

What Does it Take to Facilitate?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to capture a sense of the experience of facilitators working with schools and teachers on the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project. Facilitation skills are often used in educational contexts in a variety of forms and for a variety of purposes. A considerable body of literature provides detailed information about the skills and procedures that can be applied in facilitation. It is also of value to attend to the learning that facilitators have gained from experiencing the role.

Nine participants (including two Māori and two male) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were transcribed and the data analysed using content analysis to identify themes.

Four themes emerged from the interviews: these were (a) working together, (b) teacher self-discovery, (c) working and learning in context, and (d) useful skills for enhancing outcomes. These themes reflect a strong emphasis on the necessity for facilitators to develop quality relationships. This is consistent with current literature which recognises “being” as the fundamental skill of facilitation. The contribution of those involved in the action learning project is recognised.

Practice Paper

Keywords

Action research, collaboration, facilitation, professional development, reflection, research project, teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

Effective facilitation may indeed equate to expertise in using masking tape (Epps, 2004) but the profundity of the simple task of “making it easy” for groups to function is challenging and far-reaching in its effect. The Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) supported teachers and schools involved in the EePiSE project by providing facilitators to assist them in their action learning activities. The role of the facilitator has emerged from the project reports as one of the key elements in promoting constructive reflection and action in teaching practice.

Groups meet to make decisions, share information, plan work, learn together, create “buy-in”, and solve problems (American Society for Quality [ASQ], 2002). However, simply gathering people together in a particular forum does not necessarily mean that there will be constructive progress towards attaining those objectives; in fact it may generate additional challenges. A facilitator uses knowledge and skills to assist the group accomplish its goals (McNamara, 1999). The objective of participants in EePiSE included critical engagement in reflective practice in order to identify where and how to make adaptations to the teaching and learning context. This is consistent with the concept of action learning which seeks to develop learning from the interactions that occur while problem-solving in real work contexts (Revas, 1982). The depth and quality of this reflective process was at the heart of the facilitation role regardless of the diversity of teaching strategies that subsequently may have been affected. As Bacal (2004) comments, ‘the facilitator’s responsibility is to address the journey, rather than the destination’ (p.1).

A vast number of resources are available to provide detailed information regarding skills and strategies for facilitation (for example ASQ, 2002; Justice & Jamieson, 1998; Rees, 1998). These skills can be complemented constructively by sharing the lived experience of those who have engaged in the process (McNamara, 1999). The purpose of this article is to explore the experience of being a facilitator in the EePiSE project.

METHOD

Participants

A convenience sample of nine facilitators was invited to participate in the study. They had worked in 10 of the 24 schools that were involved in the action learning activities of EePiSE. Two of the participants were Māori and two were male. The locations of the schools (spread across New Zealand) in which they worked ranged from large urban schools to remote rural schools and included one kura kaupapa Māori. Both secondary and primary schools were represented. The participants were informed of the nature of the study and consented to participate. Most of the interviews were conducted at the symposia where the schools the facilitators were involved with were presenting summaries of their work. One interview was conducted electronically owing to the personal circumstances of a facilitator but was followed up with a face-to-face interview prior to drafting this article.

Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using the schedule provided in Appendix 1. The interview schedule was sufficiently flexible to allow participants to introduce experiences and insights that were of importance to them. The transcribed interviews were checked by the participants and any amendments were incorporated in the final transcriptions.

Analysis

Content analysis was used to examine the collected data. This is an inductive 'qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings' (Patton, 2002, p. 453). The "sense-making" includes organising the data around themes or patterns that are supported by the weight of the evidence. The transcripts of the interviews were coded to account for the full interview. Through an iterative process the common themes and distinctive individual variations were identified. The themes were grouped and subjected to peer review by a Ministry of Education senior advisor not involved in the EEPiSE project. The draft material was shared with all the participants to ensure their expressed views were adequately represented (where used) and that their anonymity was preserved. Their permission to use the quotes was confirmed. In keeping with recommended qualitative methodology (Patton, 2002; Smith, 1996), the use of verbatim evidence allows the reader to assess the validity of the interpretation provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the interview data were (a) working together, (b) teacher self-discovery, (c) working and learning in context, (d) useful skills for generating outcomes.

(a) Working together

Common to all the facilitators was a perception that building and maintaining constructive relationships was critical for effective facilitation.

In some ways I think that facilitation almost came down to the personality of the person ... because it came back to relationships so if you didn't develop a relationship then it probably would have gone to custard ...

Included in developing the relationship with the project participants was the approach that "we are all learning together" and "understanding that we are all in a different place on the inclusive practice continuum". This required both patience and time to develop credibility. Where a positive relationship already existed or time had been spent establishing one, the project was more easily activated. Participating schools as well as facilitators appear to have valued the working relationship.

