

The learning support coordinator's role in supporting inclusive literacy practice

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is one of the most important life skills. Being able to read and write effectively enhances our participation in learning, personal development and employment (Clendon & Erickson, 2009; Copeland & Keefe, 2019). Literacy instruction is the cornerstone of teaching in New Zealand primary schools. However, not all students have equitable access to rich literacy instruction (Kliwer et al., 2006). Research in the field indicates that students with complex educational needs are still denied access and taught differently or separately from their class (Copeland & Keefe, 2019; Kearney, 2009). The central focus of this inquiry was to explore and understand the barriers to literacy for some students with a particular focus on the Learning Support Coordinator's (LSC) role in supporting teachers to include all students in their literacy lessons. The key findings in this inquiry were that teachers have little evidence-based information in inclusive literacy practices to draw from (Ruppar et al., 2017), and that teacher attitudes, knowledge, time, and experience in inclusive practice impact on the accessibility of literacy for all. This inquiry looked at how the LSC has the potential to reduce the barriers teachers face and increase the potential for inclusion in comprehensive literacy instruction.

KEYWORDS

Literacy, complex educational needs, inclusion, Learning Support Coordinator

Introduction

Attitudes to inclusive and comprehensive literacy instruction for students with complex educational needs (CEN) is inextricably linked to teachers' attitudes and beliefs about CEN students' capability and attitudes towards inclusion. Inclusion in New Zealand is supported by legislation and policy including the Education and Training Act¹ (2020), and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of

¹ New Zealand signed the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 2020) in 1989. This in turn led to the change in the Education Act (1989) which legislates that all children including those with special

Education, 2007). The challenge is in the implementation. Teachers play a key role in this, yet anecdotally many teachers feel unprepared. The literature indicates that there is a belief that to teach CEN students, specialised knowledge is needed, and in terms of literacy, that knowledge is even more specialised (Flewitt et al., 2009; Kliwer et al., 2006; Toews & Kurth, 2019). Teachers want more training or professional development, time, and in-class support in the form of teacher aides (Anderson et al., 2007). This inquiry investigates teacher experience, knowledge and beliefs in including CEN students in their general classroom literacy instructions. This is through the lens of the LSC role, with the aim of providing support for teachers.

Complex educational needs

In New Zealand, students with support needs can qualify for funding under the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme² (ORS) (Ministry of Education, n.d.b). For the purpose of this inquiry the term complex educational needs (CEN) will be used to describe students who are funded under ORS as well as any student with disabilities or who are working long term at level one of the national curriculum.

Learning Support Coordinators (LSC)

A dedicated, tagged role of support in the form of a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) , was first recommended in New Zealand by Wylie (2000), in her review of Special Education 2000³ (Ministry of Education, 1996). Despite this recommendation no official provisions or formal recognition of the role was made by the Ministry of Education (Kearney, 2009).

The latest initiative from the Ministry of Education is the Learning Support Action Plan (LSAP) (Ministry of Education, 2019). In this plan the new role of a dedicated person to coordinate the support of students was recognised and funded as the Learning Support Coordinator (LSC). The LSC role is to identify, understand and plan for learners, coordinate services and support, and work collaboratively with agencies and Kāhui Ako⁴. Attention is given to the support and promotion of inclusive practices at the classroom and Kāhui Ako level (Ministry of Education, 2020). The LSC role description is eerily close to the recommendations of Wylie's (2000) SENCO role twenty one years ago.

The LSC role is new and still evolving. This presents some challenges. Across all Kāhui Ako there is uncertainty about specific areas of responsibilities, ongoing professional development, and how the LSC works collaboratively with the current SENCO (Andrews et al., 2021). Kwan (2019) notes that

education needs, have the right to attend their local school. The Education and Training Act (2020) replaces the Education act (1989) and establishes the legal framework for the New Zealand education system.

² The ORS scheme provides specialist support for those students with the highest level of need, to enable them to engage in school (Ministry of Education, n.d.b).

³ Special Education 2000 was announced in New Zealand in the 1996 Budget to help provide support and resourcing for students with special needs. The aim of the policy was to develop a fair system to ensure students with special needs received support according to their need, wherever they may be (Ministry of Education, 1996).

