

The Long Term Implication of RTLB Support: Listening to the Voices of Student Experiences¹

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ABSTRACT

Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) have supported more than 15,000 students since RTLB 1999 by assisting teachers to manage and support students with learning or behaviour difficulties within inclusive classroom environments. Research indicates that there are long term positive educational effects for students receiving short-term intervention such as those provided by RTLB. This article reports on a narrative study that explored these effects for a small group of boys in their secondary schooling. The article outlines the study and its key results. One significant finding is consideration for how immigrant students are transitioned into NZ schooling.

Research paper

Keywords: *Boys in schools, immigrant students, narrative research, needs analysis, RTLB, RTLB training*

INTRODUCTION

This article is about Poobie's inquiry in 2008/2009 that explored the perspectives of six secondary school students who had been supported by an RTLB in the past. The study captured the experiences of the students with RTLBs, their difficulties in school both past and present, and how they were currently coping with school through their narratives. Paul joined the process as Poobie's supervisor. The article is written in the first person by Poobie.

BACKGROUND

Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour were established in New Zealand schools in 1999 as part of the Special Education 2000 (SE2000) policy. This service is a school-based resource that provides itinerant specialist support to schools to work with regular class teachers to improve the educational outcomes for students with moderate

learning and/or behavioural difficulties (Ministry of Education, 1999; Walker et al., 1999). The RTLB works with individual students, groups of students, teachers, or with whole school systems (Ministry of Education, 2001). RTLBs can be seen as consultant teachers who have developed ways to work collaboratively with schools, teachers, parents and students to promote and establish an inclusive education system (Fancy, 1999; Thomson, 1998).

I was motivated to do this inquiry for three reasons. Firstly, in reflecting on my role as an RTLB, I often wondered about the impact we made on the students we supported. Was there a lasting positive impression? Have we really made a difference? How were the students coping with school after we had ended our support? I was keen to find out whether our interventions had a lasting, positive effect. This interest was also influenced by Church's (2003) report that the most appropriate way to measure the effectiveness of interventions "is to measure intervention outcomes for several years following completion of the initial intervention" (p. 11).

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of SE2000 was to achieve an "inclusive education system that provided learning opportunities of equal quality to all students" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 5). The RTLB service established as part of the SE2000 initiative was aimed at assisting schools and teachers to be able to provide relevant learning contexts for all students. However, achieving the aim of including all students is a daunting task with behaviour, social and/or emotional problems presenting the biggest challenge (Rouse, 2006). Although it has been claimed that a lack of knowledge attributed to lack of training is one of the main barriers to inclusion, Florian and Rouse (2001) found that teachers do not lack knowledge of effective teaching strategies, but they seem unaware that prescriptive teaching approaches are not effective with students of differing abilities. It is positive teacher attitudes and appropriate teaching strategies that determine the success of an inclusive classroom (ibid). The role of an RTLB includes supporting classroom teachers in

¹ This article is written in the first person from the account of Poobie, the researcher. Paul supervised Poobie's thesis, and has contributed to co-authoring this article. Using the first person account informs the reader of the importance of narratives, a key methodological approach within this work.

assessing students' needs and developing learning programmes or behaviour plans to overcome difficulties that individuals or group of students may have through collaborative planning and implementation. Therefore as an RTLB the primary questions that drove my inquiry was:

1. What were the students' experiences with the RTLB?
2. What were their current experiences of school life?

The questions were intentionally broad in nature because I wanted to keep the inquiry as open as possible to ensure that the participants' narratives were not constrained in any way. Underpinning the research questions was a genuine desire to obtain insights that would inform ways in which RTLB services could be enhanced, particularly in my cluster.

METHODOLOGY

... Children talk ... but their words are rarely listened to and leave no trace. Giving a voice to childhood thus means recognising children's right to be the primary authors of their lives.

