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Researching Recommended Practice in a Special School

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Research into recommended practice in special education has concentrated on the identification and description of practice standards against which schools can evaluate their performance and direct their efforts toward program improvement. These practice standards have typically been documented in the form of practice listings. A large Queensland special school catering for students with high support needs has used an Australian practice listing (Beamish, 1992) for quality maintenance and improvement activities over the last 7 years. A school-university partnership has recently been established to update the practice listing. A series of general staff meetings and pupil free days has allowed staff to systematically share practice, examine practice, and document practice for their context.

Updating practice

Caboolture Special School sought a partnership with Griffith University in order to maintain its momentum in practice improvement. The school has used the Beamish (1992) listing of best educational practice for students with severe disabilities (see appendix) to guide practice for almost a decade. "Best practice needs to be considered as an evolving state" (Goodfellow, 2001, p. 4). The need to update practice listings to allow systematic operations to accommodate changes in school organisation, student population, and research and technologies (Carnine, 1997) is one basic criterion for recommended practice, together with values-based and evidence-based practice. Therefore, updating the 1992 listing was essential if this approach to practice improvement was to maintain its relevance to the school.

The education of students with severe disability has continued to be the function of this school. The population of students with high support needs extends from preschool to late adolescent ages and, in addition to intellectual disability, involves a complex variety of other impairments. Although the focus of school service has remained stable, there has been a continuing expansion of student enrolments. Currently, the school caters for 100 students from a large provincial catchment area.

Within the school, principal and staff have developed an innovative model of school operations that marshals these human resources into four suites or teams with teacher leadership of curriculum and behaviour (see Figure 1). Seventy staff, including 20

teachers, support a broad and comprehensive array of educational activity. Teachers in this school bring to the teaching and learning activities considerable variation in expert training, teaching experience, and background interests.

This school service has attempted to be proactive in the wider district community. Recent governmental directions in policy and curriculum have sought to use newer curriculum frameworks (e.g., New Basics Productive Pedagogies) to improve educational practice for regular schools. Viable alternatives for curriculum development in special schools were not offered at regional level.

A perceived lack of credibility and meaningfulness of the pedagogy (teaching and intervention methods) prescribed in these newer frameworks with students with high support needs had been articulated by a number of schools. For example, a teacher survey of pedagogy at a special school obtained ratings of the goodness of fit between their actual classroom practice and the respective methods espoused by Productive Pedagogies (e.g., rich tasks) and by the Beamish (1992) listing. All staff agreed there was a very good fit between their students and the Beamish practice items such as individualised instruction, parental inclusion, respectful language towards students, and documentation of IEP programs. However, they showed a much greater spread of opinion about the fit of New Basics items such as higher-order thinking, substantive conversation, metalanguage, self-regulation, deep knowledge, citizenship, and, to some extent, engagement (Red Hill Special School, 2001). Staff at Caboolture Special School expressed the same difficulties in adopting and applying this different approach to teaching and intervention with this population of students who are well-known to be "difficult-to-teach" (Wilcox & Bellamy, 1982).

Productive Pedagogies has been presented as a model of excellence in education, but it is only one model of excellence. At the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (2003), various presenters outlined a number of models for producing excellence in schools. For all of these presentations, the theme of best fit to the individual context of the school was affirmed. Moreover, some presentations highlighted the important role played by teachers in establishing excellent practices within specific schools. "Long term, sustainable improvements in the quality of learning depends on the action of teachers, whether the impetus for change arises from national reforms, school development priorities, or a teacher's belief that something could be better" (Frost & Durrant, 2003, p. 4).

Forging a school-university partnership for school improvement

The principal at Caboolture Special School made a deliberate contact by telephone with Wendi Beamish at Griffith University. He inquired whether she was interested in working with the school to revise her practice listing. Beamish agreed and proposed a process of participatory action research to work with the school on this task. This methodological approach tends to be adopted when research efforts are aimed to inform and improve practice and when the people require practical solutions that fit their everyday context for life and work (Bruyère, 1993; McTaggart, 1991; Meyer, Park, Grenot-Scheyer, Schwartz, & Harry, 1998). By using this process, the outcomes are relevant and credible to all participants and are likely to be operationalised within the context for which findings have been generated.