⁴ Kāhui Ako: Communities of Learning. A group of education and training providers that form around students' learning pathways and work together to help them achieve their full potential (Ministry of Education, n.d.a).

being asked to collaborate can trigger defensive reactions, causing tension. However, these blurred lines allow some freedom for schools to create the LSC role to suit their context and to support inclusive literacy practices.

Literature review

What to teach and where to teach

A key dimension of inclusion is an individual's right to literacy (Flewitt et al., 2009), yet limited access to literacy for CEN students has been noted in the literature. This may be due to a limited belief in capability (Kliwer et al., 2006), the content of instruction being limited to functional literacy instruction or reliant on mastery of technical skills (Flewitt et al., 2009), and the lack of research into effective literacy practice in inclusive classrooms (Toews & Kurth, 2019). Researchers agree that literacy is a human right, and assert that "people with extensive needs for support represent the last group of people routinely denied opportunities for literacy instruction" (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 92; Kliwer et al., 2006). For students who rely on augmented and alternative communication (AAC), literacy skills are needed so that individuals can communicate words or messages clearly, and are not restricted to predetermined words on the device, deemed important by others (Clendon & Erickson, 2009).

The definition of literacy can add to or hinder inclusion. A narrow view of literacy focuses on readiness to read and functional literacy. This often includes a heavy focus on reading sight words and vocabulary related to everyday living and community safety (Toews & Kurth, 2019). Flewitt et al. (2009) argue that if becoming literate is purely based on the technical acquisition of skills in a linear progression, CEN students are not included in literacy instruction of their peers, due to their perceived lack of cognitive ability. These narrow approaches have prevented CEN students from receiving explicit instruction in the multiple areas of literacy (Copeland & Keefe, 2019). A broader view is that literacy is a "development of shared meaning through diverse symbols in a social context" (Flewitt et al., 2009, p. 213). However having a too broad definition of literacy can also lead to exclusion. Erickson et al. (2009) point out, by accepting emergent and social literacy behaviours as sufficient, the further teaching of more comprehensive literacy skills can be ignored.

Given the social and oral language component of literacy, the setting in which literacy instruction takes place is important. CEN students can acquire higher levels of literacy skills in general education settings (Ruppar et al., 2017; Toews & Kurth, 2019). These settings provide greater opportunities to engage with specific curriculum content, age appropriate materials and general education content. The authors argue that currently there is limited evidence available for comprehensive teaching strategies that can be used in an inclusive setting, during class instruction time.

Amongst the research there are a few studies that are set in inclusive school settings and have a comprehensive literacy approach. The delivery of instruction varies between classroom teacher, specialist teacher and teacher aides. Burgoyne et al.'s (2016) programme includes oral language as well as comprehensive reading and writing skills. Clendon and Erickson (2009) also argue for the need for targeted intervention that focuses on the individual's area of greatest need. Alongside this

they stress the importance of a balanced literacy approach addressing all the components of literacy learning. Recently Hunt et al. (2020) conducted an investigation into the efficacy of early literacy intervention implemented by special educators and teachers with mixed ability groups in an inclusive class setting. While some new studies are emerging there is still a worldwide gap in research into evidence-based literacy instruction in inclusive settings and none that look at the role of the LSC in supporting this.

What teachers believe

Teachers' attitudes, beliefs and values play a key role in successful inclusion in schools (Carrington et al., 2013) and therefore a key role in access to comprehensive literacy instruction. Anderson et al. (2007) reported that a large proportion of teachers they interviewed believed in the philosophy of inclusion but the reality proved too hard. Some teachers thought that CEN students would be better suited to specialist facilities, where staff have the training to offer better educational content. Teacher resistance was noted in Shevlin et al. (2013). Teachers were reluctant to differentiate work for pupils judged to be 'weaker' (p. 1129). Kearney (2011, as cited in Carrington et al., 2013), found that some teachers don't feel they are responsible for teaching some students and move the responsibility to others such as teacher aides. In contrast, Avramidis et al. (2000) determined that teachers who had experience at having a CEN student in their class had a positive attitude toward inclusion, felt confident to teach CEN students, and had a greater belief in their teaching abilities.

