



# Belonging as a Pathway to Inclusive: An Inquiry into Supporting Inclusive Practice in Secondary Schools

Tracey Ellery

*Do you see me?  
Can you hear me?  
Only then can you teach me?*  
- Abby De Groot (2010)

## ABSTRACT

This report investigates students' perspectives on a sense of belonging, and the relationship between inclusive practices. It further considers the implications for Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) as they work in secondary schools to support inclusive teaching practice. The inquiry question, *How can RTLB effectively support secondary teachers to develop a relational approach with students that enhances inclusive practice?* was addressed by using photovoice<sup>1</sup> and focus group methodologies to collect data from secondary school students who had received learning support via RTLB services. Students experienced a sense of belonging at school when they felt welcomed by teachers; when their relationships with teachers were respectful, and when they felt that they were learning. To this end, they described what effective learning support looked like.

## Research Paper

**Key words:** belonging, inclusion, RTLB

## INTRODUCTION

In my role as practice leader for one RTLB cluster<sup>2</sup>, I began to notice significant differences between both the types and numbers of referrals to RTLB services from secondary schools versus those from primary schools. Wondering about the reasons for this was the starting point for this inquiry. The RTLB service provides support for students from new entrants through to the end of Year 10. The support provided is wide-ranging and responsive to need,

and can include facilitation of programmes, building teacher capacity in relation to inclusive practices, and working with small groups of students.

Observations resulting from prior work in a range of secondary schools included the following: differences between what secondary schools want from an RTLB service and what RTLB can provide; challenges of working with multiple teachers; timetables often restrict the delivery of systems-approach programmes; and a lack of an inclusive mindset of some secondary teachers. Reasons for this may be complex but could include gaps in understandings about what an inclusive pedagogy is, and/or an inability to implement inclusive practices in the classroom. Subsequently, the inquiry reported in this paper was designed to explore how RTLB could provide effective support for students and teachers in secondary school contexts. A review of relevant literature led to an inquiry focus on inclusive practices in secondary schools, specifically emphasising how the development of a sense of belonging for students can lead to more inclusive practices by teachers. Focus groups with student participants currently or historically receiving RTLB support were used to collect qualitative data around experiences of inclusive practice in a secondary school.

## BACKGROUND TO THE TOPIC

### Contemporary Understandings of Inclusion

Exploring a contemporary understanding of the term inclusion or inclusive education reveals its complexity and changing nature (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012). Inclusion is deeper and wider than physical presence, and applies to **all** students, not just those with learning support needs. Previously, inclusion may have been practised as 'mainstreaming'

<sup>1</sup> Photovoice is a research method whereby participants take photographs of items, people or environments to illustrate or give meaning to their ideas. Photovoice can be used by participants to show what is important to them. (<https://whatworks.org.nz/photo-voice/>).

<sup>2</sup> A group of RTLB who are employed by a lead kura/school and its Board of Trustees (BOT) within a geographical area of New Zealand. Although all RTLB in one cluster will be employed by the lead kura/school's BOT, they may be located at other schools in the cluster area. (<https://rtlb.tki.org.nz/Governance-management/Organisation-of-service/How-the-service-is-organised>)

or 'integration' (Bui, Quirk, Almazan & Valenti, 2010), however now it is understood as an approach to education that is underpinned by inclusive values (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2012; Carrington & MacArthur, 2012). The concept of inclusion forms the basis of the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Ballard, 2013) and is congruent with Ainscow's (2016) understanding of inclusion which identifies inclusion as a process concerned with removal of barriers concerning participation and achievement as well as presence, and relating to groups of learners who may be at-risk of being marginalised, excluded or underachieving. These elements fit comfortably within the New Zealand Ministry of Education explanation of inclusive education, which is embodied by the following principles;

Children and young people learn best when they:

- feel accepted
- enjoy positive relationships with their fellow learners and teachers, and
- are able to be active, visible members of the learning community  
(Ministry of Education, n.d.)