I think that they saw that it was valuable to have the relationship. It really wasn't ... but may have been an outside goal, it sort of wasn't the goal of the project but it certainly was really nice to have the process, definitely.

Where the relationship developed constructively the facilitator and the school were able to adopt interdependent roles that could be a catalyst for change. Additionally, if schools had a sense of ownership of their goals, their expectations were more commonly aligned with those of the facilitator.

The actual leadership came from the school and that is where the ownership has been, so really my role has been more as a critical friend ... The most important thing here is the reminder that the school has to have full ownership. We might be a catalyst for some things but it's the school that's doing it, it has to be their vision – all we do is be a critical friend – at times clarify.

Working relationships among educators are not always easy, but even when faced with challenges, a constructive and open relationship enabled facilitators and school personnel to benefit.

The things that knocked me for a six when I was doing this were when I was in a meeting with people that I didn't know, that is staff members, who were just wanting to knock the stuffing out of me for whatever reason, whether it be ... we were moving too fast, or I was from GSE, or that ... the special ed sort of scenario where "we've got 30 kids in our class and how can you expect us to do this?" and I at times I suppose, had the stuffing knocked out of me, but then after a meeting like that, the principal and I would sit down and debrief and he and I were able to find good things that came out of it so it wasn't so bad after all. ... even though I did feel flat at times, it was easy to pick up again and keep going. Again, it was that partnership.

Mutually supportive relationships between facilitators and schools were demonstrated at the symposia presentations.

They reported that they appreciated my being there, and some advice and directions, the confidence factor even at symposia, symposium presentation ... they wanted me up on the stage there, so that sort of being alongside, that relationship and confidence building ... is useful.

(b) Teachers' self-discovery

A notable outcome from facilitators and teachers engaging in a professional learning dialogue was the evidence that teachers became more aware of their ability to confront and cope with teaching challenges. This is a particularly important outcome as 'effective teachers [reflect] on their own thinking and children's thinking as learners. They engage in reflection and planning with colleagues and use a range of methods to help to identify how pedagogical practices can be improved to benefit children and further increase their effectiveness' (Farquhar, 2003, p. 3).

I think the fact that teachers have begun to realise that what they do actually makes a difference to the outcomes that children achieve ...

And I think one of the other key outcomes for teachers was, um, a development in confidence about what they could actually do themselves, and confidence in their colleagues because there was often hidden talent in both schools which hadn't had the opportunity to come out until this type of project was in place, so many teachers found it quite validating ... and surprising and they realised they had a lot of expertise themselves ...

One characteristic of this increased teacher awareness of capability was a demystification of the myth around teaching "students with special needs" which led to teachers feeling more confident about meeting the needs of these students within their regular classroom programmes and actively seeking the input of the students in developing programmes.

Experiences during EEPiSE led to teachers realising the value of seeking student feedback and determining to make this a regular part of their interaction with students.

(c) Working and learning in context

A feature of the EEPiSE project was that the professional development or professional learning (PD/PL) was inherently related to the needs identified by each participating school and linked to their respective context. Effective professional development for educators has been described as collaborative, site-based, involving peer engagement, and involving teachers as "experimenters" (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education, 2005). Reflecting on practice within the teaching/learning context appears to have been valuable for a number of the participants in the EEPiSE project.

What was reported to me was having the theory separately and uncontextualised wasn't that helpful, but when it was brought in alongside the actual work and interpreted in the context of the actual children they were working with and in their school and community it was far more meaningful and powerful.

Not only was this approach meaningful, but it appears to have generated practical benefits for students and teachers.

The principal has been reporting some of the progress that some of the children have been making as a result of that focus, shared focus on planning for better outcomes for children. The teachers have taken ownership of their professional learning and they are looking at 'what do we need?' and they're developing and driving it and it's a huge difference to when PD used to be something where you went out there, attended a course which may or may not have been relevant, so they're really looking at what do we need as a staff? And taken ownership.

It was further observed by some facilitators that the ability of some team leaders to apply the action learning model within their school structure was a characteristic of those sites that achieved notable outcomes.

(d) Useful skills for enhancing outcomes

The predominant skill of facilitators in generating useful outcomes with participating schools was the early establishment of a positive relationship with the school. This included being available, being present and being involved.

I think, first of all, the relationship building, and that was one of the things that came from both schools, that they really appreciated the opportunity to get to know me and me to get to know them over the year that I was there. They had my phone number, my email, I was coming in and out regularly, all the staff got used to seeing my face around, they had a good understanding of my role in that, I wasn't there to tell them what to do but to help them find what they wanted to do and then help them plan it and implement it so ... they saw it as a supportive ... yeah, a very supportive role, but also challenging.

A productive relationship included a deliberate sharing of responsibilities and roles. Sometimes the facilitator had to accept that others did not currently share the same understandings and accommodate that in their work.