Professional development

Anderson et al. (2007) reported the number one request from teachers they interviewed was more training. Teacher training plays a significant part in changing teacher's attitudes and beliefs about inclusion (Kearney, 2009). Teachers report they feel they lack the knowledge needed to teach CEN students and they believe that specialist training is required (Jordan et al., 2009). Such thinking is coined 'expertism' by Skidmore (2004, as cited in Shevlin et al., 2013), which relates to the children's needs and deficits and the belief that they require specialist knowledge to teach. Florian (2006) agreed, noting that teachers often perceive that CEN students require support that is beyond their peer group. Both authors argue that specialised skills or teaching strategies may help but are not crucial to the effective inclusion of all students. Florian (2006) suggests that we shift the dilemma of teaching CEN students from a problem with the learners to a problem for teachers to solve. Avramidis et al. (2000) concur, noting that professional development that is self-reflective and targets positive attitudes toward inclusion shifts teachers' thinking from the integration of one student, to being confident to adapt, differentiate and teach all students. The LSC has a key role in identifying and arranging professional development and promoting inclusive values (Ministry of Education, 2020).

What teachers want

Time and workload

Teachers frequently reported that having a CEN student in their class required more time (Anderson et al., 2007). Some indicated that the amount of time spent with a CEN student took away from the other students. Shevlin et al. (2013) and Avramidis et al. (2000) reflected that teachers indicated time constraints were a major barrier to effective inclusive practices. This included time for planning, staff

liaison and collaboration, screening and identifying pupils with learning needs, and liaising with parents to develop Individual Education Plans (IEP). The Ministry of Education recognises these barriers and seeks to address them in the LSC role description, which includes identifying learning needs and coordinating services and support (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Teacher aides

Anderson et al. (2007) reported that more teacher aide time counts as a successful support for teachers. There is no doubt that teacher aide time is valuable, however Rutherford (2012) points out that teacher aides can play a role in helping with students' presence and participation, but they can play a role in hindering it as well. Rutherford's (2012) research suggests that effective use of a teacher aide is when the teacher and teacher aide have a shared understanding of their responsibilities, and were available to help in the class and not just with one student. The Ministry of Education agrees, stating that LSC need to ensure teacher aides understand the importance of providing support without creating social isolations. LSC are encouraged to work with teacher aides to provide clear direction, help clarify their role, as well as ensure that they have relevant professional learning opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Throughout the literature, concerns have been raised that the extent of education, or right to education, for CEN students, is dependent on the least qualified and least powerful member of the education workforce (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007, cited in Carrington et al., 2013). Training of teacher aides is beneficial, but caution is needed. Increasing teacher aides' competence levels may result in an even greater delegation of the teaching of CEN students to teacher aides. Training should therefore cater for not just teacher aides but teachers and principals (Rutherford, 2012).

There is an agreement in the literature that CEN students have a right to, and benefit from, comprehensive literacy instruction. CEN students have the right to access this instruction in an inclusive mainstream classroom. Despite this, there is a gap in evidence-based practice reported in the literature. Only a small number of studies have answered the call for action for more research raised by Toews and Kurth (2019). While these studies are encouraging, further research is needed into the efficacy of inclusive literacy instruction.

Methodology

This inquiry aimed to gather information about teachers' perceptions, attitudes and meanings around teaching literacy to students with complex educational needs in an inclusive setting. This includes where the instruction takes place, what is taught, and what support teachers feel they need when including CEN students their classroom literacy programmes. Central to the inquiry is how the LSC can support teachers. This inquiry was designed on a qualitative framework.

Ethical considerations

This inquiry was guided by a university Code of Ethical Conduct for research. It was informed by the key ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and right of withdrawal. A low-risk ethics approval was granted.

The Inquiry question was:

How can I, as a Learning Support Coordinator, support teachers in teaching literacy to students with Complex Educational Needs in an inclusive manner?

Data gathering tools

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews. This framework allowed for exploration of reasons for behaviours and attitudes to events that were unfolding (such as the role of the LSC), in a natural setting of the school (Menter et al., 2011). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a one-on-one situation. The interview design had some set questions intended to capture quantitative data such as years of experience and how many CEN students were taught. The majority of the questions were open-ended with prompts to elicit further, more in depth information.

All participants received an outline of the nature of the questions prior to the interview. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Each participant received a copy of their transcript and were free to make any changes. All data was analysed using a thematic framework, guided by the initial inquiry questions (Menter et al., 2011). An inductive research approach was used to code the data and then identify overarching themes.

