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CO-RESEARCHING BEST PRACTICE IN AN AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL SCHOOL: THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Research into best practice in special education has concentrated on the identification and description of practice standards against which schools can evaluate their performance and thereby guide collective efforts toward program improvement. A Queensland special school wanted to update an Australian listing of basic indicators of best educational practice for students with significant disabilities (Beamish, 1992) that they has used for over a decade. This paper reports the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process undertaken by this school to develop a contemporary listing in partnership with university colleagues. Two cycles of the process took two years. In the first cycle, staff engaged in a systematic review of the original listing and then generated new teaching practices for their school. In the second cycle, staff refined the emergent listing through internal consultation. Key learnings from this PAR experience were commitment to the reciprocities of PAR process, the value of active administrative support, and the critical leadership role of teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, as in many countries, special schools provide not only a necessary service option within a continuum of government educational provision but also “outward-looking centres of excellence” (Attfield & Williams, 2003, p. 29). While approximately 90% of Australian students with disabilities attend regular primary and secondary schools (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006), a large proportion of students with complex and significant disabilities receive their education at these segregated special schools. Australian special schools are reported as frequently being very successful in “meeting individual needs and providing a sense of belonging and participation” for their vulnerable student population (Norwich, 2008, p. 136).

For over two decades, the special school sector has been increasingly influenced by educational policies and processes related to regular schooling. Although Bailey and Dowrick (2001) reported strong leadership and high staff morale in Australian special schools, follow-up has not been reported. National curriculum frameworks and

educational standards, coupled with the press for “relentless school improvement” (Baker, 2009, p. 193), have presented the sector with ongoing challenges. In Australia, as elsewhere, many special schools have developed a culture of self-evaluation and self-improvement while also forging partnership links with other schools and external agencies such as universities in order to secure their future (see, for example, Baker, 2009; Horrocks, 2003; Neil, McEwen, Carlisle, & Knipe, 2001).

The inquiry reported here illustrates how one Australian special school community formed a partnership with university staff to meet the challenges posed by these changing times. Staff in this special school had expressed concern about new inclusive pedagogical expectations of the state government with the potential for serious curriculum-student mismatch. For over a decade, the school had used a best practice listing developed for Queensland teachers educating students with high-support needs. The listing comprised basic indicators of educational practice for students with significant disabilities (Beamish, 1992). Staff considered that this listing, with its pedagogical emphasis on practices such as individualised instruction, IEP programming, parent involvement, and respect for students, helped to deliver meaningful educational outcomes for their “difficult-to-teach” students. They believed that an up-to-date listing would continue to ensure both an authentic curriculum tailor-made to meet student needs and a capacity-building approach to enhancing staff performance. Following staff advice and as part of this school’s improvement process, its principal initiated a working partnership with Beamish and her colleague at Griffith University to provide a fresh and contemporary practice listing for the school.

BEST PRACTICE LISTINGS

Best practice standards, listings, and indicators have been routinely used in special education for over three decades to improve teacher practice and program quality (Beamish, Meadows, & Davies, 2010; Peters & Heron, 1993). It was assumed that improving guidelines for teacher practice would lead to improved student outcomes. During that time, best practice listings have been used as the basic benchmarking tool in North America and Australia to allow staff to reflect on their everyday practice and to evaluate their program performance against predetermined standards that have been itemised in the listings. Best practice items have commonly included “service delivery patterns, organisational structures, programming principles, and instructional strategies documented as effective and relevant within a specific educational context” (Beamish, 2008, p. 44).

Comprehensive practice listings developed by Meyer and colleagues (1985, 1987) and by Fox and colleagues (1986, 1987) initiated a series of North American benchmarking inquiries in the area of significant disabilities (e.g., Atkins, Campbell, & Hartley, 1987; Ayres, Meyer, Erevelles, & Park-Lee, 1994; Eichinger & Downing, 1992; Williams, Fox, Thousand, & Fox, 1990). These foundational lists also provided item content for the development of a number of practice listings in Australia. For example, Beamish (1992) generated a 35-item listing for educating students with severe disabilities in Queensland and then socially validated the listing with 183 special educators working with this student population across the state. Likewise, Chalmers and colleagues (Carter, Chalmers, Clayton, & Hook, 1998; Chalmers, Carter, Clayton, & Hook, 1998) worked with 83 special educators on a 42-item listing for the same student population in New South Wales.