Inclusion pertains to social justice and inclusion for all, not just those with learning support needs. Respect for diversity is key (Thomas, 2013), and this develops from feeling respected and valued for who you are. Coupled with a commitment from others to support you to do your best, this contributes to a positive and vital sense of belonging (Miller & Katz, 2002). An emphasis on belonging as a central element in inclusive schools raises questions about what relationships between teachers and students in secondary schools might look like when belonging is the focus of teaching practice.

The benefits of inclusive practices are substantial for all students regardless of their need for learning and/or behavioural support, thus giving a rationale for this inquiry (Hehir, Gridal, Freeman, Lamoreau, Borquaye & Burke, 2016). When teachers apply key ideas about presence, participation and achievement in their teaching, benefits include improvements in students' attendance rates, academic outcomes, employment opportunities, social connections, social and emotional skills, personal, moral and ethical principles, tolerance for all, and communication skills (Hehir et al., 2016). Similarly, there are fewer challenges for schools around student behaviour (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hehir et al., 2016). These benefits are also highlighted by Ballard (2013) in his critique of education as a commodity, arguing instead for social justice, caring and connection as opposed to materialism and market competition.

## The New Zealand Policy Context

An inclusive and equitable education system aims for all students to be present, participating, and achieving at their local school (MacArthur & Rutherford, 2016). Informing New Zealand's context for inclusion are a range of educational policies, laws and international guidance including The New Zealand Education Act 1989; Te Tiriti o Waitangi; The New Zealand Disability Strategy 2001; Special Education 2000; Success for All; and: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012). Collectively, they impact on New Zealand schools' progression to more inclusive practices, however contradictions and tensions relating to who inclusion is aimed at - all students or just those with learning support needs - remain (Ballard, 2013; Selvaraj, 2015).

The NZ Education Act 1989 specifies the rights of students with 'special educational needs' to enrol and access education in state schools. This led to what has been popularly referred to as 'mainstreaming' and firmly placed inclusion in the realm of 'special education' based on medical model and normative ideas about 'fixing' students (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012). However, the New Zealand Ministry of Education's (2010) policy, Success for All, moved away from the medical model of special education towards a social model which focused on diversity, equity and removal of barriers (Selvaraj, 2015). Despite this change, references to students with 'special education needs' can be found in documents such as Success for All (Ministry of Education, 2014a) and the guide, What Does an Inclusive School Look Like? (Ministry of Education, 2014b).

## Barriers to Inclusion

A pathway towards more inclusive practice can only be realised if first we explore the associated barriers (Kearney, 2011). As such, this section explains the barriers to inclusion relevant to this inquiry.

### ***Inclusion as a Mindset: Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs***

Ainscow's (2016) suggestion that inclusion is a process and a goal, as opposed to a finite set of criteria, may lead to problems understanding what inclusion looks like in practice. Lack of understanding of inclusion may be even more pronounced for teachers working in secondary contexts (Specht, McGhie-Richmond, Loreman, Mirenda, Bennett, Gallagher & Lyons, 2016). Mutch (2013), for example, suggests that barriers to teacher understandings of attitudes towards inclusion may arise due to gaps in pre-service training and constraints of a traditional secondary structure informed by a functionalist theory model where

teachers are divided by curriculum content and constrained by timetables. New Zealand research noted that barriers to inclusion, as identified by parents, were lack of understanding by schools and the perception that their child was not valued for who they were (Kearney, 2011).

### **Rights Versus Needs**

Central to the idea of teacher-mindset impacting on inclusion is the concept of student rights (as opposed to student 'needs'). The concept of 'special education' and 'needs' is also tied up with the problematic concept of 'normal'. In attempting to bring all students 'up to standard', the focus has been less about individual student's differences and strengths, and more about trying to fit students into a box of 'normality' (Rutherford, 2016). Rutherford says that 'special needsism' "conceals the rights of students in and of themselves as human beings not regardless of difference but because of difference" (p.4). Further to this, Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991) mandate 'meaningful participation' for all students as opposed to mere access (Smith, 2013).