Participants

The invitations to participate were sent out via principals, to each mainstream primary school in the selected Kāhui Ako. The Kāhui Ako was made up of two secondary schools, 13 primary schools, and one school of a special character. It also included one special school and two schools with satellite classes. It was located in an urban area in the upper half of the North Island. Within the community there were a range of school environments from Innovative Learning Spaces to single cell classrooms. The socioeconomic makeup of each school ranged from low to high. The ethnic population of each school was varied, with some schools having a large refugee population, while other schools drew primarily from Māori and Pasifika communities.

The selection of the interviewees was purposive in that the schools needed to be mainstream schools, and have an LSC assigned to them. The special school and satellite classes were not included. There were no limitations on participation based on the types of the need of the student. Criteria for selection was based on the most recent teaching of CEN students. Six teachers responded to the invitation to participate. A maximum of six teachers could be interviewed due to the timeframe and scope of the inquiry. The participants had a range of experience teaching, and had taught between one to eighteen CEN students. Table 1 gives an indication of the range of experience and current teaching roles of the participants that were interviewed. It also shows the number of CEN students each participant had taught during their years of teaching.

Table 1: Participants interviewed

| Teacher | Experience – years teaching | Number of CEN taught | Current teaching environment |
|---------|-----------------------------|----------------------|--|
| 1 | 1 | 1 | Single cell mainstream primary school |
| 2 | 20 | 18 | Innovative learning space primary school |
| 3 | 20 | 2 | Single cell primary school |
| 4 | 19 | 4 | Innovative learning space primary school |
| 5 | 25 | 15 | Innovative learning space high school |
| 6 | 5 | 2 | Innovative learning space primary school |

Results

What to teach and where to teach

When asked specifically about professional development to support literacy with CEN students, five teachers drew from previous teaching experience. Two teachers had ESOL training which they reported helped with early literacy activities. All respondents expected the student to participate in whole class activities in some form. A separate individualised literacy programme was used by two teachers when there was a significant gap in the level of learning.

Peer and group work were used by two thirds of the teachers. No specific programmes of learning were mentioned with the exception of Reading Recovery⁵ (Clay, 2016), which was used by one teacher as a framework to assist teacher aides working in class. Successful literacy activities included normal class work, sight words, phonics, oral language work, written language in co-constructing stories, cut up sentences, peer work, guided reading, and comprehension activities.

What teachers believe

All six of the teachers interviewed held the belief that CEN students should be included in their school and classroom. Half the teachers commented that inclusion benefited the other students as well. Teacher 2 felt it was important that the belief goes wider than just the teacher and that everyone in the school needed to be knowledgeable and believe in inclusion. Teacher 4 emphasised that inclusion is more than having a student in the class:

I think people say you know we have this inclusive philosophy. Putting a child into a classroom with a point one and a teacher aide is not an inclusive philosophy. That's not

⁵ Reading Recovery is a school-based early literacy intervention that provides one-to-one teaching to help children who have made slow progress with literacy in their first year at school (Clay, 2016).

what it looks like. There is a whole pile of stuff that needs to happen for inclusion to happen. (T4)

Professional development

A common theme amongst most teachers was the limited or lack of formal training in either preservice or through professional development, to support the teaching of literacy for CEN students. One third of teachers sourced their own information via online sources, reading, asking parents or drawing from personal experiences. Participants looked to their colleagues and other agencies for information and support. These fell into two broad categories, those who provided support in school and those who provided support outside school. Inside school support included colleagues who had specialised subject knowledge (e.g. phonics), knowledge about the specific condition (e.g. ASD), or knowledge of the student themselves. Half of the teachers interviewed said that talking to the previous year's teacher was the first place they went to get information. Other in school sources of support were the SENCO and LSC, or the ORS teacher. Outside support was in the form of the Ministry of Education, Kāhui Ako, RTLB, and specialists such as physiotherapists or speech language therapists.