(Allodi, 2002)

I was motivated by the research undertaken by the University of Waikato – "Te Kotahitanga: The Experiences of Year 9 and 10 Maori Students in Mainstream Classrooms: Report to the Ministry of Education" (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003), in which the researchers gathered narratives of students' classroom experience by the process of 'collaborative storying' (Bishop, 1996; 1997). I was particularly interested in the Te Kotahitanga approach of listening to the stories of students' classroom experiences and the subsequent development of the rest of the project.

I was keen to hear the stories of six students - their experiences with interventions by an RTLB and their current experiences of school, long after the RTLB support had ended. I was aware that this inquiry was based on the subjective experiences of the student participants and their perceptions of their lives, narrated through their stories. I was also aware that the interpretation and analysis of those experiences relied on my own meaning-making as a researcher. However, the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world is summed up quite succinctly by Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2007) who state that "the principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself" (p. 8).

A narrative approach methodology (Casey, 1995; Chase, 2005) was chosen because it allowed the stories of the students to be told in their own voices. Since I wanted to listen to the stories of the participants the interview method was chosen as the methodological tool to collect the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kvale, 1996; 2007). Interviews are practical yet powerful in attempting to understand the "world from the participants' point of view and to try to unfold the meaning of their experiences" (Kvale, 2007, p. xvii). The principles of a narrative guided the construction, presentation and application of the interviews. The interviews were audiotaped. Interview data were transcribed and retold as stories in collaboration with the individual participants and formed the narrative text of the research (Merriam, 1998), while the analysis of the stories formed the discussion in response to the questions that initiated this inquiry.

Participant Selection

There were two criteria for participant selection. Firstly, they must have received RTLB support in the past, and second, they must be reasonably articulate to ensure that I had information-rich cases for this study that examined meanings, interpretations and perceptions (Rice & Ezzy, 2000). The names of possible participants were obtained from the RTLB cluster's database which held the names of all students who had been on the RTLB roll since 1999. I intended to have 15 possible participants, selecting 10 students to participate in the study and five students' in reserve in case one or more students from the initial selection were unable to participate. However, it was only possible to select 10 students who met the above criteria and still remained at school. There were eight boys and two girls.

Prior to commencing the research I met with the school administrator, responsible for pastoral care and special programmes, and obtained the necessary permission to undertake the inquiry in the school. The two girls were excluded from participation because of their high level of anxiety. The group was made up of four students who were born in New Zealand and four students who were not New Zealand born. I met with the eight boys briefly and discussed the project. One boy chose not to participate. This was the first and only time that the boys met as a group. It was obvious from the interaction during the meeting, that there were no friends within the group and that the students did not know each other very well, apart from seeing each other during the normal course of the school day. Subsequent contact with the boys was on an individual basis and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. The choice

of participants resolved two important ethical considerations. Firstly, I had not worked with any of the students in my role as RTLB and secondly, the possibility of the participants identifying each other in the final report was most unlikely. The necessary information sheets were provided and the participants also read and signed the consent forms. The students were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time, with no repercussions. Unfortunately, during the course of the study, one of the South African participants left school and could not be contacted to complete the interview.

The Interviews

I arranged the interviews at a time convenient to the students, making sure it did not interfere with their learning. The interviews were held in a venue that was least-intrusive and ensured confidentiality. The students were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation and I obtained their permission to audio tape the interviews. Although I approached the interviews by having a general idea about the direction they were to take, I purposely took precautions to avoid leading questions but attempted to engage with the students on a person-to-person basis (Woods, 2006). As the interviews progressed, they became more conversational and the flow was “guided but not dictated by open questions” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p. 105). The students put considerable thought into their answers.