Hence, research into best practice has involved large scale activities to develop and socially validate lists of practice items. These lists have been typically published for practitioner adoption for use in their own context and adaptation according to contextual demands. However, tracking how schools adopt-and-adapt a list has rarely occurred.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has acquired a proven track record of generating contextually-relevant work practices (Crane & O'Regan, 2010; Ho, 2001; Piggott-Irvine, 2010). PAR has engaged local people in multiple cycles of planning (with others), action (with others), observing (with others), and reflecting (with others). In education, this participatory version of action research has helped to change “practitioners’ practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practise” (Kemmis, 2009, p. 463). A major reason for selecting PAR has been to maximise staff involvement across the research process and to promote “joint ownership of the research, collaborative conduct of the research, and immersion of the subjects being studied in every stage of the research, from design to outcome” (Beamish & Bryer, 1999, p. 459). This involvement and ownership, therefore, has allowed staff the opportunity to appraise, collectively and individually, their practice base.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The setting for this best practice inquiry was a large provincial Queensland special school, which had a long history of catering for students with high support needs. At the time of the inquiry, approximately 100 students from preparatory (kindergarten) to late adolescent ages attended the school. A staff of 70, including 20 teachers, provided

adjusted curriculum and pedagogies. Teachers varied considerably in age, training, and experience. A third of these teachers had specialist qualifications from Griffith University. The organisational model for school operations clustered teachers, teaching assistants, and therapists into four chronologically age-based teams (known within the school as “suites” for Years 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and transition out of school), with teachers as suite leaders of curriculum and problem behaviour.

The school and university staff aspired to participate in a strong co-researching partnership (Turnbull, Friesen, & Ramirez, 1998), in which they could share the research decision making and enact their joint approach. Accordingly, it was decided that the “lead team” (Piggot-Irvine, 2010, p. 230) would comprise administrative staff, some suite leaders including Griffith graduates who had studied with Beamish, and the two university academics. The lead team then sought to build collaborative teaming within and across the school community, bringing together practitioner and university perspectives and connecting theory with practice and practice with theory as the school’s best practice listing was refreshed.

JOURNEY THROUGH THE PAR PROCESS

The methodological focus of this paper is to provide a fine-grained documentation of the research journey entailed by this process in a school setting. Although many grassroots inquiries in social planning and health sectors have used this well-established social science methodology, inquiries in education have focused mainly on school-to-work and family-school partnerships (Beamish, 2008). In education, few inquiries have described the PAR process (e.g., Ho, 2001). There has been no Australian example of this participatory version of action research and how it mobilizes a

Table 1 Overview of PAR Cycles

Time	Activity	Task	Outcome
Cycle 1 November	Planning meetings university staff + school leadership team	Inquiry initiation	
Cycle 1 January	Pupil-free day school staff	1 st Updating of listing	83 practices
Cycle 1 May	Review university staff + school leadership team	1 st Review	
Cycle 1 August	Teleconference university staff + lead teachers	2 nd Updating of listing	
Cycle 1 September	Pupil-free day school + university staff	2 nd Review of listing	52 practices
Cycle 2 January	Pupil-free day school staff	Benchmarking of school practice using listing	
Cycle 2 May	Review university staff + school leadership team	Review of benchmarking data	
Cycle 2 August-September	Pupil-free day school staff	3 rd Updating of listing	
Cycle 2 October	Review university staff + school leadership team	Final review of listing	42 practices

school community to co-research their own practice. A detailed account of two cycles of PAR will comprise the substance of this report (see Table 1).

CYCLE 1 OF THE RESEARCH

In the first year of the PAR inquiry, a series of meetings was held involving all the co-researchers (i.e., university partners and the school leadership team). Several face-to-face and phone meetings between lead team members took place to plan what needed to be done. Staff meetings were held to engage teachers, therapists, and teaching assistants in the research inquiry. Two full-day activities (the school's pupil-free days)

involved staff across the whole school in updating the listing.

Planning meetings

The parameters and design of the co-researching inquiry were negotiated at the first meeting that was held by the school's request at the university. Four aspects of inquiry design were considered. First, the lead team agreed that the conduct of the inquiry needed to accommodate class-, suite-, and school-wide levels of practice. Next, they acknowledged the importance of broader contextual factors such as the operational routines of the school and the policies and procedures of the state's

education department. Then, in order to ensure that a reliable and valid tool would be designed to help meet the current needs of the school, they adopted the Beamish (2008) guidelines for documenting best practices; namely, that a best practice should have five features: (a) substantiated by research findings and strong values in the field, (b) measurable or described in quantifiable terms, (c) feasible and targeting an achievable practice, (d) demonstrating contextual relevance, and (e) in order to maintain currency of the list, having time boundaries in place for a restricted period. Finally, the partners identified key activities to be addressed at staff meetings, and the principal committed to invest two pupil-free days in this cycle of action research.

