

Reimagining education with Rebekah Corlett: A whānau perspective on partnership and inclusion



Tēnā koe Rebekah. Would you like to start by telling us a bit about yourself and your whānau?

Kia ora koutou

Ko Hikurangi te maunga

Ko Waiapu te awa

Ko Ngāti Porou te iwi

Ko Rongohaere te marae

Ko Rebekah Corlett toku ingoa

I'm a mum to Sophia who is fourteen. She was diagnosed as autistic at age 2 1/2; she is non-speaking and uses Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) to communicate which for her is an iPad with a communication app on it. She uses a mixture of a few spoken words, AAC, a few NZSL signs and lots of gestures. That's how she makes herself known.



We live on the Kapiti Coast which is about an hour north of Wellington. I live with my husband Jason and also our son Ryan who is eleven. Sophia is ORS funded, and she has moved in the last couple of years from a specialist primary school to a mainstream high school, which has been a massive undertaking and mostly successful.

I write a blog ***Reasonable Accommodations with Rebekah*** which explains what those experiences and education are like, and gives a voice to whānau who are supporting and keeping their child or young person engaged in the education system.

What messages for whānau do you find yourself returning to in your blog, that you feel need to be repeated?

It's okay to be unhappy about the level of support that your child is receiving. It's okay to not settle for crumbs of support that are often on offer. It's okay to ask for more, to ask why?

There's a real sense of being alone in all of this, that there's no one out there to support us. A message that I convey a lot is 'you're not alone'. There are families exactly like you out there in the community. We are all isolated from our school, and our wider school communities but there is support out there for you wherever you find it – local coffee groups, online or wherever you bump into like-minded parents.

That support is out there and it's so important that families that, to keep you going and to take that weight off your shoulders. You're not the only person experiencing this.

And key messages for educators?

That parents really want to help. I know that we often seem to bring the drama right at the start or end of the day, but we really want to be involved. Communicate with us. Let us know what's working, what's not working. We want to know what's really happening and be involved and involved in creating successful experiences for our children, not only in the classroom, but around the school, school trips, camp, the school disco. We really want to be involved, and we have skills that can help create success for our children. I think that's really important to me, that families feel that they're not locked out, on the other side of the school gate. That there is a place for them in that they're welcome. I wish more educators were aware of that, we're not just grumpy and demanding, we actually want to be part of the solution process.

We talk about whānau-centred practice and whānau partnership so much. Can you tell us what it can look like when it's really working?

I think that utilising parent-teacher meetings or IEPs is really important. You can use that not only as a time to share progress, but getting to know each other and working out modes of communication that work best for whānau. We're often time poor, so maybe an email or a quick text message to let us know what's coming up this week. That sort of thing can be a lot more meaningful than a report at the end of the term.

Use those official meeting times to understand each other and know what's important to whānau – cultural values, what it looks like at home and how you can create a stronger link between school and home. That way all the good work that's happening at school isn't lost when they come home for the day, and vice versa.

What are some of the little and often communication methods that work best for you?

I like the online portfolios like Seesaw, and just photos. Sophia doesn't speak; she doesn't come home and tell us what happened today. A photo, a snapshot of what she got up to during the day, is

like gold. Even just a quick line underneath *this is something that she enjoyed* is really valuable to us as a whānau and we can share with friends and family.

It's quite an isolating experience when other people in the family want to ask *Oh what does Sophia do at school, how was her day?* We can't always say because we don't know. But when we've got a photo to illustrate, it's a real source of pride.

We can talk to Sophia about it as well, so she knows we're showing interest in what she was doing. Even if she can't put all the words to that experience, she knows that we're interested.

And it blows them away. I don't know what they picture in their minds, but when we send pictures of Sophia helping plant trees at the farm, caring for the animals, or doing shot put at athletics day, that sort of thing, they said *Wow I didn't know she did that, that's amazing* so it's really good.

Can you talk about the journey from being Sophia's mum to becoming an ally to all whānau?