Creating the Narratives

After familiarising myself with the transcripts I wrote a core narrative of each interview as a means of reducing the interview data to a skeleton plot so it could be seen and analysed more clearly (Riessman, 1993). The stories were linear in structure but included all relevant and important details of the interview. I centred the participant as the main voice and wrote in the first person to emphasise ownership of the story by the participant and to keep it free and separate from my own interpretation (Ely, 2007). I assumed that a first person story was more powerful than a third person account, and that the way people narrate stories about themselves express who they are and how they fit into their culture (Engel, 1999; Wortham, 2001). After I wrote each story I met with each participant again to reconstruct the stories wherever necessary.

The “richly textured, unique stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 142) provided satisfactory responses to this inquiry. The narratives, when analysed, included responses on family, culture/ethnicity, effective/ineffective teachers, bullying, specific learning difficulties/dyslexia, indifference of boys/teachers, school curriculum and transition.

However, for the purposes of this article, only the discussion in response to the research questions are examined.

What were the students’ experiences with the RTLB?

The storied experiences provided information on whether the students had a recollection of the RTLB who worked with them and were able to recall specific interventions to address their needs. The students had varied recollections of the RTLB:

In Year 5, I was referred to the RTLB who helped me quite a bit. (Anthony)

Then I got referred to the RTLB, I can’t remember her surname though, but I went to her, not so much for getting sent out of class but for just not doing my work. (Henry)

And the work was a lot harder; we had to do a lot more writing, and I wasn’t used to that. That’s when I got extra help from the RTLB; I can’t remember her name though. (Murray)

The school did refer me to this lady [reference to RTLB] who tried to put me in one day school, for talented kids. (Jeff)

But, then I got a teacher aide [referring to the RTLB], I think that’s because my mom asked for one. (Greg)

Anthony, Henry and Murray were able to provide substantial details of their interactions with the RTLBs. All three acknowledged that the support was helpful and that it had an impact on their current school experiences. For example, Anthony talked about the RTLB engaging him in specific exercises for memory and eye concentration, as well as checking in on him.

I did quite a bit of memory things, like memory card games and then she did spelling. She also came into the class and checked on how I was doing. So in Years 5 and 6, I started to get better. (Anthony)

The other students reported similar experiences:

My time with the RTLB was good because we started talking about things; not a lot about problems with the teachers but always about motivation and why I was not working- stuff like that. Yeah, it was very nice and it also made me feel like someone was concerned and listening to me. Anyhow, I found it quite useful. (Henry)

She did a lot of work with me and another kid and I got pulled out of class a lot. The RTLB would give us maths cards and we had to calculate the answer. If we didn't know, she would like show us and kept going over it. She also did reading with us. She also spoke to my parents and tried to show them how to help me at home. (Murray)

Both Anthony and Murray experienced learning difficulties very early in school. Anthony realised that he had learning problems when he was in Years 3 and 4 because he had great difficulty learning maths and spelling:

I went to the local primary school and I remember in Years 3 and 4, I started having a real rough time understanding maths and spelling. I felt really embarrassed asking people how to spell simple words and always got really low scores. I didn't want to try, because I didn't want to feel like I got it wrong. (Anthony)

Murray struggled academically in all his classes because of the misunderstanding and mismatch between the New Zealand and the education systems out of the country he came from.

When we came to New Zealand I went to a local school and was put into Year 3 straight away. I then completed Year 4 and half of Year 5. Funny thing, in [name of the country he came from] I was in Grade 1 but when I came here I went straight to Year 3. I missed out on two years and I really struggled to keep up with all of the other children, so my mom and dad moved me to another school. At the other school I got moved back a year, to Year 4, so that I could try to keep up with the other children in that year. After I did Year 4, I was sent back to Year 3. So I did Year 3 again and then went back to Year 4. Halfway through Year 4, I got moved straight to Year 6. I did not do Year 5. It was quite confusing, but I had extra help and kind of caught up with kids a little bit younger than my age group. I kind of coped though. I think by doing Years 3 and 4 again helped me catch up with my reading and maths. Year 6 was quite difficult, because all the kids were the same age as me and I wasn't used to hanging out with older kids like the same age as me. So I was kind of like quite scared. And the work was a lot

harder; we had to do a lot more writing, and I wasn't used to that. That's when I got extra help from the RTLB. (Murray)

However, both acknowledged that the extra support they received had a major influence on their learning.