How student rights are respected and actioned will impact their lives both in the present and in the future (Smith, 2013). Recent research into inclusion explores the idea that learning support is, and can be understood as, a right for all students rather than a need (Kearney, 2011; MacArthur & Rutherford, 2016; Smith, 2013). The concept of educational rights for all children is key to constructing an inclusive educational environment (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009) as rights are inclusive of ALL students and the concept takes the problem from 'within the child' to be the responsibility of the teacher. This theory is contrary to the recently released Draft Disability & Learning Support Plan (Ministry of Education, 2018) as it moves beyond a focus of identification and brings us back to the understanding that inclusion is not an administrative label used to indicate presence; instead, it is about participation and belonging for all students (Ainscow, 2016; Carrington & MacArthur, 2012; Miller & Katz, 2002).

Lundy (2007) explored 'rights as actions' when she conceptualised Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) as a four-part model. The model asserts that students must have the opportunity to express views and that teachers, or teacher-aides, must facilitate students to express their views. In going beyond voice, the model states that these views must then be listened to and acted upon appropriately (Lundy, 2007). Respectful relationships between students and teachers are a catalyst for the manifestation of this model.

### **The Relationship Between a Sense of Belonging and Inclusive Practices**

A positive sense of belonging is connected with feelings of being valued and personally recognised, and results from respectful relationships (Graham, Powell & Truscott, 2016; Kearney 2011). Conversely, experiences of exclusion have a strong negative impact on student's feelings of value and belonging (Falvey & Givner, 2005, in Kearney, 2011). Similarly, research suggests that the development of positive relationships between teachers and students is integral to effective learning and teaching (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2009). The Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile (Bishop & Berryman, 2009) outlines the importance of the development of strong, positive relationships and impacts specifically on feelings of belonging. The Effective Teaching Profile applies equally to all learners, it compliments Hattie's 8 Mind-frames which specifies teachers' responsibility to develop positive relationships as a pathway to student learning (Hattie, 2012), and is especially relevant for students who receive support for their learning (Ballard, 2013). The Effective Teaching Profile emphasises that "every child needs a champion" (Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Pierson, 2013) and when children feel valued by their teacher, and can see themselves in their classroom, the benefits include academic achievement, higher self-esteem, increased risk-taking and improved peer connections (Carrington et al., 2012; Kearney, 2011).

### **How RTLB Can Support Inclusive Practices Through Relationship Building**

Collaboration among teachers and related service providers, for example, Resource Teachers: Learning & Behaviour, is a critical factor in implementing effective inclusive education (Bui et al., 2010; Jorgensen, McSheehan & Sonnenmeier, 2002; Taylor, 2014). Frequently, this collaboration includes the use of teacher-aides (TA) to provide in-class support as well as deliver specific intervention programmes to individuals or small student groups. However, research on the role of teacher-aides suggests that when teacher-aides/teacher assistants are used to deliver learning support, levels of student engagement with teachers often decreases (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2001, cited in Bui et al., 2010). More positively, Rutherford (2011) discusses the importance of the teaching assistant in helping teachers to see who the student really is, and thus develop an authentic relationship with them. Rutherford (2011), however, also discovered that untrained or inexperienced TAs could sometimes have deficit thinking. Providing strengths-based training for Tas, which includes collaborating with teachers, and relationship building, are potential areas for RTLB to support the development of inclusive classroom practices.

