

Reflections on an Action Research Project

An interview with staff at Mt Richmond Special School

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ABSTRACT

Two teachers and the principal of a special school reflect on their learning from participating in an action research project focusing on the Individual Education Programme (IEP) process in their school. Their reflections illustrate not only practical applications of IEPs, but also the challenges and rewards of engaging in action research. The principal's reflections help to locate the project in the wider vision of the school.

Personal Experience

Keywords

Action research, effective practices, individualised education plans, professional development, reflection, special education teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Mt Richmond Special School in Otahuhu, Auckland, has a multi-ethnic population of 140 students ranging in age from 5 to 21 years. There are nine satellite classes attached to other schools and about 65 students attend the base school. The school's involvement in the action research component of the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project focused on examining the existing IEP process and how it could enhance the achievement of students.

A teacher of a Year 1-5 class and a teacher of a Year 8-15 class were directly involved in the project. One teacher had been at the school for three years and the other for one year. The principal, who has been at the school for 29 years, took a keen interest in the project activities. The project considered the learning needs of seven students with autism.

The principal and teachers involved took part in the following interview which provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their practice and learning.

Interviewer (I):

What were your expectations from being involved in EEPiSE?

Teacher 1 (T1):

We were offered the opportunity to be involved with the project and accepted the challenge even though we were uncertain as to whether it was intended to provide the Ministry with data or to contribute to our own practice. Initially we felt vulnerable about being asked to provide information about our students and our teaching practice to someone we didn't know. We were asked to speak honestly and frankly about issues that concerned us but naturally in speaking to an "outsider" we had to face the decision either to give filtered information or to be really honest and therefore expose ourselves. At that point we took a plunge into the unknown in order to know and learn more.

Teacher 2 (T2):

I started the project thinking that this would be an opportunity to refine the process of creating and using IEPs. I thought it would provide information and skills about the "nuts and bolts" of doing IEPs. When I came into the project I thought it was going to be a project collecting data about the effectiveness of IEPs catering for the needs of students. I wasn't sure of what exactly I was going to learn from it. Each session was a learning experience in itself, in the sense that we looked into assessments, reflective practice, classroom practice and these were all learning moments for me.

I:

Can you describe one of those learning moments?

T2:

We had a drama teacher come to work with the children. She was trying to get them to pass balls. I noticed that J struggled to even hold the ball and realised that before the activity could take place a lot more teaching was needed. We then redesigned the teaching goals by breaking them down into smaller segments such as (a) holding a ball, (b) carrying a ball to the teacher, (c) carrying a ball to another student, (d) rolling a ball to one person, and (e) rolling a ball to more than one person. Then we moved progressively to developing ball throwing skills. We also used video to record the progress of the children. After six months J had improved his ball skills and could engage in simple interactive ball games. The ball skills helped to achieve other IEP goals including turn-taking, eye contact, and relating to other students.

That example showed me how much teaching can be generated by reflecting on what I observe in the class.

T1:

I developed more ideas about data collection such as who could contribute information, and how the data could be written into an IEP, which helped me to choose appropriate goals. The data collection involved more than just recording the frequency of particular behaviours for example, spitting; what really helped was thinking about the purpose that might lie behind the behaviours. There were messages for us in the children's behaviours. The range of data sources could be observations, interview information, tests, or reports. Using a task analysis form helped to break down the activities into smaller achievable steps. I found it helpful when we were doing data collection to discuss, evaluate and select the appropriate emerging data and to reflect on choosing IEP goals.

When writing IEP goals we needed to pay attention to many different aspects of the student and their environment, such as the physical environment, emotional factors, the way the staff approach children, routines and so on. Using this process we hoped the information gathered would help us plan a teaching and learning approach more suited to each student's needs and that this approach could then build more effective programmes by helping us refine teaching strategies.

I:

Your action research was particularly interested in addressing the needs of children who could be challenging to teach. Can you explain how your IEP focus helped?

T2:

In my situation there were a number of non-verbal students who had severe behaviour concerns. We trialled some existing assessment tools but on reflection found that they were inadequate. It was clear that we needed better ways to gather useful information about what the behaviours meant. We adapted the existing assessment procedures to get more precise and purposeful data, particularly thinking of ways that we could understand the behaviours that would motivate students. The data provided me with better information to develop IEP goals that were more useful for teaching and were more meaningful for the students.

My teaching practice changed as a result, to working towards attaining the IEP goals. I found I was providing different and more motivating activities for the students. The classroom atmosphere changed, even the physical environment was altered. For instance, I used information about the students' needs and capabilities in adjusting how I did shared reading or structured physical activities. By being aware of the stimuli and reinforcers that worked for each student, and that these can change over time, I was able to improve their learning. Now I am more conscious of what relevant and workable behaviour goals can be applied with my students.