Experience

The results indicated that all teachers thought teacher experience was a key factor for success. This included the ability to adapt and modify literacy programmes, setting realistic learning outcomes, celebrating small steps of achievement, and being able to provide appropriate support for learning. The gap between the student's level of learning and the rest of the class made inclusion in class literacy programmes more difficult according to five teachers. All teachers interviewed talked about learning on the job:

To be honest really, you just figure it out don't you, and you use your teaching experience and your teacher training and then you adapt the curriculum for them. (T5)

What teachers want

Time

Half the teachers interviewed reported that time constraints were a key factor in inclusion of CEN students in inclusive, comprehensive literacy programmes. This included time with the student, time with the teacher aide, time with specialists, time to implement programmes from specialists, time for professional development, and time to meet with parents. Four teachers mentioned that being provided with release time was a common form of support within school. In this time teachers met with the teacher aides, planned and observed other teachers, and were released for professional development. Two teachers thought more time was needed to further support their role.

When asked what further support would they like to see, most teachers mentioned any kind of support that would raise teacher capacity and capability in literacy instruction. This included time for collegial conversation, time with specialists, professional development, practical tips, and strategies to help with students. Three teachers reported that the LSC had helped with time constraints by freeing up management, organising meetings, providing specialised support and taking the pressure off teachers.

Teacher aides

All teachers reported that having teacher aide help was useful.

... so having an TA in to give them the support that the need in the class makes a world of difference. (T6)

Half the teachers went on to qualify that you need to get the right person for the job. The roles of teacher aides varied between schools, with half the teachers using teacher aides to work one-on-one with students for some of the time. Five teachers believed that teacher aides should not be solely attached to one child but they should be used to support the rest of the class as well. One teacher reported that although teacher aides are skilled at their job, they have not had the training of a teacher so were not always suited to take targeted teaching or group work. Teacher aides were included in team planning meetings by half the teachers. One response indicated that it was important for the teacher aides to know why things were done so that they were in touch with current teaching practices:

... and often giving another little reading that might say, hey an average kid takes this many times to learn, these children can take an average of this to this. So it's helping them understand why. Why are we doing this, what is the purpose of this. (T3)

The LSC role

It was reported by all teachers that the LSC provided extra support for teachers, teacher aides, management, and students. The support fell into three broad themes: supporting teacher aides, supporting teachers and students, and supporting management. Table 2 shows the breakdown of support already provided by the LSC.

Table 2: Support provided by Learning Support Coordinators

| Supporting teacher aides | Supporting teachers/students | Supporting management |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Organising time tables | Specialised support | Frees up management |
| Finding methods and programmes | Observes and recommends action | SENCO not always available |
| Training TAs | Provides resources | |
| | Transitioning children | |
| | Connecting with agencies | |
| | Takes pressure off teachers | |
| | Organise meetings | |
| | Communicates with whānau | |
| 3/6 = 50% | 4/6 = 66% | 2/6 = 33% |

There was some uncertainty around the LSC role. Three teachers also noticed some confusion and tension around how the role was implemented and where the LSC sat within the hierarchical nature of a school.

I was really excited when I heard about the role, and I think there is an incredible potential but you're fitting a relational model into a lot of schools which are very hierarchal. And so sometimes there is a mismatch in the way that schools are actually traditionally operating and the way that the model was intended. (T4)

Two teachers commented on the potential of the role to further support learners at their school. Half the teachers reflected that they would like the support of the LSC in areas such as having another set of eyes, specialised knowledge, and resources, and in joining in the collaborative network.

Discussion

This inquiry found that the LSC has already made an impact on teachers, teacher aides and in supporting management in schools. Similar findings were reported by Andrews et al. (2021). There are still areas where the LSC could do more to support teachers in inclusive literacy practices such as time constants, training and teacher aide time. There are intertwined complexities to providing this support. This includes what teachers believe, what and where we teach, as well as addressing areas of further support teachers requested.

Addressing what and where to teach

The exposure to rich and wide language in a classroom raises the level literacy skills for CEN students (Ruppar et al., 2017; Toews & Kurth, 2019). An encouraging finding was that all teachers expected and planned for CEN students to be included in literacy activities of the class. The use of peers by two teachers further brought students into the class. There was a wide variety of literacy instruction alongside normal class literacy activities. While sight words and phonics were used by some teachers there was agreement that all literacy activities needed to be engaging and meaningful for students. Two teachers reported that a few CEN students had some time on individualised targeted teaching in addition to the class literacy programme. A right to comprehensive literacy instruction is a key dimension to inclusion (Flewitt et al., 2009). Researchers argue that targeted teaching focusing on an individual's area of need is important, but it needs to be alongside a balanced literacy programme (Burgoyne et al., 2016; Clendon & Erickson, 2009).