The lead team then met at the school to map the content of activities and specific processes for engaging in the developmental inquiry. Accordingly, they decided that staff meetings would be used to encourage informal sharing and self-reflection about current practice in classrooms, within suites, and across the school. A package of readings sought from and provided by the university partners would be used to inform staff discussion, reflection, and action (Beamish, Bryer, & Davies, 2006). Selected materials comprised best practice literature for educating students with high support needs (e.g., Ayres et al., 1994; Chalmers et al., 1999; Dule, Korner, Williams, & Carter, 1999; Eichinger & Downing, 1992; Meyer et al., 1987; Williams et al., 1990) and related literature on Australian teacher leadership in school improvement (e.g., Frost & Durrant, 2003; Laursen, 2003). Finally, the leadership team mapped tentative activities for each of the pupil free days (January and September).

First updating of the listing

The principal led the first pupil-free day in January with 20 teacher participants. He oriented these staff to class-, suite-,

school-, and state-wide best practices with a Powerpoint presentation and introduced a checklist for generating and judging the quality of any particular practice. For each practice, teachers considered questions in relation to levels of (a) feasibility (Does it fit our school context?), (b) importance (Is it important to our school community?), and (c) measurability (Can it be seen to be done?).

Later in the morning, the teachers engaged in a sharing phase. They discussed their classroom practices with teacher aides and therapists (where available). Next, teachers from a particular suite joined allied teaching staff to discuss their collective practices in the suite. Staff then combined as a community of co-inquirers to share practices relevant to the school and its context (with almost all of the 70 staff participating at this time). After they broke for lunch, the teachers worked in their own classrooms to identify five practices that they considered as most important to their current teaching. All 20 teachers submitted their practice selection anonymously to the administration at the end of the day for collation and sorting into practice areas. Altogether, 83 practice items were identified, sorted into 11 areas, and forwarded to the university partners for their consideration and to provide constructive feedback.

First review of updated content

As invited, the university partners initially edited item wording for overlapping content. They took care to retain the practitioners' intention in the practice content and to avoid adding any new content. Next, they re-sorted items into more compatible areas and scrutinised content for overlap and scope. They identified two concerns that needed to be addressed at the second pupil-free day to further refine the listing while maintaining the integrity of the school's ownership

of the practices. One issue concerned the omission of some specific practices relevant to this school. For example, in the area of positive behavioural support, no practice item pinpointed the need for staff to monitor and manage individual students in a consistent and proactive manner. Staff later explained the omission as a function of its being so fundamental to daily practice that it had become almost taken for granted. Updating the listing was already proving its developmental worth. Another issue concerned the measurability of many practice items. For example, Use

of adaptive technology to assist students to achieve was an important practice for the school, but the statement needed to have observable elements inserted so that it was observable and quantifiable (viz., Students access technologies such as computers and adaptive devices that are associated with their own health care and independence). This jointly negotiated review resulted in the re-arrangement of edited items across nine practice areas (see Table 2).

Formatting into practice areas did not occur in the original 35-item list (Beamish, 1992), but the large number of items generated

Table 2 *Initial Outcomes: practice areas, numbers of items, and examples*

Practice area	Number of items	Practice example
1. Program quality	12	The school follows through with outlines, ideologies, and philosophies of best practices.
2. Productive partnerships	16	Meaningful relationships are developed with partners inclusive of parents, therapists, caregivers, and transdisciplinary teams.
3. Collegial support and professional activity	7	All staff need to be able to access varying degrees of support in order to fulfil their role.
4. Valuing students	8	Respect for individual, the individual's family, and family circumstances is displayed at all times.
5. Technology for learning	4	Students access technologies such as computers and adaptive devices that are associated with their own health care and independence.
6. Positive behavioural support	8	Challenging behaviours are viewed as indicating a need to teach alternative behaviours (e.g., communication skills).
7. Instruction	15	Students are given opportunities to make choices, provide input, and express their preferences and feelings as appropriate for chronological age-grade level expectations.
8. Teaching in natural contexts	8	New skills are taught in the context of naturally occurring activities and daily routines, including interactions with peers and adults in a variety of typical environments.
9. Individual education plans	5	IEP/transition goals are developed in a collaborative manner with parents, therapists, appropriate organisations, and school staff.

by the staff warranted clustering into practices areas. The school list contained new practice content. Specifically, collegial support and professional activity, technology for learning, and positive behavioural support were new areas with multiple practices. Moreover, the areas of productive partnerships and valuing students underwent considerable expansion.

