

Collaborative-Consultation: A Pathway for Transition

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Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, Engari he toa takitini.

Success is not the work of one, but the work of many.

ABSTRACT

Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) are specialised teachers who work in regular schools to help facilitate the presence, participation and learning of students who experience difficulties with learning and behaviour. In focusing upon the RTLB principle of a 'collaborative and seamless model of service' (Ministry of Education, 2012a), this article examines the theory and evidence that underpins this principle, drawing upon research from overseas and New Zealand. In order to critique the RTLB principle of collaborative consultation in practice, a project undertaken by the authors involving the transition of students from two special classes to a mainstream context is discussed. This discussion reflects on the importance of RTLB working in a collaborative consultation model with school management and staff, the students, parents/whanau and the Ministry of Education, Special Education (MOE:SE) in order to enable positive outcomes for all those involved.

Research Paper

Keywords: *Collaboration, consultation, inclusion, RTLB role, transition.*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has been a major focus of the New Zealand government for the last 15 years. The recent policy, *Success for All – Every School, Every Child* (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2010), aims to create "a fully inclusive education system of confident schools, confident children and confident parents" (MOE, 2010, p.1). The government has set a target of 100 percent of schools demonstrating inclusive practice by the year 2014. In order to help achieve this, the Ministry of Education has developed a set of initiatives and activities (MOE, 2010).

One such initiative is the Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB). RTLB are experienced teachers who are trained to support students who experience difficulties with learning and behaviour. They do this by working collaboratively with class teachers, students, parents/whanau and other professionals in order to develop class or school-wide programmes. RTLB are itinerant teachers, working across clusters of schools. There are approximately 1000 RTLB in New Zealand working in 40 clusters throughout the country. RTLB are managed by Cluster Managers situated in base schools.

A guiding document for RTLB practice is the *RTLB Toolkit: Professional Practice* (MOE, 2012a). This is a document that outlines the professional principles and practices of RTLB work. The *RTLB Toolkit* outlines seven guiding principles of RTLB practice.

These are:

1. Inclusive teaching.
2. Culturally responsive.
3. Ecological approach.
4. Collaborative and seamless model of service.
5. Strengths-based.
6. Reflective.
7. Evidence based. (MOE, 2012a, p. 31-33).

This article investigates the evidence base that underpins one of these principles, that of a 'collaborative and seamless model of service' through examining relevant theory and research. An example of the principle from RTLB practice will then be discussed, with conclusions drawn in terms of lessons learned and the role of this principle for RTLB. The example presented, which is based on qualitative evidence, focuses on a year-long project involving the transition of nine students from two special classes to the mainstream at a multicultural primary school in a major city in New Zealand. While it is recognised that this example could be applied to the six other principles outlined above, such as inclusive teaching and strengths-based, for the purposes of this article the principle of a 'collaborative and

seamless model of service' is the focus. In this regard, the authors acknowledge, as the two RTLB involved in this project, the importance of working collaboratively with the students, parents/whanau, school management and staff, and the Ministry of Education, Special Education (MOE: SE), in order to ensure a positive transition process.

Collaborative-consultation: Definition and theory

The *RTLB Toolkit* identifies a model of collaborative consultation as underpinning the principle of a 'collaborative and seamless model of service' (MOE, 2012a). This model is fundamental to the ten-step practice sequence¹ as outlined in the *RTLB Toolkit: Professional Practice* (MOE, 2012a). Moreover, collaborative consultation is an integral part of interprofessional practice, which has historically been associated with the health profession where it has been beneficial in providing coordinated healthcare services that best meet the needs of the client/patient (Faresjo, 2006).

In order to facilitate effective collaborative consultation, the *Interprofessional Education Collaborative Expert Panel* (IECEP) (2011) has identified four competency domains for interprofessional collaborative practice – values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, communication, and teamwork. While these competencies were developed for the American health sector, Mentis, Kearney and Bevan-Brown (2013) state that they are relevant to all interprofessional teams.

Within the education context, Mitchell (2008), in citing the work of Idol, Nevin and Paolucci-Whitcomb (1994), defines collaboration "as a process that enables groups of people with diverse expertise to combine their resources to generate solutions to problems over a period of time" (p. 60). Such collaboration among educational practitioners, parents/whanau, students and other professionals is imperative when meeting the special education needs of students in an inclusive education paradigm (Mitchell, 2010). Mentis, Quinn and Ryba (2005) characterise collaborative consultation as an interactive process whereby a problem-solving model is used in order that "the 'whole' student is considered rather than each team member working in isolation on a 'piece' of the student" (p. 80).