## THE INQUIRY METHODOLOGY

The context of this inquiry is a small North Island secondary school. Research participants comprised four students from Years 7 to 11 who have received some level of learning support via RTLB support services whilst attending this school. Student participants were identified by the school's SENCO<sup>3</sup> and Deputy Principal. Participation was by invitation and was also voluntary. The final group of participants was kept confidential beyond the college DP and informed parental consent was obtained for those participants under the age of 16 years.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach using photovoice and focus group interviews was used for this inquiry and provided a format for investigating student perceptions (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin & Lowden, 2011; Mutch, 2013); in this instance, their personal experience and perception of inclusive practices at secondary school. A grounded analysis approach was applied to the data collected in this inquiry. This approach is open and inductive, and allows the data to speak for itself through identification and discussion of themes (Menter et al., 2011).

Data gathering process:

1. Students took photographs of places at school where they experienced a strong sense of belonging. This method of collecting student voice, based on the methodology of *photovoice*, aims for a "re-imagining" of situations and is potentially empowering for those involved in the process (Iskander, 2015)
2. Students gathered as a focus group with the researcher. Photos were used as, "a springboard for meaningful discussion" (Berman & Graham, p.199 in Berman & MacArthur, 2018) and an appreciative inquiry designed set of discussion questions was followed to explore students' views on how their photographs conveyed a sense of belonging.
3. A second focus group meeting explored themes arising from the first discussion: welcoming and a sense of belonging, student/teacher relationships, and learning support. Meetings were held one week apart.

Focus-group discussions allowed for researcher-administered discussion, ensuring that students

understood the researcher's questions, and reducing the chances of students giving inappropriate responses and/or encountering literacy barriers (Menter et al., 2011). Focus groups also allowed the researcher to probe for deeper explanations to answers and broader exploration of themes. It was hoped also that discussion amongst the students would elicit more information as opposed to interviewing students separately. As noted by Palomba and Banta (1999, cited in Menter et al., 2011), "Focus groups may provide an excellent opportunity to listen to the voices of students, explore issues in depth, and obtain insights that might not occur without the discussion they provide" (p. 148).

### Ethical Considerations

This inquiry received a low risk ethics approval from a university human ethics committee (2010). Consistent with the committee's guidelines, the project adheres to ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and the right of withdrawal. A key ethical consideration for this inquiry was social and cultural sensitivity. This has been addressed by the integration of the Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles of protection, participation and partnership throughout the research design.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This inquiry set out to discover how RTLB can effectively support secondary teachers to enhance inclusive classroom practices. To explore this, a decision was made to seek students' perspectives on places of belonging at school. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, students were asked to describe where they felt most comfortable and included at school, what helped them learn best, and what qualities they wanted in a teacher. Consistent with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991), children's participation rights are upheld in this project by prioritising, seeking, and responding to the views of students currently receiving learning support in New Zealand.

Inclusion is a complex and evolving process (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012) and discovering a pathway to support inclusive practices has been the focus of this inquiry in which three major themes emerged. Students said that they wanted their teachers to make them feel welcome in their learning spaces

<sup>3</sup> Special Educational Needs Coordinator

SENCO stands for "Special Educational Needs Coordinator". A SENCO is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school's Special Education Needs policy. All mainstream schools must appoint a teacher to be their SENCO).

and to give them a sense of value and belonging. Secondly, students said that the development of positive and respectful relationships between students and their teachers was important. This encompassed a reciprocation of information between themselves and teachers, leading teachers to an ecological understanding of who their students are, and subsequently what their learning needs, interests and strengths are. Thirdly, students expanded on the topic of learning needs and interests to express their ideas about how they wanted to receive learning support.

This section discusses these three themes within the context of international literature on inclusion and explores the implications for the work of RTLB in secondary schools. In doing so, this inquiry shows a response to student voice in relation to inclusive practice in New Zealand secondary schools (Lundy 2007).