In my particular facility it was built on a good relationship, but that relationship was developed and continued to be developed over time. I think that I needed to be willing to take, to let the school have a part in the process ... it was necessary to ... you know, in a collaborative sort of thing for us each to have a part in it. I found that hard at times.

The feedback I got from teachers was the ability to provide safe feedback to them – they didn't feel threatened; they quite happily sought feedback on what they were doing and the effect of it.

One facilitator noted that the effectiveness of an outside facilitator "is largely influenced by the effectiveness of the in-school coordination". This may be enhanced through open communication between the school coordinator, principal, deputy principal and the facilitator (for example, setting up a group email and modelling "keeping everyone in the loop"). The modelling by the facilitator of the valued skills (whether communication, consultation, questioning, listening, or teaching) was often reported as useful for facilitation. But perhaps the most effective elements in producing change in teaching practice are fully comprehending the needs of the students and seeing the possibility of making positive outcomes happen for them.

Hugely powerful for all those teachers was recognition of that ... intimate connection with the students that often the sector is failing for whatever reasons, building their understanding of those students' needs and, from that impact, quite an emotional impact for most of them (but not all of them), a commitment to making things happen differently in their classrooms.

Facilitation occurs in diverse and dynamic contexts and involves the art of creatively using a variety of techniques (for example, Baca, 2004; Rees, 1998; Schwarz, 2002). Where the purpose of facilitation is focused on learning and improving practice rather than accomplishing a task, simply applying techniques is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes. Moreover, the nature and extent of how such techniques were applied by the facilitators at their respective sites over the time of the EEPiSE project are far beyond the limits of this study.

However, a sense of the “artistry” involved emerges from the interview data. All the interviewees emphasised the necessity of developing relationships and these provided the foundation for working together, supported teacher self-discovery, and allowed the possibility of working and learning in real contexts. The skill of “being” is central and pervasive, cutting across all other skills, for it represents the facilitator’s presence and vulnerability in creating a reflective climate in the group’ (Raelin, 2006, p. 92). The emphasis on relationships is woven through the interviews and appears to have influenced the nature of the role taken by facilitators whether as a catalyst, a critical friend, providing feedback, or as a source of confidence. To some extent (although how much cannot be assessed from the interview data) the project team relationships supported teachers discovering capabilities within and among themselves. This appears to have been related to providing a focus on the real teaching/learning practice as illustrated in the observation that:

They are looking at “what do we need?”

The teachers’ reflection on what was needed in their particular contexts promoted constructive dialogue about change in practice.

In addition to the core skill of “being”, Raelin (2006) identifies four other skills that characterise advanced facilitation praxis: (1) speaking to express the collective voice, (2) disclosing doubts or passions, (3) testing ideas to uncover new ways of practice, (4) probing assumptions and consequences. Elements of the facilitators’ reported experience indicate the use of techniques that are consistent with these four skills.

The current study only reports on the perceptions of the facilitators. The emphasis on the importance of relationships with participating teachers clearly indicates that they were also very significant in the facilitation relationship. The reports of positive change suggests that the teachers must also have demonstrated high levels of facilitation skills to bring about real change in their practice. Not least of the characteristics of the teachers was the courage to share themselves and their practice with others.

CONCLUSION

The interviews reported in this paper offer some insights into the experience of the facilitation role. It is very clear that the skill of “being” is fundamental in effective facilitation and the experiences of those involved are consistent with the literature. For the purpose of enhancing effective teaching practice a facilitator (together with participating teachers) may contribute to the creation of a learning team that provides an environment that is compatible with open reflection on practice and encourages change. The interviews suggest that facilitators performed a variety of roles and applied a range of techniques but did so as members of a learning team with a keen interest in the development of that team.

The service orientation of facilitation becomes paramount when:

- the focus of the entity is on praxis, namely, on learning from reflection on practice
- the facilitator is not just a guide to increase the efficiency of the operation or to remove the obstacles to task accomplishment
- the facilitator is committed to the learning of each member within the group, as well as of the group itself (Raelin, 2006, p. 94).

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Dr Bruce Kent is a Senior Advisor, Professional Practice, with GSE. In this role he has been the project manager for some national research projects including a portion of the EEPiSE project. He has previously been a teacher and an educational psychologist, and has just completed a PhD in health science.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions/Prompts

You have worked with school staff to provide support for professional learning ...

1. Describe the outcomes that had the most impact on the school/project.
2. What skills were most useful in generating those outcomes?
3. What does PD/PL mean to you?
4. What experiences/attributes that you have were most useful for you to work with schools?
5. What did you learn about facilitation?
6. What were the main inhibiting factors to effective facilitation?
7. What were the main enabling factors to effective facilitation?