Collaborative consultation is facilitated through team members recognising the professionals they learn with, from and about, and how, through drawing on other

members' knowledge, they can learn new information, thereby increasing their own understandings i.e. *interprofessional education* (Mentis et al., 2013). However, if effective connections are to be developed, educational practitioners also need to value the cultures of their students' families, and parents need to learn about and value the educational culture of the school. This reflects the principle of *ako* (reciprocal learning and teaching), which Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) posit is fundamental to developing connections that work.

Collaborative-consultation: The evidence base

When reviewing the evidence on the impact of collaborative consultation on the learning outcomes for students, there is limited research-based evidence to support its effectiveness (Mitchell, 2008; Gable, Mostert & Tonelson, 2004). While the setting up of consultation models in education is encouraged, research-based support "has been accumulating only slowly" (Mitchell, 2008, p.64). There is, however, numerous literature from overseas and New Zealand that examines different models of collaborative consultation, the competencies and skills needed for working collaboratively, and the perceived benefits and barriers of working collaboratively for team members (Dettmer, Thurston & Dyck, 2005; Mentis et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2010; Snell & Janney, 2000; Todd, 2007; Westling & Fox, 2009).

An area that has been researched extensively internationally, and which links to collaborative consultation, is the effectiveness of parental involvement in facilitating student achievement (Mitchell, 2010). Hattie (2009), from his meta-analyses, calculated a moderate positive effect size² for parental involvement on student achievement of 0.51, while Jeynes (2005) found high positive effect sizes from 0.7 to 0.74 in his meta-analysis on the relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement of urban elementary school students. In addition to student achievement, Hornby (2011) notes that other benefits of parental involvement include improved student attitudes, attendance and behaviour, as well as increased confidence and satisfaction for parents, and improved parent-teacher relationships for school staff. While the benefits of parental involvement are apparent, Hornby (2011) cautions that merely involving parents in school activities is insufficient, as productive partnerships need to emphasise two-way communication and the development of a partnership between the school and parents.

¹ The ten steps are referral, initial meeting, data gathering, analysis, goal setting, planning, intervention/implementation, monitoring, post-data gathering/follow-up, and reflection, review and closure. The steps are not linear and may not always be followed in order. New information may require going back to a previous step in the practice sequence (MOE, 2012a).

² Hattie (2003) identifies the effect size of 0.4 to be an average effect size for any educational intervention.

In focusing on Pasifika students' literacy and learning skills within the New Zealand education context, Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'aofoi, Taleni and O'Regan (2009) also support the importance of home-school relationships in advancing students' learning. The authors suggest that the face-to-face *talanoa* approach could be a possible framework for building collaboration between Pasifika families and schools (Fletcher et al., 2009). Through analysing Maori whanau experiences of special education, Wilkie, Berryman, Himona and Paul (2001) also espouse the importance of schools showing awareness of culturally-responsive practices, such as *tikanga* (Maori protocols/customs) and a commitment to the three principles of the Treaty of Waitangi - partnership, protection and participation. However, Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph (2003) note that not all partnerships are effective, such as those based on deficit views and which are not culturally responsive to the parents/whanau needs.

Recent research by Bevan-Brown et al., (2011) evaluating the *Tips for Autism* professional learning and development programme funded by the Ministry of Education, highlight its success in building collaborative interprofessional teams and developing participants' knowledge and skills relating to Autism Spectrum Disorder. The research implies that it is important for all team members (teachers, parents, teacher-aides and other professionals) to attend the programme as this can have a positive impact on team collaboration (Bevan-Brown et al., 2011). Such collaborative planning will lead to effective outcomes for the focus student (Bevan-Brown et al., 2011).

While the student is not directly involved in the planning team for the *Tips for Autism* programme, this raises the issue of student voice in collaborative consultation. In their report, Mitchell, Morton and Hornby (2010) argue that students can, and should be able to, participate in their own Individual Education Plans, as setting goals for learning is important for all students. However, MacArthur, Kelly and Higgins (2005) state that research evidence has shown that students with special education needs are often not consulted about their educational experiences. For example, in citing the Educable study (2000) from Northern Ireland, MacArthur et al., (2005) report that students would like to have been consulted about their perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses and the level of assistance that they require to achieve their goals.