Teacher experience played an important part in the success of CEN students in literacy activities. The gap between the level of learning and the rest of the class was raised by five teachers as a possible barrier in literacy lessons. Four teachers noted that this could be mitigated by a teacher's experience in the confidence and ability to plan and adapt programmes. These findings supported Avramidis et al. (2000) who found teacher experience resulted in increased confidence. While this reinforced the degree to which teachers felt they had the capability, it does highlight that there is a sizable gap in research to draw from so teachers are left with little choice in approaches. Ruppar et al. (2017)

reflect that with limited study in literacy instruction in inclusive settings, it leaves the teachers with limited information on how to teach CEN students.

The LSC role has the potential to strengthen teacher capability and confidence. The LSC could look at the knowledge and skills teachers already have and build on these. Immediate support may look at what teachers know about teaching literacy, as well as what the teachers know about their learners and provide support to then maximise this in class. This could involve looking into the limited available research (Burgoyne et al., 2016; Clendon & Erickson, 2009; Hunt et al., 2020), and support teachers in adapting and implementing these ideas.

Addressing what teachers believe

If teachers are resistant to planning and teaching for CEN students or feel that they are not responsible for teaching CEN students, supporting inclusive literacy practices becomes harder. This inquiry reinforced the importance of teacher attitudes, beliefs and values in successful inclusion and right to literacy instruction in schools (Carrington et al., 2013; Flewitt et al., 2009). An encouraging finding was that all teachers felt it was their responsibility to teach all students. Teachers were not looking for the CEN student to be placed in a different facility, or handed off to a specialist or teacher aide. Half of the teachers commented on the benefits of having CEN students in their class and that the benefits extended to other students and school. This sees a shift away from the resistance and reluctance of teachers to plan for and teach CEN students (Anderson et al., 2007; Shevlin et al., 2013). While this was true for the teachers interviewed, it was noted by three teachers that the wider school community may not be as far along the inclusion continuum. It could be presumed that there are pockets of inclusion in schools, with some teachers being more open to inclusion than others. A key tenet of the LSC role is to strengthen the implementation of inclusive values (Ministry of Education, 2020). The LSC could source professional development as this plays a significant part in changing teacher attitudes and beliefs about inclusion (Kearney, 2009). Professional development should be targeting schoolwide training in inclusive pedagogy. Avramidis et al. (2000) and Florian (2006) agree that training should address thinking from what works for this child to instead what works for all children.

Addressing what teachers want

Professional development

An important finding showed that five teachers had little professional development to support their students. Further professional development was requested by two teachers. This included knowledge of the CEN student, knowledge of literacy, and knowledge of adapting the programme to include CEN. This finding was similar to Anderson et al. (2007) who found that professional development was a frequent request for support. In the absence of professional development, most teachers sourced their own learning, drew from previous or personal experience, or gained advice from the collegial or interprofessional groups they belonged to. Teachers also looked for support in a less formal manner. The results showed that half of the teachers sought out the student's previous teacher as their first form of support. Considering the reported lack of training and professional development by teachers, it's not surprising they turn to other sources for support. The LSC has the potential to help facilitate collegial conversations, and to source specific professional development.

The role description states that LSCs will “work to identify professional development needs in learning support and to arrange for professional learning to be provided” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 25).

Experience

The importance of teacher experience was a common finding, with five teachers reporting that teacher experience is key to success. This included experience with teaching literacy as well as experience in teaching CEN students. This supports Avramidis et al.’s (2000) findings that teachers that have had experience in teaching CEN students have a positive attitude towards inclusion. Two of the teachers spoke about trying things out, or figuring things out as they went along. The ‘do it yourself’ attitude is reassuring as teachers did not feel the need for specialist knowledge. This shows a shift in thinking of ‘expertism’ noted by Skidmore (2004, as cited in Shevlin et al., 2013). It speaks to the teachers’ own belief in themselves as capable teachers. However could it be, in looking to each other, relying on support already in place and with the absence of professional development, we are perpetuating the status quo? With teachers sourcing their own information, how do we as a professional body ensure our practice is evidence-based? Unlike teachers, the LSC do not have extra duties nor are they in a teaching position (Ministry of Education, 2020). This allows time for investigation and research. LSC have a pivotal role in staying abreast of current evidence-based research and ensuring teachers have access to it.