Second updating of the listing

In August, prior to the second pupil-free day, the university partners teleconferenced with three suite leaders who had volunteered to lead staff groups to review and refine the practice items. They discussed the need to review the listing as a whole in order to remedy the omission of any other important school practices. They also discussed the need to review each item in order to check its measurability. At that point, they suggested “rules of thumb” to the teacher leaders for writing measurable practice statements and coached them about how to make a practice statement demonstrable (*viz.*, using action-based nouns and verbs). The suite leaders then divided the practice areas to share across their working groups for the forthcoming pupil-free day of staff action. Each group was to review a megacluster of three practices areas: (a) program quality, productive partnerships, and collegial support and professional activity; (b) valuing students, positive behavioural support, and technology for learning; and (c) instruction, teaching in natural context, and individual education plans.

In September, on the second pupil-free day, practice items were reviewed, rewritten, and appraised using critical staff discussion and joint reflection. During the morning session, each of the working groups refined existing item content, redistributed content across items, and added content omitted from existing material. They then checked the measurability of each practice statement

to ensure that the key element within a given practice could be explicitly observed over time. At the end of this period, the reworked items were collated for school-wide review and feedback.

During the middle session, the staff assembled in one room for individual scrutiny of all practice items. Everyone was invited to use adhesive post-it notes to attach extra ideas to any item. The morning groups then re-assembled to consider additional feedback on their respective contributions and re-edit the material as needed. At the end of this period, the consolidated items formed the pool from which to draw the school listing.

During the afternoon session, the staff took part in freewheeling, unstructured discussions about the reworked items and then used a simple voting procedure to identify practice items for school-wide adoption. Initially, all staff and then suite members discussed the relative contribution of each item to best practice within the school. Concurrent with these activities, administration staff formatted the items into a listing so that each staff member could indicate include-not include on each item. Before leaving for the day, individuals independently reviewed a hard copy of the listing, voted according to their own perspective, and completed an anonymous return. The administrative team then collated returns to identify 52 practice items for school use in the following year.

CYCLE 2

In the second year of the PAR inquiry, the principal re-engaged staff with the 52-item listing on their return from summer holidays. He allocated vital planning time to benchmark belief in and use of these practices across the school. Outcomes from this benchmarking activity produced mixed results, and further assistance was sought from the university partners. Analysis of

these results by the lead team initiated a second cycle of action, which aimed to reduce the number of items in the practice listing.

Benchmarking

On the first pupil-free day of the second year, the principal told all teaching staff that he wanted to implement school-wide use of the practice listing and then distributed a copy of the 52-item tool to them for individual consideration. In the third week, the principal and his deputy met with each teacher to discuss individual belief in and use of practices in the list. In the fifth week, suite leaders received an electronic version of the revised listing to gather data on day-to-day implementation of practices within the suite. Suites interpreted this request for data collection in different ways. All suites discussed belief in and use of practices, but only three (Years 1-3, 4-6, 7-9) documented their approaches and resulting appraisals.

The Years 1-3 suite provided typed comments for each practice (e.g., practice “needs improvement” or “yes within suites...but not across suites”). The Years 4-6 suite used a 3-point scale to rate all practices (e.g., rating of 3 denoting a highly valued and implemented practice) and provided extensive examples of each practice. The Years 7-9 suite provided global comments for each cluster of practices combined with assorted examples of implementation strategies currently used within their suite. The transition suite did not generate any print material, perhaps because their suite leader did not take part in the preparation for this review. Taken together, these differences in approaches posed challenges in terms of comparability of the appraisals across suites and perceived relevance of practice items to each suite.

Review of benchmarking data

A review of these data by the lead team pointed to two important conclusions. First, it was very evident that staff co-researchers were strongly committed to re-engage with the listing, share beliefs and current use, and generate examples of practice relevant to their suite. At the same time, it appeared that some suites tended to take different “shortcuts” in appraising practices and documenting their responses. While these shortcuts appeared to save time for these busy teachers, they complicated the expected implementation outcome from this joint action by each suite. The viability of a 52-item tool to rate practice in this school, therefore, came into question.

The university partners recommended reducing the items to a number comparable to the original Beamish (1992) set of 35 practices. They recommended that all suites might need to redo practice ratings using a consistent procedure. They also recommended that a catalogue of practices (see the Activities Catalog developed by Wilcox & Bellamy, 1987) could be assembled to share examples of practice embedded in suite activities throughout the school.

An unexpected mid-year change of principals at the special school then interrupted the actioning of these recommendations. The lead team, now including the incoming and outgoing principals, agreed that the immediate priority was to achieve a specific and measurable list of items that represented best practice across the school. The team also decided to catalogue examples of these items. An experienced English high school teacher volunteered to coordinate practice editing, and a suite leader agreed to coordinate practice cataloguing.