However, while the Ministry of Education document - *Collaboration for Success: Individual Education Plans* (MOE, 2011) identifies the teacher as an integral part of an interprofessional team when

focusing on students with special education needs, there is limited evidence on the positive effects of the teacher working in a collaborative consultation model. This is because teaching has historically been conducted in isolation, with each teacher responsible for the teaching and learning of the students in their class (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Mentis et al., 2013). Goddard et al., (2007), in their study of teacher collaboration for school improvement and student achievement in 47 American elementary schools, maintain that although there is a strong theoretical base for teacher collaboration, there is little research that validates this theory, stating "Indeed, collaboration is often advocated, yet its effects are less frequently investigated" (p. 878). Studies have shown that while collaboration leads to positive outcomes for teachers (Shachar & Shmuelevtiz, 1997 and Brownell, Yeager, Rennells & Riley, 1997, cited in Goddard et al., 2007), the majority of evidence on collaboration focuses on the advantages for teachers rather than the benefits for students (Evans-Stout, 1998, cited in Goddard et al., 2007). In their study, Goddard et al., (2007) conclude that teacher collaboration is associated with increased levels of student achievement, as collaboration may foster teacher learning that improves student instruction.

Finally, this raises the question of "What is the role of the RTLB in collaborative consultation?" Thomson (2004) perceives RTLB as the link between research evidence and teachers, referring to them as 'scientist-practitioners', supporting teachers in meeting the needs of students identified as requiring behavioural and learning support. In order to facilitate this collaboration, Thomson et al., (2003) argue that RTLB require the ability to negotiate and coordinate changes in the school environment, acquiring appropriate problem-solving skills.

Collaborative-consultation: An example in practice

In March 2012, the authors were approached by their RTLB cluster manager and the service manager of MOE:SE to undertake a project involving the transition of a group of students from two special classes to the mainstream context at a multicultural primary school. This transition was prompted by the RTLB transformation 2011-2012³, and was supported by the vision of the school's senior management to move towards a fully inclusive education environment.

³ The RTLB Toolkit: Management states that: "The RTLB position is a full-time itinerating role" (MOE, 2012b, p.9). Further to this, the RTLB Toolkit: Professional Practice notes that taking responsibility for a special class or unit is not a task within the RTLB role (MOE, 2012a).

The authors' role, as practicing RTLB employed by the cluster, was to facilitate the transition of the students to a mainstream learning environment through working collaboratively with all key stakeholders (the students, school management and staff, parents/whanau, RTLB and MOE:SE) involved in the project.

The historical context of these special classes within the school and local community was both sensitive and emotionally charged. This was illustrated through the organisation of public meetings, media interviews and online social networking regarding the closure of the classes.

In critiquing this example, the four competencies for effective interprofessional collaborative practice - values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, communication and teamwork – will be drawn upon (IECEP, 2011).

With regard to values and ethics, it is essential that all key stakeholders have shared core values (IECEP, 2011). In this situation, it was working collaboratively to transition students with a diverse range of learning and behaviour needs into an inclusive mainstream learning environment. This involved respecting confidentiality, building a relationship of trust with parents/whanau and school staff, and valuing the knowledge and expertise of all stakeholders. Given the historical context surrounding the closure of the classes, it was important that the authors were sensitive to the views of all stakeholders, while focusing on developing relationships of mutual trust and respect (IECEP, 2011). For example, with regard to the students' mainstream class placements, what the RTLB and school management perceived as appropriate was not necessarily the views of the parents or school staff. Thus, it was significant to recognise the teachers who willingly accepted students from the special classes into their rooms, and in one instance, it was the students who convinced their teacher that a 'special class' student should join their classroom.

The cultural diversity of the school community, which was primarily Maori and Pasifika, highlighted for the authors, as New Zealand European, the limitations of their own cultural competence, particularly with regard to language barriers and cultural protocols. However, as relationships developed with stakeholders, the authors became comfortable seeking advice and working in collaboration. As Mentis et al., (2013) argue, cultural competence is developed through the sharing of cultural knowledge through interprofessional interaction.