### **Welcoming and a Sense of Belonging**

“Be nice, that’s always welcoming.” (Student 3)

A central theme of this inquiry into students’ perspectives on school was welcoming practices and the feeling of belonging. A positive sense of belonging is connected with a feeling of being valued and personally recognised (Graham, Powell & Truscott, 2016). Students asked directly for such recognition and gave suggestions about ways that this could occur; “... just talk to the person individually.... at some point, it doesn’t have to be straight away. Just talking casually when they have time.” (Student 4)

Congruently, *Success for All: Inclusive Practice for Secondary Schools*, highlights a ‘sense of belonging’ as a key aspect of inclusive school environments (Ministry of Education, 2014a).

The Effective Teaching Profile (Bishop & Berryman, 2009) indicates the importance of providing a learning environment (Nga whakapiringatanga) where students feel ‘safe’ and comfortable. Photovoice data showed a range of learning spaces around the school where students experienced such comfort and a sense of belonging; included were three independent photographs of the school library. Another student described a learning space where there were fewer distractions which supported the student’s ability to complete work, “I like coming in here to ... come in here and sit in silence or listen to music when I do my work.” (Student 4).

Thomas (2013) argues that teachers recognising and respecting diversity is a critical feature of inclusion. Students in the present study wanted their teachers to be nice to them, and for their teachers to get to know them. This relationship development is

integral to constructing a ‘sense of belonging’, a point that has been identified in other school-based research (Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Graham, Powell & Truscott, 2016; Kearney 2011). Students called for acceptance and understanding, and one student explained that a good teacher is one who, “[knows] everyone is different” (Student 2) which is key to helping students feel they are welcome and they belong (Miller & Katz, 2002). Another student referred to affective factors, “... Maybe just having a happy heart, doesn’t have to show it on the out(side) but shows inside, in the heart.” (Student 3)

Photovoice data collected from students emphasised places of belonging and comfort within the school. This included (multiple) photos of the library door, as well as classrooms where they felt welcome and that they ‘belonged’.

### **Respectful Relationships with Teachers**

A second central theme emerging from focus group interviews was the importance of teachers taking time to get to know who their students really were as people. Students likewise expressed the importance of getting to know their teachers and described their ideal teachers as not being ‘stereotypical’, with one student emphasising this with the message, “... don’t be a robot.”

Miller and Katz (2002) highlight the need for students to feel respected and valued for who they are, explaining that in order to do your best as a learner you need to be able to feel a level of support and commitment from others. Correspondingly, students stated their preference for teachers who understood their learning needs, who pushed them and encouraged them even when the learning was hard. Students illustrated this concept when talking about the qualities of a good teacher, “One that knows your abilities and will push you if he thinks you can get it.” (Student 1)

Other research also emphasises relational elements as vital in the teaching and learning process. The Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile (Bishop & Berryman, 2009), calls for the development of strong, positive relationships and specifically mentions the impact of relationships on feelings of belonging. At a broader level, inclusion is described as being about students’ participation, not mere presence (Ainscow 2016; Smith 2013). Inclusive practices require teachers to respond to individual differences, something which can only happen when the relationships between students and teachers are positive and respectful (Ainscow, 2016; Hattie, 2012). Students in this inquiry agreed and

highlighted the importance of being able to relate to their teachers, saying they felt more comfortable sharing about themselves when they knew something about their teachers.

When asked what teacher qualities were important to them, students agreed that they preferred teachers to be understanding, encouraging, and to have a sense of humour. They gave several examples of these qualities in teachers:

H is actually understanding and respectful. (Student 2).

