a whole school framework, rationale and policy. Examples of marking policies and strategies for marking in different curriculum areas are offered. RTLB will find this useful in implementing a systems approach to formative assessment and giving children feedback in schools.

It does strike me that when working with children, teachers are aware of learning cultures or communities of learning in classrooms, and of the different ethnicities in classrooms. They are also aware of the links between learning and behaviour. These issues are not covered, and are outside the scope of this book. This book does not deal with behaviour.

Regardless, I consider it a handy book for your resource collection alongside Unlocking Formative Assessment (2003) by Shirley Clarke, and our own John Hattie and Helen Timperley, published by Hodder, Moa, Beckett. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to get classroom teachers to buy into the process. I hear from a deputy principal and ex-RTLB that you’ll need to adapt all the strategies used with students, to shape your own and teachers’ behaviour and learning. This book will help you do that.

REVIEWER PROFILE

George Middleton is an RTLB in the Hamilton West Cluster based at Maeroa Intermediate. He has worked for 30 years in special education in Wellington and Hamilton.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Title: Enriching feedback in the primary classroom: Oral and written feedback from teachers and children.

Author: Shirley Clarke

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editorial, Editorial Board and contact details</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Ourselves as Learners:</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interview with Professor Joy Cullen – Roseanna Bourke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to School:</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pilot project – Jan Salter and Jill Redman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan’s Story – Bronwyn Julian</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with Families about Things that are Hard for Them to Hear</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Stephen Robinson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Aggression between Primary School Girls</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Browne and Janis Carroll-Lind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Things to Stick:</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the narratives of young New Zealanders who experience specific learning difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheryn Marshall, Clare Hocking and Jan Wilson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Case against the Categorisation of Children and Youth:</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Theoretical perspectives – Peter Stanley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Specialist Service Standards – Sue Nikoia</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning through Practice – Jill Ford</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger and Stranger in a Strange Land:</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living overseas and how it has influenced my understanding of students with “special needs” – Wendy Holley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book reviews</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission Guidelines</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscription forms</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>