In developing roles and responsibilities, a 'transition for inclusion' team was formed. This team included the authors, school management, the RTLB cluster manager and MOE:SE service manager. Team members attended transition update and forward planning meetings on a weekly basis. In their proposed model of a mainstream-special school partnership in promoting inclusion, Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua and Frederickson (2007) identify the role of the inclusion team as a key element in supporting the process of inclusion in the mainstream school. From the authors' experience of this project, we agree with the importance placed on the 'transition for inclusion' team, as without the weekly meetings the momentum of the transition process would not have been maintained.

An outcome of the weekly meetings was the development of a transition action plan. This plan supported the ten-step practice sequence, outlining the process for transition, including a tentative timeline and responsibilities (MOE, 2012a). The plan involved RTLB working collaboratively with stakeholders to collect data, such as interviewing the students, parents and class-based RTLB to obtain their 'voice', as well as setting goals and planning and implementing interventions. This highlighted that while the practice sequence guided RTLB in the transition process, the steps in the sequence are not linear, as RTLB had to be responsive to the needs of the stakeholders, which meant revisiting steps in the sequence as necessary (MOE, 2012a). For example, student perspectives on their transition to the mainstream were sought by the authors, principal and parents before and throughout the transition process in order to help monitor the students' progress in their mainstream classes.

While Wilson and Pirrie (2000) state that teams work best when roles are clarified, the example provided in this article highlights that shared responsibility, along with fluidity of roles, can also be effective. Planning meetings, to ensure the smooth transition of each student to their mainstream class, were held regularly and involved all stakeholders. Although the authors, principal and new class teachers were prepared to take the lead at these meetings, on several occasions the parents naturally led the planning process. The success of this shared responsibility was in part due to there being transparency regarding the reason for undertaking the engagement, ensuring positive participation (Pihama & Penehira, 2005; Todd, 2007).

Open communication was recognised by all stakeholders as playing an important role in facilitating effective collaboration throughout the transition process. In this respect, acknowledging the

different methods of communication, such as email, face-to-face conversations and the telephone, as well as having a good communication network among stakeholders, was pivotal. This meant that concerns from any stakeholder could be addressed quickly and feedback provided (Moltzen, 2005). An example of this was the school's principal liaising daily with each parent via the telephone or face-to-face contact to ensure the transparency of the transition process for their child. This enabled a proactive (rather than reactive) problem-solving approach to be taken. Moreover, allowing sufficient time for meetings enabled stakeholders' views to be openly shared, clarified and discussed. However, while there were no significant breakdowns in communication among stakeholders, it was sometimes difficult to know what information had been shared with whom, such as when a student's home circumstances had changed. As Mentis et al., (2013) posit, poor communication can be a major barrier to collaboration.

Working in the 'transition for inclusion' team provided a forum for those involved in the transition process to come together to share their knowledge and ideas. Throughout this project, teamwork enabled all stakeholders to work together for the same purpose and develop a shared understanding of the best way forward with regard to transitioning the students. However, Snell and Janney (2000) identify lack of training in teamwork as a potential barrier to collaboration. This is because, as Dettmer et al., (2005) note, failure to prepare professionals in collaborative consultation strategies will "short-circuit well-meaning intentions for those with special needs" (p. 42). Nevertheless, this raises the issue of what this 'training' should look like. While it could be argued that the competencies of values and ethics, roles and responsibilities and communication support the development of teamwork, teamwork could also be seen as learned through experience, involving stakeholders learning with, from, and about each other (Mentis et al., 2013).

In this respect, teamwork not only involves working with students, school staff and parents/whanau, it also includes RTLB working in pairs or teams (MOE, 2012a). This project was co-worked by two RTLB. The size and scope of the project meant that it was more feasible for it to be co-worked, and as such, a more 'open' approach to be taken i.e. 'two heads are better than one'. An example of effective RTLB teamwork was in the planning and delivery of professional development on inclusive education to school staff. This professional development was based on teachers' responses to survey questions about teaching students with diverse educational needs. From the information gathered, the authors worked

collaboratively to provide professional development that would ensure all staff developed a shared understanding of inclusive education.

Providing professional development on inclusive education helped to facilitate a positive understanding of the students in the special classes. This is because, as Monsen and Frederickson (2004) argue, teachers who espouse very positive attitudes towards inclusive policies and practices communicate these to their students who, in turn, develop a positive perception of their learning environment.