PAR involves "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). Hence, meetings at the university and at the school were set up to negotiate the level of decision making and management required of both parties (school and university). The collaborative teaming in PAR means that there are many possible levels of comparative exchange between school and university. Turnbull, Friesen, and Ramirez (1998) described three levels of PAR exchange that supplement traditional relationships between university-based researchers and field-based participants in the research (see Figure 2). Levels 4, 5, and 6 specify the nature of relationship between the researcher and those traditionally seen as the subjects being studied (constituents or participants) in the PAR research process.

The first meeting at university involved the school principal, Beamish, and another university colleague. A critical agreement reached at this meeting was that the school and university would function as coresearchers (see Figure 1, Level 5). Joint ownership meant that both parties had to agree on the project goals and the design of the project to revise the Beamish (1992) practice listing. Because the school took the lead in initiating the research collaboration and in conducting the implementation of the research design, this project also contained "leadership" elements of a Level 6 partnership. Table 1 presents the results of the mapping activity undertaken to help shape goals and dimensions of the project at the school.

Table 1.
Four Levels^a of Practice in Operation at Caboolture Special School

MACROLEVEL	EXOLEVEL	MESOLEVEL	MICROLEVEL
Class-wide	Everyday practice	Specific actions (practice in teacher use)	Instructions and interactions
Suite-wide	Operational routines	Patterns of action (practice in team use)	Protocol and procedures for suites
School-wide	Legislative requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School documents for action • Budget provision for action (elements to support practice) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment • Mechanisms for professional development
Community-wide (public theory)	Research literature	Recommended practice to action (evidence-based practice)	Practice validation (empirical) Practice fidelity (measurable and doable)

^aBronfenbrenner (1979) devised an ecological model in which the environment is conceptualised as a series of nested structures or levels: macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem.

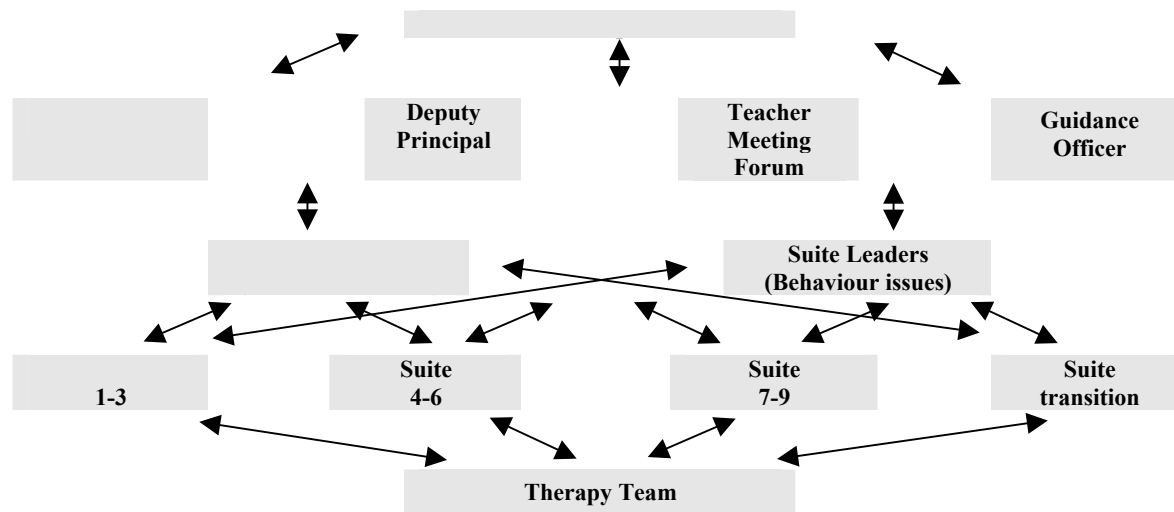


Figure 1.
Staff structures in operation at Caboolture Special School.

