

An interview with Don Brown

Team leader (Southern Division) of the Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) training programme

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Don Brown has been one of the leading voices in special education in New Zealand since the mid 1970s. As director of clinical psychology training at Victoria, Chief Psychologist in charge of the psychological service, Director of Special Education prior to the Tomorrow's Schools restructuring, Chair of the Teacher Education division

of the School of Education at Victoria, and team leader for the development of the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) training programme, Don's influence and leadership over many years has been significant.

Many of the desirable practices in working with children in special education that we believe are important today were introduced and/or promoted by Don twenty years ago: practices such as inclusion, ecological assessment rather than disability classification, and parent involvement in decision making. Don has an ongoing passion and commitment to an equitable access to New Zealand education for children who require additional special educational support.

Don's description of his work as an educational Psychologist in the early 1970s when he looked for ways to reach those children in schools who through disadvantage or disability were struggling, brings through clearly the themes of working collaboratively with others in settings which are part of children's everyday lives.

"In the early 1970s a team of us in the Porirua Psychologist Service set up an in-schools programme, where we would not test kids. We didn't accept referrals but we would visit the schools on a fortnightly basis and work with the staff on issues that arose. And it worked beautifully and we got good feedback from it.

I saw the Psychological Service as a hugely important group of people able to work in the interests of teachers and children. I saw them working contextually in the classroom, and I saw them as people who could support their teaching colleagues In my thinking, you don't support teachers by taking kids away from them, you don't support teachers by giving them intelligence test reports which are indecipherable anyway and ineffective in any event.

The 1970s and 1980s were challenging times for educationalists who, influenced by overseas research and trends, were starting to believe that all learners should be included in their community schools. One of the battles was over the medical model and the categorisation of children into "conditions". Labelling children meant that they ceased to be treated as individual learners with the right to go to their local schools.

We had to prevent the terrible business that the Americans have with something like 16 categories in their legislation ... They can't take kids on the basis of their presenting position and abilities and capacities [into regular schools]. They have to take them [into schools] under categories.

This was not an easy issue, and Don recalled going into one SPELD meeting in Hamilton where he was booed because of his opposition to the inclusion of a category of specific learning disability in the Education Act (1989). In the 1970s and 1980s many Psychologists took a stand based on their reading of the literature of the time, and refused to use intelligence tests.

[Psychologists] had to be staunch and to stand up against the perceived wisdom basically of an education system that wasn't based on current research.

One of the difficulties for those psychologists was the commonly accepted use of intelligence test scores for special class placement. Don's reaction in 1986 when he was Director of Special Education was to discontinue the requirement for those tests – not a popular move among some practitioners who favoured a quick labelling method and habitually removed "problem children" from the classroom.

Back in the 1970s special classes proliferated; it was not always easy to push for mainstreaming.

I remember there was one mother in a Dawn Start programme who said she was going to get me a t-shirt which said "If it moves, mainstream it"... [But] it was a struggle to convince people that equity [of access to regular schooling] was an important social and moral issue. And it was a struggle to demonstrate that by adapting the curriculum and providing the right kind of resources, it's very difficult not to justify inclusion.

There was a lot of fear about inclusion in those days.

I remember an occasion where we had a little girl in the early intervention programme who not only had some form of intellectual disability but also had leukaemia, and she was beautifully included into a school in the area. A TV film crew

went out to do a documentary. They filmed this youngster in the classroom. The Teacher had her nicely included into the class programme. The crew interviewed the mother, and then some mothers of the other children. They all said this was wonderful and they thought it was a great idea. Everybody [said they] enjoyed her company and they thought it was good for their own kids too ... I got a telephone call from the an official of a Teacher organisation who said, "What do you think you're doing? I've heard that they're filming this youngster in the school." And he said, "That's setting a terrible precedent for the other teachers. They might be expected to have the same thing!"

As Director for Special Education, Don promoted the involvement of parents in shaping special education's directions.