Collaborative-consultation: Lessons learned

As a result of transitioning the students into their mainstream classrooms, one of the key 'lessons learned' by the authors in the collaborative-consultation process was the importance of flexibility and being responsive to the wants, needs and concerns of all stakeholders involved. For example, the transition plan developed for one student was intended to take approximately three weeks, increasing from introductory class visits, to half-day and then full-day inclusion. However, in practice this student clearly expressed to their parent, new class teacher and the school's principal, a desire to be in their mainstream class full-time after two visits. All stakeholders agreed and the original transition plan was adapted to meet the student's request. As the IECEP (2011) points out, in focusing on the healthcare context, it is important to place the interests of the client at the centre of the collaborative consultative process.

Given the challenging historical context around the closure of the special classes and initial preconceived deficit views regarding the ability of the students from some stakeholders, the authors focused on using a strengths-based approach to ensure positive collaborative consultation occurred. Such an approach also supported a shift in the parents' perceptions of their child's ability, as prior to RTLB intervention most were apprehensive that their child's needs could be met in a mainstream context. Moreover, a strengths-based approach reinforced the importance of RTLB gathering data from a variety of sources in order to ensure that it was ecologically-focused.

The buy-in of all stakeholders, through sharing a vision of moving towards an inclusive mainstream education environment, was vital to the success of this project. According to Wilson and Pirrie (2000), teams that develop a shared vision gain in confidence and are inspired to learn. RTLB could also be perceived as what Thomson (2004) describes as 'scientist-practitioners', facilitating the link between the theory/research evidence and the teacher in the classroom. This was evident in the planning

meetings held for each student's transition, whereby RTLB supported the parents and new class teachers to collaboratively set goals that were realistic and achievable. Further to this, the value of financial support cannot be underestimated in facilitating the shared vision. The RTLB *Learning Support Fund* was used to provide teachers with release from their classrooms to participate in transition planning meetings during the school day. As such, RTLB acknowledged the heavy demands placed on teachers and the lack of teacher time available for consultation and meetings (Kearney & Carroll-Lind, 2005).

If such a project were to be undertaken again, there are two aspects that should be considered for change. The first is that it would be beneficial for RTLB to have prior experience of the school in which the project takes place. The authors did not have this opportunity, and as such, this meant it took time for RTLB to establish relationships with the school staff and community. The second aspect of change relates to providing feedback. Wilson and Pirrie (2000) espouse the value of team members being provided with feedback on their performance, and Gable et al., (2004) believe that successful collaboration is most likely to occur when all members are able to evaluate every collaborative process and outcome. While stakeholders regularly reflected on the wellbeing of the students being transitioned, the type of feedback provided to the authors on their performance was of a general nature. Such feedback would have been beneficial, as the authors could have used this to reflect on their practice and therefore consider whether a 'collaborative and seamless model of service' was being provided (MOE, 2012a).

Thus, this raises the question of "What is the role of collaborative consultation in RTLB practice?" It is evident that without effective collaboration in the RTLB role, the government's vision under *Success for All* of creating "a fully inclusive education system of confident schools, confident children and confident parents" will not be realised (MOE, 2010, p.1). This is because collaboration facilitates the six other principles that guide RTLB practice through all stakeholders learning with, from, and about each other in order to improve the educational outcomes for diverse learners.

CONCLUSION

Through investigating the evidence base that underpins the RTLB principle of 'collaboration and a seamless model of service', it is evident that there is limited research to support its effectiveness in the learning outcomes for students, both in an international and New Zealand context. This may

be due to models of interprofessional collaboration being traditionally associated with the health sector. Moreover, teaching has historically been perceived as an act that takes place in isolation. However, in order to implement the New Zealand government's vision under *Success for All* of a fully-inclusive education system, collaboration has become essential, as evidenced through this being one of the principles guiding RTLB practice.

The example provided of transitioning students from two special classes to a mainstream context demonstrates the importance of all stakeholders working in a collaborative consultation model. In order to support such a model, it is evident that the four competencies for effective interprofessional collaboration (values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, communication, and teamwork) should be considered. Through integrating best-evidence with practitioners' professional knowledge and judgement, and with the preferences and needs of students, school staff, parents/whanau, this has enabled positive outcomes for all those involved in the transition project.

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Janet Gifford-Bryan is an experienced primary school teacher who is currently employed as an RTLB practice leader in Cluster 5 West Auckland. In 2012 she completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching (Learning and Behaviour) and is passionate about working collaboratively to achieve the best educational outcomes for students. She is currently working towards completing her Masters in Specialist Teaching.

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