Teacher aides

Results showed that teacher aides were widely used to support teachers and CEN students. This was similar to the findings in Anderson et al. (2007), who stated that teacher aide time was counted as successful support. Teachers described a variety of ways that teacher aides were used. A significant finding was that most teachers expected teacher aides would work with other literacy groups and not just the student they were attached to. Teacher aides were considered by four teachers as part of a collaborative team. The work was planned jointly by teachers with teacher aides or ORS teachers. This was an important finding demonstrating that the responsibility of planning and teaching CEN students was not passed off onto the teacher aide (Kearney, 2011, as cited in Carrington et al., 2013). Rutherford (2012) noted that teacher aides are most effective when they have a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities. This was reflected in this inquiry which found that five schools were supporting teacher aides in understanding reasons behind teaching approaches and by providing training and professional development. Facilitating a collaborative and collegial relationship between teachers and teacher aides is noted in the LSC role description. Alongside this is the emphasis on supporting teacher aides with relevant professional learning opportunities to support their practice and develop their capabilities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The future of the LSC

It was reported by half the teachers that the implementation of the LSC role caused tension at the management level and with existing SENCOs. The strong emphasis on collaboration with the existing management structure could be a possible cause. As Kwan (2019) stated, the demand to collaborate can result in defensive reactions. It’s not surprising that some SENCOs may feel threatened as the

role description of the LSC is very similar to the SENCOs'. This tension could be a potential barrier to the direct support teachers want. Teachers have reported that the LSC provides a layer of support for management, however the degree that the LSC has to influence management decisions will vary. This will be dependent on the how the LSC role sits within existing school structures.

Limitations of the inquiry

This inquiry had several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly the small sample sizes of six teachers in one Kāhui Ako means that findings may not be transferable to other contexts or across New Zealand. All teachers were volunteers which may mean that their experiences are not reflected by the wider school community. A further limitation was that the role of LSC is new and still evolving. It cannot be assumed that the role will look the same in the future. A final limitation was the interrupted induction process of the LSC due to Covid-19, which may have added to the confusion surrounding the implementation of the role.

Conclusion and recommendations

LSC have provided an extra layer of support for schools, but there is some confusion and tension. There is a need for further information around the implementation of the role. Targeted research should follow the impact this role has on students, family and whānau, teachers and staff.

LSC have the potential to provide support to teachers in the planning and teaching of literacy for CEN students in an inclusive setting. Support could be in the form of training teacher aides, brokering professional development, or increasing teacher capability, capacity and confidence.

CEN students were included in class literacy activities. Teachers were drawing on their experiences in early literacy practices and working out things as they went along. This does speak to the notion that teachers felt capable in their own abilities. It also reinforces the call from Toews and Kurth (2019), that there is an urgent need for further research into evidence-based effective literacy practices in inclusive settings.

Limited or no professional development was a common theme with the teachers. Teachers drew from strong interprofessional collegial and collaborative networks. Collaboration by choice can overcome the barriers to inclusion, however without evidence-based information to draw from this could be perpetuating entrenched teaching practice.

This inquiry showed that teacher attitudes, experiences and beliefs play an important role in successful inclusive literacy practices. While all teachers interviewed believed in inclusive practices it was noted that this was not always shared by the rest of the school. The pockets of inclusion could be addressed with school wide professional development in inclusive pedagogy.

I think you get better at it the more kids that you have, and I think you need to believe inclusion and you need to believe in – this place is the best place for this child right now, because ... And then you need to be committed to finding ways to do it. Because you can. (T4)

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AUTHOR PROFILE



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Karen Howell is currently a Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) across two schools in Waikato and has been a teacher for over twenty years. In the last ten years, she has been a Reading Recovery teacher and a SPELD teacher, and she has also worked as an ORS teacher. Her Masters research is in Specialist Teaching with a focus on inclusive literacy practices. Karen is passionate about inclusion in in-class programmes for children with complex needs. In particular, she is interested in looking for meaningful ways and opportunities to include all children in literacy lessons.

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