W, because they are funny and nice and generous (Student 1)

M is a really fun teacher. Most teachers give you really boring work but M made it all interactive. She put things all over maps and made them 3D and gives us lots of activities to do. She's really choice and makes you want to learn cos it's fun. It's not hard to do the work when it's fun like that and you can do stuff instead of just reading and listening, that's so boring. (Student 2)

Being understanding was a key quality mentioned repeatedly. This went beyond understanding interests and strengths, and whilst that was also important, "Knowing everyone is different" (Student 4) was vital. Participants also shared that good teachers understood the reasons for student behaviour. According to Student 2, "... they understand your behaviour, understanding when you're a bit stressed when you're working." (Student 2)

Additionally, students wanted teachers who would encourage them despite their learning difficulties. Student 3 explained this as, "(teachers who) will help regardless of if you don't know and find it hard", while Student 1 described an encouraging teacher as, "... one that knows your abilities and will push you if he thinks you can get it" (Student 1). Two students independently took photos of Teacher K's classroom and explained that this teacher encouraged students to work well:

Researcher – "Both of you took a photo of K's room. Can you tell me what is it about K that makes you feel comfortable and that makes you like them?"

Student 2 – "K's funny and K doesn't really mind if you don't do the work"

Student 3 – "Oh, K minds, but you know K encourages us to make sure we don't make any more mistakes. K actually makes us do the work."

Researcher – "So K makes you do work .... but in an encouraging way?"

Students 2 & 3 – "Yeah."

When asked what teachers they felt most comfortable with, humour featured strongly. However, students were careful to point out that a teacher joking around with you was not incongruent with learning and getting work completed.

Teacher W just has a joke around and makes you do hard work, (you) do the hard yards and then play later. (Student 2)

Teacher C was a cool dude to talk to and one of those people who liked to joke around but also got us to do work at the same time. (Student 3)

Having a teacher whom they could relate to was fundamental. Students felt more comfortable sharing interests and personal information when they could also "just get to know the teacher" (Student 3), and stressed that teachers need to reciprocate and "say something about themselves" (Student 3) and "then you got, you know, you guys could relate about something" (Student 2). Another said that the best teacher was, "one that's into the same stuff as I am" (Student 4). This importance of shared interests in developing relationships leading to inclusive practices was illustrated by another student discussing a teacher that made him feel like he didn't belong when he first started at the college. Their relationship changed when, "we sorted it out" (Student 3). They got to know each other and were able to turn their opposing interests in football and rugby into a general love of competitive sport, "he's next level now", said the participant when explaining the support he now receives from this teacher. Being treated equally was also significant for participants, with one student explaining that the best teachers didn't make him feel different and treated him the same as everyone else in the class.

### **Effective Support for Learners - Inclusive Practices**

'Effective support' for learners was the third theme to emerge from this inquiry. The following sub-themes emerged during discussions with students about their preferences for learning support. These requests are important and give voice to the term 'meaningful participation' as mandated by Articles 12 and 13 of

the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991).

### **Teacher and Teacher-Aide Support**

Inclusive practices can involve teachers constructing within-class supports through student group work, peer supports, or teacher-aide support. While teacher-aide support can be highly valuable in the classroom, the research is critical of the one-on-one assignment of teacher-aides to students as levels of teacher engagement with the student have been found to decrease (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2001, in Bui et al, 2010). All focus-group students had received learning support in the form of a teacher-aide and whilst students were clear in their self-perceived need for learning support, they also expressed a clear preference for inclusive in-class support from teachers over working with teacher-aides or peers. This stemmed from an inability to relate to the teacher-aide, and responses from peers such as teasing and bullying, “... they tease you and say you’re dumb, [they say] you need another teacher to help you.” (Student 3)

Matters of equality and fairness were also raised by students, with a request by Student 4 to, “treat us all equally.” Other researchers have suggested that support for learning should be considered a ‘right’ rather than a ‘need’ (Kearney, 2011; MacArthur & Rutherford, 2016; Smith, 2013). The students in the present study did not feel that they had equal opportunities and the same rights as their peers, that they were in fact treated unequally. Students talked about the predominance of female versus male teacher-aides as a barrier to this form of learning support. Student 1 commented, “I kept getting paired with girls (women) and I just feel that they didn’t give a s\*\*\* about me.” When asked if a male teacher-aide would have been better, the student replied, “Yeah I think so cos they understand me kind of better.” Another barrier identified was a lack of knowledge of the teacher-aide/ student working relationship, or of the aide’s role, with Student 2 indicating that, “I wasn’t really used to it and I didn’t know how it worked.” One student who shared a positive experience of working with a (female) teacher-aide talked about common interests having a mediating effect as the student felt the teacher-aide understood them, “... cos they were into the same stuff as me.” (Student 4)