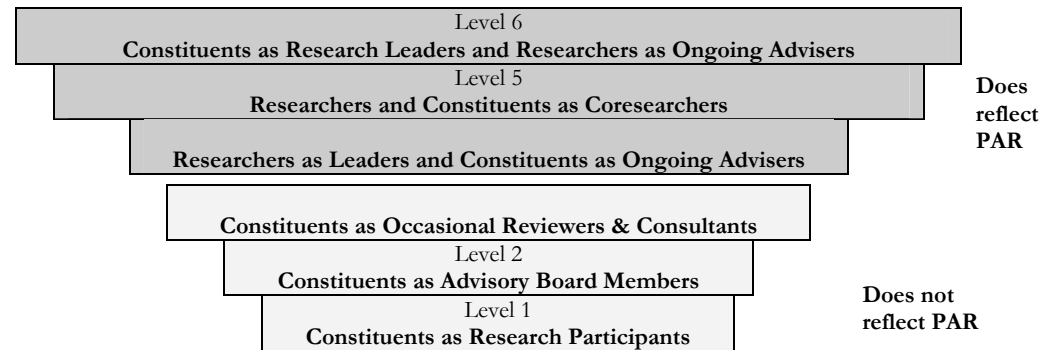


Figure 2. Continuum of constituent participation in research (adapted from Turnbull et al., 1998, p. 182).

Practices in the revised listing, therefore, would have to be drawn from public theory and would have to accommodate the class-, suite-, and school-wide levels of practice in the school. The design for the project would have to take into account everyday practice, operational routines, legislative requirements, and literature guidelines for conducting a best practice project. Prior to practice identification, school staff would need to share specific actions, patterns of action, school provisions, and practice literature relevant to this setting. When identifying revised practices for the school, teachers would need to consider classroom instructions and interactions; protocols and procedures in suites; departmental and school policy for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and related training and professional development; and to reflect on whether practices have an empirical basis and are measurable and doable.

Mapping activities also raised several other issues relating to the practice listing, relevant literature, and a school site visit by the university members of the project team. First, there was discussion about the 1992 practice listing, which contained class-wide and school-wide practices and discussion about changes since 1992 in research directions in the inclusion literature, which were fostering increased emphasis on school-wide supports. Second, there was additional discussion about the need to prime staff with core literature on recommended practice for educating students with high support needs (e.g., Ayres, Meyer, Erevelles, & Park-Lee, 1994; Chalmers, Carter, Clayton, & Hook, 1999; Dule, Korner, Williams, & Carter, 1999; Eichinger & Downing, 1992; Meyer, 1994; Meyer, Eichinger, & Park-Lee, 1987; Williams, Fox, Thousand, & Fox, 1990) and contemporary literature on teacher leadership in school improvement (e.g., Frost & Durrant, 2003; Heward, 2003; Laursen, 2003). Third, arrangements were made for the site visit.

The second meeting at the school involved the same three participants. The primary purpose of this meeting was to discuss how the PAR process could be implemented in conjunction with (a) research guidelines for the identification and validation of recommended practice and with (b) the projected dates for staff meetings and two pupil-free days remaining in the year. The essential component of the desirable research process outlined at this meeting was an iterative, consensus building process to share existing practice, then to generate a range of practices, and then to collectively determine which of these practices attracted most agreement and support from the participants (Beamish, 1996). A time slot in a scheduled staff meeting was devoted to a preliminary session to introduce staff to the process: The principal discussed the tasks and timelines involved in the school review of the practice listing and encouraged staff to read the selected literature prior to practice sharing and generation. Three sequential activities would be embedded in pupil-free days scheduled for Terms 3 and 4 of the school year, when staff could spend a whole day on the practices.