I had said that no conference or workshop that we held that came out of the Special Education area, could go ahead if it didn't have a group of parents there. And not just one or two. We wanted them to be in sufficient numbers that they weren't over-awed or out-gunned by the professionals.

From one such workshop came the Parent Pack, an informative manual written about special education services by parents and for parents. It went to a second printing and was extremely well received.

In 1985 Don was the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship. On his return to New Zealand he found himself immersed in 18 months of extensive consultations that would result in the draft *Special Education Review*. *The draft review never went any further than a draft because the Minister accepted it and said that's what I want. We submitted it for overseas evaluation. We gave it to Jack Bardon and Maynard Reynolds, who both wrote back saying that it was far-sighted, innovative and ahead of its time. It didn't go as far as we would today but it was a major step to mainstreaming and toward inclusion.*

Following the Picot report in 1988 Tomorrow's Schools took education, including special education, in a different direction, and in 1989 the Special Education Service (SES) was set up as an independent corporate organisation funded largely by government contracts.

Don's reaction to this:

I was unhappy about what was going to happen to special education after 1989 and I wasn't wrong. The failure to focus on schools and teachers and students in the schools, in favour of a corporate model was, in my view, a disaster...

If you wanted special education to be effective, you had to take it away from the old [specialist] model. In the draft review we made it very very clear that it should be a needs based collaborative system involving parents, Teachers, Principals and Psychologists. Now Psychologists of course, as we all know, were decimated under the SES. And that was in my view, a disaster, educationally a disaster. You lost to education in New Zealand, some of the best qualified,

most experienced and most insightful people available. The [Psychologist] training programmes got lost. Those training programmes were described internationally as of high standing. It was a good programme and the model was evolving into today's collaborative, collegial, needs-based approach.

The implementation of Tomorrow's Schools brought a career change for Don. After a few years of working extensively in secondary school consultation and on his doctorate, he became immersed in building the new special education support service, the RTLB.

We asked how the RTLB concept came up.

If you look at the principles of the draft review, you will see them present in the RTLB guidelines. And I believe that there remained, between 1986 / 1987 and 1996 / 1997, a memory trace and some innovative work by some people in the Ministry, Merris Cochrane for one, who could see that if you wanted Special Education to be effective, you had to take it away from the old model, the specialist model.

The RTLB model was designed to provide the needs-based, collaborative system argued for in the 1987 draft Review of Special Education.

The leadership of Special Education does not need somebody with a vision, it needs people with vision ... people who understand, thoroughly understand, the developing literature. And who have the determination and the strength and the will to consistently insist on moving in the direction that the research takes us.

Don is proud of the work that many RTLB do, although he acknowledges that their output can be variable.

He was particularly concerned about those who had not taken up the opportunity for further training. *I could take you to some RTLB who I regard as doing outstanding work and not just one or two, numbers of them. But you have to remember there's nearly 800 of them. Some of them have never trained. Some of them have got equivalent degrees but not equivalent preparation ... Every single RTLB who leaves the training programme has demonstrated that they can work to an evidence-based model. Whether they still do so has to do with leadership and professional development.*

We asked about the opportunities for ongoing professional development for the RTLB service. Don pointed out that some of the research undertaken by RTLBs as part of their master's degrees was quite outstanding. Professional development needs to be a guided development model. And it can be guided from within the profession ... You have to look to those RTLB who have demonstrated a developing capacity in a scientist practitioner model. When questioned on the ERO report on RTLBs Don agreed with the recommendations, especially about management of RTLB by their local management committees. However he was not sure that the recommendations were obtained by valid and reliable methodologies.

An RTLB should be able to demonstrate that their practice is effective. The method by which they do that however doesn't have to be a standard interview measure of a student's progress. If the RTLB are working effectively, some of the youngsters they are working with won't know they are the focus of the RTLB work. So asking the students about the RTLB's work may not be valid.

An RTLB is working with a Teacher who has one or two students who are struggling with an area of work. The RTLB knows that you will not easily get a Teacher to undertake an intervention if it is focused on only one or two students which typically requires a huge amount of additional work. But you if you can work with the Teacher to engage the class in an associated activity, or even the same activity but at different levels of intensity you have a better chance of improving the situation .