Students were not in favour of receiving learning support from their peers and were concerned that their peers might not have the correct skills or knowledge. Student 2 felt that “... they [the student] might get it wrong ... I’d rather be helped by the teacher” (Student 2). The concept of fairness arose

again with several students agreeing that the teacher was the person they most valued when it came to supporting their learning. Student 1 said, “I think just having the teacher help you in the class instead of helping the same people and letting the TA help me.”

Students also commented on lesson content and structure, voicing a desire for more “hands-on activities” (Student 2), interactive lessons, and a need for more opportunities to move and have sensory breaks. Relating lesson content to areas of student interest, the importance of ‘do(ing) stuff in your interests’ (Student 4) was also raised. One student, who had been learning at NZC Level 1 for most of their schooling, illustrated this point by discussing in-depth the connection between car engines and maths concepts, implying that if this connection had been made in class, he would have been more engaged: “... say you don’t like maths but then he [the teacher] says all about the maths to do with engines, then it’s cool and interesting.” (Student 4)

Another student explained in-depth about a favourite teacher who made learning fun by making lessons interactive. It was clear during the explanation how engaged the student was with the learning in this teacher’s class; “She’s really choice and makes you want to learn cos it’s fun. It’s not hard to do the work when it’s fun like that and you can do stuff instead of just reading and listening, that’s so boring” (Student 2). Students raised ‘fun’ as an important aspect of building relationships with their teachers and engagement with their learning. They also stressed that ‘fun’ was not incongruous with high expectations for learning.

### **Using Understanding to Support Engagement**

A key finding of Kearney’s (2011) study into barriers to inclusion in New Zealand schools was parental perception that their children were not valued for who they were, and that “respect for difference” (p. 105) is an important value to hold in order for inclusion to occur. Congruently, students in this research asked to be understood for who they were; they wanted teachers to, “... be themselves and let us be ourselves” (Student 4). “Issues associated with valuing participation” (Kearney, 2011, p.105) are also key for realising inclusion, and students in this inquiry explained that participation for them was greatly enhanced by, “hands-on activities” (Student 2) and integrating a sense of fun into their learning.

### **Implications for Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLb)**

Lundy’s (2007) exploration of ‘rights as actions’ is conceptualised as a four-part model comprising

space, voice, audience and influence and is congruent with Ainscow's (2016) notion of 'inclusion as a set of practices'. This section shows how 'influence' manifests as RTLB support in secondary schools for each of the emerging themes.

### ***Welcoming and a Sense of Belonging***

Building teacher capacity in relation to providing a 'sense of belonging' has previously been identified as a key area for focus in schools (Rutherford, 2011; Taylor 2014). RTLB could be effective by supporting teachers to establish environments that are welcoming, and by providing teachers with practical strategies to help them get to know their students at both a broader and deeper level. Examples include implementation of social circles and formal programmes such as 'Traveller<sup>4</sup> (Travellers, 2018). RTLB work could also involve reframing the teaching environment to focus importance on key competencies such as relating to others as well as using a Universal Design for Learning approach to develop learner agency and learner self-knowledge. Equally important would be the promotion of ako (Bishop & Berryman, 2009) as a way of valuing individual knowledge and skills to create an environment where everyone feels they belong.

