

A Journey into Education

An interview with Pat Caswell

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ABSTRACT

Previous interviews published in *Kairaranga* have given insight into the experiences, memories and stories of the founding editors of this journal along with well-known educational leaders; people whose research or work has shaped educational practices at local, national and international levels. However, a community of practice also consists of quiet leaders, who through their daily interactions and activities also help to shape the practice of others. This is an interview with Pat Caswell, a physiotherapist and one of the quietly achieving practitioners who works every day with children and young people, their families and whānau, schools and wider teams. Pat has both influenced and been influenced by her experiences in education.

INTERVIEW

Pat is acknowledged by the therapy community as being one of the first, if not the first physiotherapist to be employed by the former Special Education Service making her a pioneer and leader in her area. Pat was less sure. “There’s a lot of people working like I do, sort of in the background, making sure things are happening for kids. The first ones [occupational therapists and physiotherapists] have all been pioneers – all around the country there are people doing great things, and I think we probably don’t recognise enough of them for that”.

This interview with Pat recognises all the practitioners who are doing great things at the classroom level. To start the interview I asked Pat to describe how she came to work in education. Having worked at Mangere Hospital (a psychopaedic institution) in Auckland, then in antenatal and postnatal services in Auckland and Dunedin, Pat moved into education in 1987. She was initially employed at the Matariki Unit (an attached unit at Forbury School) which became Forbury Resource Centre when students with disabilities were entitled to enrol at their neighbourhood school. In 1996, seeking a new challenge Pat approached the Dunedin manager of the Special Education Service (SES¹) and convinced him that a physiotherapist would have much to offer. She is still employed in the same position a decade later.

M: Would it be right to say that you often came into positions where you were the first physiotherapist to be employed?

P: Yes. For my work with children I was either the first physiotherapist to be employed, or the first to be employed after a gap in therapists, or at times, I was the only therapist in that service.

M: What did this mean for you?

P: I’d start the job and be presented with a list of names and a suggestion that I should just go out and see what I could do. A physio was seen as important but there was little understanding about specific goals for the children. But that meant that you didn’t know what you were supposed to be doing. You had to work it out for yourself.

M: Did you see that working in education would provide you with the opportunity to create your own role in a different setting?

P: I didn’t think too deeply about things back then. While I had to work out what I was supposed to be doing at the Matariki Unit (I was one of two new physiotherapists), I also learnt much from others around me, not only from other physiotherapists but from teachers and occupational therapists as well. For a while when I was the only therapist in the unit, I learnt lots of occupational therapy skills very quickly.

M: What was it like to work at Matariki Unit?

P: Children and young people came to the unit from 5 to 21 years of age. We had a physiotherapy room that had plinths and curtains that could be drawn around just like the physiotherapy department at the hospital. We worked in the withdrawal model which meant that at the beginning of each term we spent time timetabling the child into their outside class activities: physiotherapy, Riding for the Disabled, swimming, occupational therapy, the paediatrician’s clinic at the school. Every Thursday morning was the “orthotics run” where the therapists took children into the Orthotics and Wheelchair Department at the local hospital for visits to review wheelchairs, splints or footwear.

M: It must have been quite different then when the students moved out to start attending their local schools, and your work moved from “hands-on” to itinerating to the schools the students were attending.

P: In some ways it wasn’t that different in that I was working with the families who chose to move their children into their neighbourhood schools. These families wanted to have their child with a disability

¹ SES became known as Specialist Education Services after 1996, then became part of the Ministry of Education in 2002.

to be involved in their local communities for a number of reasons. Some had brothers and sisters at local schools, some were travelling quite long distances, and at about that time the special needs units started at Kings High and Queens High schools, so the older students moved into more age appropriate settings for schooling. So it wasn't difficult as I was already comfortable being around schools, through my work at Forbury and having followed my own children through the system.

M: And you knew the children and young people from when they attended Matariki?

P: Yes, I did know the children well. Naturally staff in their new schools were anxious about how the whole thing was going to work out. I think in the early days much of my work was giving a lot of reassurance to the teachers and staff. "This will be all right. You can cope with these children in your classroom and we can help you." One of the biggest changes was there weren't any timetables, and you didn't withdraw the children for treatment. If you did, there were only the medical rooms which were often also used as store rooms, or someone else was using the bed!

M: What has shaped your work in schools?

P: Education has always been important to me. At about the time I started at Forbury I managed to do a postgraduate paediatric module for two weeks in Christchurch. This gave me a taste for further learning. I was trying to find out how I should be doing my job, and the course did give me some ideas about what I should be doing and not doing but there was nothing about how working in education could be different. By the time I started itinerating, I was completing a postgraduate diploma through the School of Physiotherapy in Dunedin. I would call this the real start of my learning about education as we touched on alternative models of service delivery and were encouraged to look more widely about how we might meet the children's needs.

M: And where did you go from there?

P: This learning triggered an avalanche of wanting to know more which led to enrolment in a Masters of Physiotherapy. I never had any doubt about the topic because I had become defensive about my work in education as there seemed to be a feeling that what we did wasn't really physiotherapy. But I felt that if you were working in schools then it was obvious that things were going to be different. *The Role of the Physiotherapist in New Zealand Special Education* [Pat's thesis title] really picked itself.