T1:

We reviewed previous IEPs and critiqued them against the school handbook. This prompted us to brainstorm how we could do IEPs in better ways. This has helped me to look more critically at the data used in IEPs. I am aware of using more suitable test information to set goals that are relevant to the students' needs. The IEP is only a starting point, the learning goes on beyond the school.

The project helped me improve my skills in goal setting and writing the IEP as well as implementation. It also showed the importance of collaborative teamwork in developing the goals. Working as a team helps you to consider more perspectives on the student and it makes you feel less vulnerable. It is not a question of who is doing what that matters, it is all of us, caregivers, parents and teachers, working for the benefit of the child.

I:

Looking back on your involvement in EEPiSE what have you learned that helps your teaching practice?

T2:

My most important learning experience from the whole project was developing my own IEPs for my students after having reflected, studied and analysed assessments and previous IEPs. Looking at different barriers to learning and reflecting on current IEPs was very useful. It was a valuable journey that began with my reflections as a teacher, my strengths, weaknesses, hopes and barriers and moved on to scaffolded professional development related to assessments and the effectiveness of the IEP. I reflected on and used existing school references to develop teaching strategies that would support working towards the new IEP goals. I can now confidently write down goals that take into consideration learning barriers, assessment strategies and teaching strategies.

I firmly believe that in order to have a conducive and challenging environment that maximises students' learning, it is very important to have an effective IEP.

I am seeing the IEPs working effectively with my students.

I:

As principal how do you think the EEPiSE activities aligned with the broader objectives of the school?

Principal (P):

In the past we relied on an assessment screening type of tool with broad steps. The increase in roll and the verification of students through the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) meant that our staffing increased markedly and we employed more than 16 new teachers from overseas who had less experience with the type of students we have at Mt Richmond. The assessment tool that we were using to guide us in the development of our IEPs was not adequate for teachers new to the school and we have been developing more precise assessment tools and a more structured and systematic process for assessing our students. Initially, staff may have felt overwhelmed but are now finding these tools give them a much clearer picture of their students' levels of functioning.

Our assessments showed the teachers the skills that the students had, but then the teachers were unclear about how to prioritise goals and write short-term learning objectives. They also needed development in selecting teaching strategies that would enable the learning objectives to be taught.

Many of our students operate developmentally below three years. Teachers have to become proficient at understanding students' behaviours and how they respond in class.

While students' skill levels can be assessed easily, other observations help teachers develop strategies to overcome barriers to learning skills. Judgements of the function of students' behaviours sometimes tended to be based on perception rather than reality. It helps if teachers understand that the behaviour can be a demonstration of student needs.

Effective IEP writing is an important task for our "Positive Behaviour Support" approach to teaching and learning across the school. Gathering and reflecting on assessment data from a variety of sources can inform teaching decisions. By seeing the purpose of gathering data it becomes more exciting and meaningful for teachers. This has been particularly relevant to the students who have been involved with the project because of their extreme sensitivity to stimuli including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is difficult for teachers to select learning goals for these very complex students.

The project gave these two teachers an opportunity to understand more about the importance of writing IEPs and the selection of appropriate teaching strategies, greater confidence in selecting and using various forms of assessment, and guided opportunities to reflect on their teaching and learning programmes. The outcomes also provided the school with useful recommendations for managers about teacher induction, school-wide assessment systems, and further training for staff, including teacher aides, in assessing and monitoring student achievement.

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Kathy Dooley has been the principal of Mt Richmond Special School for 29 years. She was an Inspector supervising special education for a short period in the 1980s, and was formerly Organiser of Special Classes with the Psychological Service prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Education and Special Education Services, now part of the Ministry.

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Reflection Task 1: Clues about classroom life

On a good day in my classroom, these things will be happening:

- Students will be on task and motivated while doing planned activities.
- Students will be re-directed to activity even if they are playing up or tantruming.
- (Child A) (Severe behavioural problems) participates in the entire morning greeting session (from tantrums at this session we have got him to sit in circle most often), works on table top activities and responds to visual and verbal instructions)

On a bad day in my classroom, the things that happen that are not the way they should be or that I would like them to be, are:

- (Child A) keeps running away from certain activities, throws tantrums (banging, hitting, screaming, throwing).
 - (Child B) gets agitated with the noise and starts crying, flinging objects at hand at (Child A). Also sometimes does this at other times. But can be redirected much more easily than (Child A)
 - (Child C) could be grizzly and bite others. This does not happen much now.
 - My teacher aides are busy with other tasks and I need them close at hand to deal with their challenges
- Some things that should happen more than they do to make this class a better place for learning, are:

- Lots of outdoor, planned activities apart from indoor activities that keep them busy but which at the same time are interesting for students like (Child A) He has very few interests.
- A particular incident in class was an eye-opener in this context - (Adult A) the drama therapist wanted my students to catch the ball and pass it back to her. I realised that this was not as simple a skill for my students as it appeared to be. I realised that this could be the beginning point of new learning and help in making and achieving new IEP goals to include waiting, turn taking, ^{other} social and behaviour goals too