### ***Respectful Relationships with Teachers (and Teacher-Aides)***

Strong, positive relationships between students and teachers are crucial for student achievement (Hattie, 2012). Inquiry findings supported this, but also emphasised that students want to learn about their teachers in order to relate to them. RTLB could provide practical help in this area by developing and facilitating team-building activities as well as building capacity in the important area of social and emotional literacy. Mana Enhancement and Pause Breathe Smile are two tools to consider here. Inquiry findings also indicated a clear role for RTLB in building knowledge and understanding of how to effectively use teacher-aides to support learners. Developing the working relationship between students and aides is key.

### ***Effective Support for Learners – Inclusive Practices***

Inquiry findings also suggest that RTLB support for secondary teachers would be effective if it addressed a range of issues, including developing capacity in the use of collaborative teaching strategies such as tuakana/teina relationships and reciprocal teaching strategies. Student's lack of confidence in peer support indicates a need for development. Supporting teachers

to engage in approaches to teaching and learning which advocate for students to learn together and view learning as a process rather than a journey towards a correct answer, is pertinent for RTLB.

Teaching scaffolding techniques is also relevant as students stressed the importance of teachers pushing them and supporting them even when the learning was hard. Effective schools focus on equity for students (Ainscow et al., 2012) and by working at a systemic level, RTLB could be effective by supporting the development of a whole-school mindset that destigmatises learning support and sees inclusion as a right (Rutherford, 2011) applicable to all students (Ainscow, 2016; Thomas, 2013). This could involve supporting teachers to implement a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach where they plan for all needs from the outset rather than providing learning support for those identified by the special needs register. Such an approach would also be effective at giving action to student voice by providing choices relating to how they engage with, receive, and express their learning and their learning support.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The primary limitation of this inquiry is a small sample size of four students from one secondary school. Time constraints meant that researcher/student relationships were not fully developed and may have impacted on how comfortable the participants were in sharing their experiences and ideas. This inquiry collected qualitative data and, as such, is subject to researcher interpretation and bias (Menter et al., 2011). An appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) approach which takes a positive and forward-focused approach was used in part to address any researcher bias.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Acts of welcoming and a sense of belonging, positive student relationships with teachers, and effective learning support are three distinct themes emerging from this inquiry. These results are important because by giving a voice to students receiving learning support in a secondary school, they highlight some key practices for teachers to ensure students feel welcomed and understood, and indicate the specific actions RTLB can take to support inclusive practices in secondary schools. Inquiry participants are clear in their request to be treated the same as any other

<sup>4</sup>Travellers is an in-school, eight week programme that teaches young people skills to cope with change, loss, and transition. It builds their self-esteem and confidence, so they can face other challenges in the future. <https://www.skylight.org.nz/build-resilience/travellers>

students. They want teachers to encourage them, even when they are finding it hard, and they want their learning needs to be understood. In order to be able to relate to their teachers, they want them to share something of their own lives and interests, and to be able to have a bit of fun with them. All themes identified in this inquiry highlight the importance of teachers developing an understanding of individual students. The students in this study have indicated that it is relationships that matter. Understanding begins with teachers creating a welcoming environment and creating a sense of belonging in the classroom. It is deepened through strengthening relationships. The nature of teachers' relationships with their students are fundamentally manifested through the approaches they use in the classroom. This includes the ways in which learning support is provided by RTLBs and others working with teachers. There are clear roles for those people who are supporting teachers to adopt more inclusive practices, in both highlighting the place of affirmative relationships in the classroom and in considering the implications for teaching practice.

Implications for further research include investigating how the relational aspects of teaching are addressed in pre-service training for secondary teachers, how teacher-aides can be used most effectively in secondary schools, and what is the role of SENCO in developing inclusive practices in schools.

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## AUTHOR PROFILE

**Tracey Ellery**



**Tracey Ellery** is an RTLB based in the Waikato region. She has a Master of Specialist Teaching from Massey University and has a particular interest in inclusive education in secondary contexts. She is currently extending on this research by inquiring into supporting well-being at school through a UDL lens.

**Email:** [traceye@haurakirtlb.org.nz](mailto:traceye@haurakirtlb.org.nz)