Two other students, Sam and Greg, could not recall their interactions with the RTLB. However, all participants acknowledged having either learning or behaviour difficulties prior to RTLB involvement, although Sam was the least vocal about his learning difficulties and stood out from the rest as being the least interested in the academic part of school. His most exciting experience of school was when he started drumming lessons and belonged to the school band. When his music was not encouraged at secondary school he frequently stayed home to play on the computer or listen to music. He began to show an interest in school again when he took Music Studies in Year 10.

The short period of time that RTLB work with students is crucial in establishing meaningful relationships and providing positive expectations for the students (Macfarlane, 2007). Although the students did not remember the RTLB per se in this inquiry, they were positive about the nature of assistance they received which appeared to have had positive outcomes for them (Macfarlane, 2003, 2007). It could be argued that given a great length of time had passed and that RTLB are expected to work more with teachers than students, not remembering them could be quite acceptable.

What were their current experiences of school life?

All six participants reported that their current experiences of school were positive despite continuing to have some difficulties. Anthony, Murray and Greg were positive about their achievements at school and all three of them attributed a part of their progress and success in learning to their RTLB intervention. As Murray reflected... "I reckon that from where I was to now, there's been a big, big improvement in my work. I couldn't even read and write at all but right now I am capable of reading and checking the book and stuff".

Anthony also made great improvement in his reading and had writing support for his exams. Greg was focused on completing Year 13 and had minimised his disruptive behaviours. Greg finished Year 13 successfully and is currently undertaking further study.

Jeff continued to excel in his academic work but still had some difficulties interacting socially. Sam was also more positive about school and was quite involved in his Music Studies until early 2010 when he dropped out of school. Henry continues to have some minor behaviour difficulties at school but has not been excluded from any classes this current year.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This inquiry revealed positive experiences of RTLB intervention for six secondary school students, although some continue to have difficulties at school. While the RTLB had been perceived in a positive manner by those students who remembered the RTLB and their interventions, this inquiry also highlighted the need for RTLBs to be proactive in developing meaningful relationships with students (like Sam) and make them more aware of the purpose of RTLB involvement. There was also some evidence to support the impact of the interventions in the long term:

And then in Year 10, I got a reader-writer for my exams. I passed all my papers, except maths. I didn't get to finish the paper, because I struggled with some questions and stuff. I was, however, able to use the things that the RTLB taught like memory and all that, it helped me memorise all the equations and stuff. (Anthony)

An incidental finding through the stories of the non New Zealand students highlighted the structural differences in the two education systems. In adjusting to the New Zealand education system these students presented with learning and behaviour difficulties. The finding implied that RTLBs need to be aware of immigrant students' level of readiness for the New Zealand Education System when working with them.

CONCLUSION

This research was driven by a search for answers on the long-term impact that RTLBs had on the learning of students' who were on their roll. The inquiry found the long-term impact to be variable, with the greatest impact being with students who had a meaningful relationship with the RTLB. Although it was a small study, the enlightening voices from the six narratives offered an interesting insight into the lives of these students and in some small way, may influence RTLBs work with children.

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AUTHORS' PROFILES

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Poobie Pillay is an RTL in the Northern Bays cluster based in Torbay, Auckland. He started his teaching career in South Africa as a qualified physical education teacher. He then qualified as a school counsellor and spent several years as a counsellor in a secondary school. In 1996 he moved to New Zealand and took up a post in South Auckland as a Guidance and Learning Unit teacher before becoming an RTL when the transformation occurred in 1999. From 2001-2004 he taught in a Behavioural and Emotionally Disabled class in the USA before returning to New Zealand to take up his current position.

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