I surveyed all of the physiotherapists known to be employed in special education which was about 36. I had a 97% return rate which was amazing for a postal survey. What I found really interesting was that therapists who identified that they were in itinerant roles answered the questions differently to therapists who were in special schools and attached units. You have to remember too that this was before *Special Education 2000*. These

therapists had started to shift their understandings about aspects of school based services such as how they worked in teams and the importance of IEPs. They talked about how you can't work in isolation, you have to talk to people, you have to look at the big picture.

It was exciting to see many common responses amongst these physiotherapists, most of whom worked in relative isolation. It was like they were coming to the same way of thinking despite working very much on their own, but maybe this happened because they were responding to the needs of the environment in which they were working.

M: Where did your thesis lead to?

P: I like to continue my personal learning while also making contributions to extending the knowledge of others and the organisation, so I've been involved in research projects, and worked with NZEI (New Zealand Educational Institute). I've been involved in the national induction workshops for both physiotherapists and occupational therapists as my thesis showed the importance of developing the knowledge and skills of therapists coming into what I think is a very special environment. I've been involved in projects on effective practice, and in workforce development. You never reach the end of it, you have to keep going.

M: What one issue do you see arising in the near future?

P: The groundbreakers, the children who moved into their neighbourhood school at age five in the early 1990s are now turning 21. Their families have certain expectations from their experiences of the education sector. How well prepared is society for these students and their families? Are they prepared to be inclusive, to work in partnership, to listen to what the young adult and their family wants? This must be a real dilemma for these people and their families – what will happen next?

M: What advice would you have for therapists new to working in education?

P: Don't be scared. Just go into the classrooms and do it. I still remember being given that piece of advice myself. When you go into the classroom it dictates what you are going to do because it is a space full of children and tables, picture books, puzzles and pictures. There is no way you can do anything traditional. But although it is a different setting to what you are used to, remember that you have got a contribution to make to the student's life in the school. The purpose of you being there is to facilitate a young person's access to their education.

M: Why do you continue to work in education?

P: Every day is a different day; every class is a different class; every year is different for some children; every year brings different classroom challenges and changes. That's the joy of it for me. We're there to make sure that the young people get the best out of their education. The physiotherapist adds to the picture by providing information about the physical side of things because we have that bit of extra knowledge that other people

don't. The really important thing about working in education and bringing on new physiotherapists is to help them to understand that we're not there to get 10 more degrees of knee extension; we're there to make sure that the student has the knee extension to climb the stairs or to play in the playground. While knee extension is important, it's the playing in the playground, getting on the floor to play with the maths equipment – they're the important things, and we need to solve the physical problems for the young people to allow them to do what they need to do.

Really, I believe that every physiotherapist is a teacher, and whatever branch of physiotherapy you are in, if you can't teach the person well, then change won't happen. Working in education lets me be that teacher. And the children and young people are also my teachers as they pose the little challenges that keep me learning, growing and developing. We each shape and influence each other in our everyday interactions.

INTERVIEWER PROFILE

Merrolee Penman



Merrolee Penman

Merrolee Penman is Principal Lecturer at the School of Occupational Therapy, Otago Polytechnic. Merrolee's practice interests have focused on children within inclusive education and the role of occupational therapists in local schools. Merrolee has been involved in a number of projects for therapists working in inclusive education, from the supervision of some of the first occupational and physiotherapists to be employed by Specialist Education Services (SES), to being involved with the development of the SES National Training course called Therapists in Education – Promoting Inclusive Practices. Merrolee joined the Editorial Board of *Kairaranga* in 2004, and was part of the team who produced the project with Pat and Trevor McDonald titled *Integrated effective service provision for children and young people with physical disabilities* (2002). Merrolee has encouraged a number of occupational therapists to explore the practices of occupational therapists in inclusive education through supervision of their honours and masters research dissertations/theses.

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INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Pat Caswell



Pat Caswell

Pat is a physiotherapist in the Otago District of the Ministry of Education, Special Education providing services to students in both Dunedin and rural North Otago. Pat graduated with a Master of Physiotherapy in 1997; her thesis is entitled *The role of the physiotherapist in New Zealand special education: Present practices, future directions*. She is currently completing a Master of Education through the University of Otago. In 1999, along with Carolyn Simmons Carlsson, Pat co-developed and presented the SES National Training course called Therapists in Education – Promoting Inclusive Practices.

Pat has held a number of roles in the area of inclusive education including Southern Region Lead Practitioner: Physiotherapy between 2003 and 2005, and being involved in the preparation and administration of a survey tool designed to provide a comprehensive profile of the occupational therapy and physiotherapy workforces employed in the compulsory education sector. Pat has also been elected representative of physiotherapists and occupational therapists on the NZEI Advisory Panel for 2002, and is currently an NZEI workplace representative. Pat was the physiotherapist representative on the Ministry of Education's Reference Group for Students with Physical Disabilities in 2000.

Pat was a member of the Editorial Board for *Kairaranga* in 2004, a member of the National Advisory Group for the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education Ministry of Education research project from 2003-2004, and has been committee member, and editor of the journal for the Paediatric Physiotherapists Special Interest Group from 1994-1999.

She has been seconded to a number of short term projects including being co-author of a report for the Ministry of Education's Reference Group for Students with Physical Disabilities titled *Integrated effective service provision for children and young people with physical disabilities* (McDonald, Caswell & Penman, 2002).

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