Day 1 procedure

The principal led the first pupil-free day in August. Participants were 18 female teachers. Two male teacher absent from the day subsequently contributed by generating individual ideas about practices. To kickstart the day, the principal gave a Powerpoint presentation, in which he stated that class-wide, suite-wide, school-wide, and state-wide practices

should be considered. He emphasised that each practice should be generated and judged for quality in terms of three questions.

1. Does it fit our school context?
2. Is it important to our school community?
3. Can it be seen to be done?

The three questions in this checklist would serve to contextualise practice in relation to feasibility, priority, and measurability.

Across the day, teachers discussed their classroom practices with teacher aides and therapists (where available). Teachers from a particular suite then joined allied teaching staff to discuss their collective practices in the suite. Teaching staff then combined as a whole staff to share practices relevant to the total school and to the Queensland context. After teachers engaged in this sharing phase and after they broke for lunch, each teacher worked alone in her classroom to identify the five practices most important to her. Each teacher delivered her list to administration at the end of the day.

Day 1 results

The principal collated, sorted, and grouped the lists submitted by the 20 teachers. He identified 83 individual contributions, which he clustered into eleven sets. He then forwarded this compiled list to the university partners for inspection and feedback. He included a comment that the process had worked quite smoothly.

The university advisers examined this initial "brainstorming" material and undertook a series of activities to process the material (see Table 2). They observed some duplication of items. They transferred some items into another set, with which the items were more compatible. Moreover, they reduced the number of sets of items from eleven to nine. Two sets had very few items, and two sets involved overlapping topics.

Furthermore, the order of the sets of items was restructured to establish a more natural progression of practices (see Table 2). Three superordinate clusters were then created for subsequent use on Day 2. Final inspection of the reshuffled sets of items suggested there were some apparent omissions among the individual items that could be brought to the attention of teachers at the Day 2 activity.

Day 2 preparations

The university advisers planned to support teacher-led activities in the second pupil-free day. For this day, there were two major tasks: (a) to write specific practice statement from the Day 1 priming material that was processed at university and (b) to rank practices for adoption in the school through a consensus-building process. Teachers would lead the Day 2 process in October, with the support of the principal and the university partners. Results will be reported at the conference.

Table 2

Day 1 Results

PRACTICE AREA	NUMBER OF ITEMS	EXAMPLE
1. Valued towards students	8	Respect for individual, the individual's family, and family circumstances should be displayed at all times.
2. Program quality	12	The school should follow through with outlines, ideologies, and philosophies of best practices.
3. Productive partnerships	16	Meaningful relationships are developed with partners inclusive of parents, therapists, caregivers, and transdisciplinary teams.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Technology for learning	4	Students access technologies such as computers and adaptive devices that are associated with their own health care and independence.
7. Individual education plans	5	IEP transition goals should be developed in a collaborative manner with parents, therapists, appropriate organisations, and school staff.
8. Positive behavioural support	8	Challenging behaviours are viewed as indicating a need to teach alternative behaviours (e.g., communication skills).
9. Collegial support and professional activity	7	All staff need to be able to access varying degrees of support in order to fulfil their role.

Writing statements was expected to involve (a) refinement of practices by combining practices or separating aspects of practices into individual items and (b) insertion of practices omitted from the Day 1 material. The university advisors would provide coaching, prior to the second pupil-free day, for teachers who would act as leaders for the writing of statements for one of three superordinate clusters. The first cluster of practices comprised values towards students, positive behavioural support, and technology for learning. The second cluster comprised instruction, teaching in natural context, and individual education plans. The third cluster comprised program quality, productive partnerships, and collegial support and professional activity.

After teachers generated statements, the items would be compiled. Teachers would then gather to review all items and achieve consensus that each item should be

considered as a potential item for the new practice listing. The final step in the Day 2 activities would be the use of a simple voting procedure to identify particular practices from this large set.

Conclusion

Projects in PAR at Levels 5 and 6 have been increasingly recommended in the international literature. However, few studies have been published. This local study into recommended practice, therefore, represents an effort, by pairing school leadership and university advice, to advance research into practice.