Third updating of the listing

Over several weeks in August and September, the busy staff engaged in

concurrent practice editing and catalogue production activities in addition to their regular duties. They used suite meetings, individual time, and a staff meeting to work through an iterative process of discussion, reflection, rewording, and collation. To conclude this activity round, the English teacher presented the final product to the school community and posed the litmus test, “Are you happy to implement these practices in your classroom?”

During the same period, the suite leader coordinated the identification and production of important listed practices that could be captured on videotape as snippets. The exemplification process involved three steps. First, criteria for the selection of practice examples were set. In particular, examples of practice needed to represent variations in student age and ability, teacher style and curriculum adjustments, and practice delivery in class, play, and community activities. Second, ethical consent was sought from families and staff, together with ethical clearance from government and university. Third, the video snippets were produced in ad hoc collaborations as time permitted.

Second review of updated content

The English teacher emailed the revised 42-item listing to the university partners for their review and comment in October. They found that the school’s editing process reduced the list of practices to fewer, more salient, and measurable statements. However, in the opinion of the university partners, eight practices still remained unmeasurable, because the items combined unrelated content. Consequently, the university partners and the leadership team held a telephone meeting to discuss the ineffective practices. These leaders then collaborated informally with other staff to rework these practice items. After two years of updating practice items, the staff celebrated their school’s final listing and

video catalogue at their end-of-year pupil-free day. Participatory inquiry takes time and may involve some misleading turns, but the co-researchers’ sense of ownership may be all the stronger for that.

LIMITATIONS

Two key limitations were associated with this labour- and time-intensive process. First, the focus on a single school provided contextually relevant practices for that setting but lost the generalisability to other settings that characterised the state-wide application of the 1992 best practice listing. Second, this inquiry addressed only the planning phase of practice reform in the school and did not undertake the companion phases of implementation and evaluation (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007). Because these action cycles were halted at the planning process, the issues of practice sustainability and flow-on to student benefits remained untapped. Future inquiries need to fast-track the planning phase, so that time and energy can be committed to the crucial phases of implementation and evaluation. In this inquiry, for example, the sharing of explicitly stated practice criteria among the staff at the beginning of the first cycle would have saved considerable time and effort.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this PAR inquiry was rich in joint action and positive in final output (i.e., school practice list and catalogue of practices). The school and university partners continued their co-researching across two lengthy cycles and worked through busy teaching semesters, time constraints, and leadership transitions. There were important learnings about the reciprocities required for PAR, the value of active administrative support, and the critical leadership role of teachers.

The participatory process is reciprocal.

The core ingredient of the partnership was the staff's commitment to collective inquiry to establish best practice in their own workplace. They invested their ongoing actions with intention, effort, and reflection. The university partners added theoretical knowledge and methodological rigour through the feedback loops in the two cycles. This partnership ensured that staff actions produced meaningful and functional outcomes. While the tasks were challenging, the trusting school-university relationships helped to keep the co-researchers focused on the outcome.

The participatory process slows and flounders without ongoing administrative support. The first principal committed dedicated time to his staff so they could engage in structured activities over an extended period of time because he expected it to deliver school improvement. In Australian schools, pupil-free days are scarce resources typically used for an assortment of professional development activities. In this case, co-researching as a school community allowed the research activities to promote professional growth. In particular, this type of professional development fostered understanding of and commitment to best practice among new staff, teachers untrained in special education, therapists, and teaching assistants. One unexpected benefit was that the second principal allowed teachers to take the lead in completing tasks in the second cycle.

Throughout the participatory process, we came to agree that teachers must be leaders (Ludlow, 2011). In particular, two teachers in this inquiry were not only part of the lead team but also played the primary role in managing staff through the many iterations across both cycles. In a sense, they were "insider action researchers" (Coghlan, 2007, p. 338), who were able to mediate between the co-researchers (university and school) and the staff. When the challenges

multiplied in the second cycle, they used their dual roles to alert leaders to problems while showing staff how to stay "on track."

The present inquiry confirms the potential value of using PAR co-research projects to promote school improvement (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007; McIntyre; 2008). Few studies of this kind have been published in the last 20 years and especially not in an Australian special school context. This inquiry into co-researching best practice blended on the spot school leadership and staff perseverance with invited university expertise. It served to "connect theory with practice and practice with theory" (Attfield & Williams, 2003, p. 28). The updated practice listing, as a final outcome, may have arisen from a sound theoretical base but was won only with great effort on the ground by all participants. It stands as a tribute to two years of "patient" action research (pAR)!

AUTHOR NOTE

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