That kind of approach is collegial and collaborative. It's a problem solving model. It's ecologically sound, it's inclusive, and it's a scientist practitioner model. It meets all those criteria. Why would you interview those two students? It makes no sense. What you need to do is interview the teacher about the outcomes [that they wanted to see happen for the referred students].

We discussed the challenges of the RTLB structure, with its multiple line control, and principals with varying special educational philosophies. Don was quick to point out that did not mean that the RTLB service should be taken over by any other organisation.

Any association between the RTLB and another group should be based on the capacity of the other group to demonstrate its expertise in an inclusive special education model, following ecological assessment principles and demonstrating a scientist practitioner approach to their work ... The RTLB do not need to be taken over by anybody. What they need is effective leadership and effective professional development and people with vision and courage to ensure that the model is maintained. Working with others with a comparable approach is ideal. Unfortunately RTLB are working to a developing paradigm which is still not shared by many associated organisations."

Don spoke on the subject of leadership.

..... We no longer have a central bureaucracy. We've got street level bureaucrats, about 3000 of them, one in every school. What you've got is everybody interpreting policy. And the question is have you got agreement? [among government, public servants, managers, and practitioners] If you look to see whether or not there is a synchronisation of those things at those levels, the answer is No, there isn't... I don't think it's being unfair to say that while the Ministry is producing some excellent material and engaging in essential research on effective teaching and learning it is also producing some material which is not consistent with its own policy.

Some examples were to do with de facto categorisation: the Attention Deficit Disorder guidelines, guidelines on 'learning styles', programmes for 'gifted' children.

If you believe in an ecological approach, it is not helpful to categorise with all its inherent expectations. Far better to approach each challenge in a problem solving way. What is the current ecology in which the student is presenting the concerns, what hypothesis might you agree with the teacher, what intervention is likely to work?

We've always had categorisation because human beings want to categorise, but in terms of people who are, if you like, in the know, people in leadership roles should know better.

However, the Ministry seems responsive to feedback – it recently changed its reporting requirements for RTLB from an emphasis on deficit categories to account for ecological practices.

I am impressed with the way RTLB are working to enhance the capacity of Teachers to meet the needs of students with special teaching needs. We are aware that there is no special pedagogy for special education, only intensified, targeted, adapted and modified approaches to delivering the curriculum. As I work with RTLB and schools around the country I find many examples of this close interaction. More though, I see schools, and increasingly secondary schools, adopting a strategic approach to mixed ability teaching, introducing cooperative learning into the classrooms and finding ways to meet the needs of all their students. There is some way to go (as the UNESCO and other reports show) but we are on the right track. The Ministry has made clear the need for an inclusive system based upon a sound understanding of evidence based practice. I see the RTLB and other Special Educators playing a major role in advancing that goal for all students.

The future of special education will depend on who has the controlling position at the time, as to whether or not special education will continue to move toward the development of an equitable and an effective programme. You cannot regard special education in isolation from general education. All Teachers must become more effective in working with a diverse range of students, and school systems must enhance that practice. The one thing you can be certain of is that if special education is not merged into the regular education setting then it will fail to achieve the goals of equity and effectiveness. If you keep special education focused on a small percentage of your population... if you don't allow that broader range [children who are failing] to become your focus, then special education will continue to be an appendage of the education system. Furthermore you cannot ignore mainstream education because it is into that setting that students with special teaching needs will receive their education. Unless the systems of education are consistent with the demands of the modern world, the 21st Century, the knowledge society – however you want to describe it – then we will be missing the point. We will be missing the point.

KEYWORDS:

Special education, education psychology, inclusion, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour.

AUTHOR PROFILES

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Tiri Sotiri is an RTLB based in the National Park area of the central North Island. He first met Don when he was head of the New Zealand Psychological Association, and later worked for him as Assistant Chief Psychologist when he was Chief Psychologist and Director of Special Education.