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Appendix

Indicators of Best Educational Practice for Students with Severe Disabilities (Beamish, 1992)

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- Instructional strategies are individualized to suit particular student's needs and are constantly reviewed.
 - Each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) includes priorities expressed by parents/caregivers.
 - Skills are taught directly in the context of functional daily routines and structured activities.
 - Staff talk with and about students in a manner which communicates respect.
 - IEP priorities are selected on the basis of increasing student participation in age-appropriate, functional activities in current and future home and community environments.
 - Therapists are given opportunities to participate in IEP decision making and planning whenever students are in need of such services (i.e., occupational, physio, and speech therapy).
 - The school has an "open door" policy regarding visits by and communication with parents/caregivers and other persons significantly involved with the student.
 - Individual students use augmentative/alternative communication systems and adaptive equipment as needed in an integrated manner across all activities & environments.
 - Behaviour problems are addressed within the context of the student's total education plan, with emphasis on teaching skills/activities.
 - Each IEP priority program is implemented at least three (3) times per week across one or more environments.
 - Assessment of activities and skills required to function in identified home, community, and school environments (i.e., ecological inventory) is used in planning IEPs and instructional programs.
 - Each IEP priority program has easily understood and clearly documented long- and short-term goals, teaching strategies for achieving these goals and identified data collection procedures for tracking performance.
 - The school has available current resource material for staff and parent/caregivers which addresses the following aspects - physical wellbeing, communication, social training, independent living, community participation, recreation, meaningful work, financial support, additional support services/agencies, local respite care facilities, local adult services, and local recreational/holiday programs.
 - If therapy services are provided in a consultative format, they include training of staff and parents/caregivers, organised follow-up and the monitoring of programs and equipment at least once a term.
 - The school has a process for assisting families/caregivers to be directly involved in teaching and maintaining skills in the home and community environments.
 - Settings, activities, and materials used to generalise and maintain skills are selected to match those in identified age-appropriate current and future environments.
 - The school has a process for sharing information on individual students across the whole school team.
 - The school demonstrates an advocacy role that increases community awareness and knowledge about student needs, currently and in the future.
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Reimagining Practice: Researching Change

Priority program goals (in the IEP) target activities and specify what the student should be able to do after a period of training (i.e., competence, adaptations, and limits of performance).

The school has a system for monitoring student progress that indicates level of participation on identified activities; indicates the environments in which these activities are conducted; is summarised annually; and tracks the student from entrance to graduation from school.

There is an established system for parent/teacher communication between the school and home in relation to progress on IEP priority programs which operates on at least a two-monthly basis.

If direct therapy services are provided, they are delivered in an integrated manner in the classroom, the community, and the student's home.

There is a written transition plan for each student moving from one facility to another (i.e., early intervention to school, school to school, school to adult service).

Students have regularly scheduled, structured opportunities to interact with age-appropriate nonhandicapped peers and other community members within school and local community environments.

Students are given opportunities to make choices and indicate preferences as a regular part of program planning and implementation.

Instruction emphasises predicting and preventing student error and providing feedback to students in the form of positive reinforcement & assistance (75%) and corrective procedures (25%).

The transition planning team includes the parent/caregiver, the current teacher, a representative from the next environment, therapists, and where possible, the current administrator and the student.

The school consults with parents/caregivers in identifying who are the participants in the IEP process for any individual student.

There is a systematic procedure for training and monitoring teacher aides, peer tutors, or volunteers implementing instructional programs and includes feedback on at least a fortnightly basis.

All teachers working in the area of severe disability have specific training.

A current schedule of daily activities describing what students are doing, when, and with whom, is publicly displayed within the classroom.

The school has education programs for staff and parent/caregivers on a basis of at least once a term.

All students over 15 years of age have out-of-school work training opportunities.

Data reflecting student performance is collected at least weekly on all priority programs and is used to make program changes.

Students are given opportunities to have at least some of their educational programs implemented in age appropriate regular schools (preschools, primary, and secondary).

Note. Indicators are sorted and ranked according to level of importance.