I have a sheet of paper somewhere that, the day Sophia was diagnosed, I started writing. I could tell there was a lot of noise in my head and I thought, right, I'm going to get all those thoughts out. For eight days afterwards, I wrote quick little statements about how I was feeling and one of the last ones was ***Nobody should feel like this. Somewhere in my future, I want to help people.*** I remember feeling really alone and I thought, well, I can use this feeling to drive me.

I think perspective is really important. Well-meaning people can give support, but it's a different sort of support when it's from somebody who has been there before. You don't have to spend all of your time explaining how you're feeling to someone who just gets it. Yeah, it's as simple as that.

You took the idea of I don't want to feel this alone, and made it your life's work to ensure no one else feels this alone.

The thing is, we don't all have time to go to coffee groups; we don't all have the capacity to take on other people's grief on top of our own. So it's about finding a space that is respectful, and meaningful for you. Increasingly, it is an online space. If something's a bit heavy, you can scroll on past; if it's something that's interesting to you, you can click on it and show support with a like. I think that's a real source of support for people.

Online groups like the **VIPs Equity in Education** Facebook group, where I'm an administrator, ensure a safe space for people who are at all different stages on that journey. The space was started by two grumpy mums – Sue and Glenys – who were really annoyed by changes in the education system, and outraged that whānau were not included in consultation processes. So they created this space and then it just keep growing. It became a space for people to share their experiences and to pass on knowledge to people who needed support that wasn't available through official streams. That to me is what it has evolved to now: a place that plugs the holes up of support that are unavailable.

I'm really proud of that group and what it's become. It's a very empowering space, and somewhere not just for parents anymore. It's for educators, disabled people, allies, anyone really who's

interested in understanding the gaps and wanting to contribute to conversations to improve the education system.

One thing I admire about you is the way you retain an optimism for what the education system can achieve. There are highs and lows of course, but what differences have you noticed over time?

I think there is a real appetite for conversations around racism and unconscious bias and unteaching racism in our education system and my wish for the future would be that we could be that brave in talking about unteaching ableism in the education system. Some of the attitudes and policies are actually creating more barriers to inclusion and creating inclusive spaces. Until that happens, we are just going to keep moving in the same circles of conversations and consultations.

I am hopeful that, with our work around the new Curriculum, there will be attitude changes. And, with all the work going on around Enabling Good Lives, that the voice of disabled people and disabled students will be louder and given more volume in communities and in school communities as well.

What will it look like when we get there? What's your vision for equity and inclusion once there isn't any more ableism?

I've been thinking about that a lot lately, and I think it would be classrooms without the labels. No more units, no more secret names for classrooms. No more othering. Classrooms would be physically and sensory-friendly for all students or teachers; I'm thinking about teachers with disabilities and neurodivergent teachers as well. A place where everyone can thrive.

And, thinking of families, an open door policy where you could come in and look around and feel really proud of the classroom. See a reflection of who your child is: the whole person and everything that they bring to the classroom, not just a label or a level of funding. It would be about Sophia: she's got curly brown hair, she likes Peppa Pig but she also likes Nicki Minaj. It's about getting to know the whole person and all the great things they bring to a classroom.

That would be my dream. Teachers are empowered to teach and classrooms are a reflection of the wider community. School is like a welcoming space that values all types of diversity. I think that that would be the dream. Somewhere where we can feel proud, and everyone is included and nobody is left behind.

What do we have to learn from the marae in this regard?

In Te Ao Māori, there's no word for disability. Everyone has their own strengths; everyone has challenges, but everyone has a role to play on the marae. We're all just connected and everyone is valued.

Thinking about Te Whare Tapa Whā, the whole person is valued and all of the elements have to be present for it to work. We need to respect and acknowledge a person's physical health, their mental wellbeing, their spiritual wellbeing, all of those things altogether.

That's what we need in classrooms as well. For it to be an accessible classroom, you don't just need a ramp for people who use a wheelchair. You also need to make sure that, visually and sensory-wise, it's accessible. That everyone can see it as their place, their space that they can be themselves in.



Rebekah and Sophia

For more information, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/vips4equity/>

Reasonable Accommodations with Rebekah:

<https://rebekahcorlettmnzm.substack.com/>