Learning together: Collaboration to develop curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that promote belonging

Paper presented at the Inclusive Supportive Education Congress, Queen's University, Belfast, 2-5 August 2010.

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In this paper we describe the processes and outcomes of a two-year project to develop the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Students with Special Education Needs.* We will show how the processes of collaboration and sharing which characterised all aspects of the project impacted on those involved and suggest that this is a way of working together that, if used more widely, would lead to capacity-building to promote inclusion.

 The project focussed on teachers working with students described as working long term at level 1 (of 8 levels) in the *New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Earlier research had shown that teachers in regular classrooms in NZ were often puzzled about how to include some students with special education needs in their planning, teaching and assessment. Many teachers saw the *NZC* as irrelevant for some students with special education needs. The development of the *Exemplars* provides a very practical example of a framework that supports educators and families to work collaboratively; as well as the positive outcomes that are possible when working in this way.

The project team included classroom and visiting support teachers (from primary and secondary schools, regular classrooms and special schools), curriculum advisors, assessment facilitators, and teacher educators. We pay particular attention to new

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understandings about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that emerged as together we learned to use narrative assessment.

Assessment tools can both enable and constrain what can be noticed and reported. Assessment methods as well as the results of assessment can lead to painting different kinds of pictures about students and teachers. Participating in the professional learning aspects of this project provided teachers with a language and a framework (Carr, 2006) to consider what learning might look in their classrooms. It became apparent that often progress is evident with the benefit of hindsight. This recognition challenges the belief that assessment should be predictive and predictable. Narrative assessment reminds us of the complexity of life and of learning; it also provides us with the means of better describing some of this complexity.

We learned that when we write a narrative assessment, we do so with a particular way of understanding a student, a particular way of seeing and interpreting a student. When we share the narrative with other people, including the student, we are sharing our way of interpreting the student, sharing our sense of who the student is. As we engage in conversation about the narrative, all participants in the conversation are together constructing, and re-constructing the student's identity as a learner. In our conversations about narrative assessment, we can be excited, affirmed or even challenged in our sense of who a student is.

We also learned that our writing is influenced by how we understand ourselves, how we see and interpret ourselves and our actions. The way we construct our own identity shapes, and is shaped by, the identities we construct for our students, as well as the other people in our classroom and school communities. If we cannot see our students' learning, how might we see our teaching; how might we see ourselves as teachers?

Introduction

The New Zealand Curriculum, as an expression of policy, states clearly that the national curriculum is for *all* students (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.6). However previous research in New Zealand suggests that many New Zealand teachers may struggle to see the relevance of the curriculum or usual approaches to assessment for some students with special education needs. (McMenamin, Millar, Morton, Mutch, Nuthall & Tyler-Merrick, 2004). The educational experiences of students with significant special education needs have been characterised by low expectations and limited outcomes. Many teachers may unwittingly base their expectations for these students on views about the students that reflect a generalised and deficit view of disability and fail to see the students as capable and competent learners. Clearly these circumstances are likely to create barriers to successful inclusive education for some children and limit their access the curriculum.

In 2007 the New Zealand Ministry of Education initiated a professional development programme related to the use of narrative assessment for learners with special education needs; this project included the publication of a draft guide and a draft set of curriculum exemplars for students with special education needs. This paper describes the development of *Curriculum Exemplars* for learners with significant disabilities and the professional development and learning process that occurred over the two years of the project. We will show how the processes of collaboration and sharing which characterised all aspects of the project impacted on those involved and how the nature of the project itself both required us to work in this way and supported our learning from each other. We will *s*uggest that this is a way of working together that, if used more widely, would lead to capacity-building and professional learning among teachers that would promote inclusion and support access to the curriculum for all students. The development of the Exemplars provides a very practical example of a framework that supports academics, advisors, teachers and families to work collaboratively; as well as demonstrating the positive outcomes that are possible when working in this way.

In the following sections of this paper we describe the context of the project including developments in the New Zealand Curriculum. We then outline the aims of the project, how we worked together on the project, and finally what we learned on the project.

The New Zealand Context

All New Zealand children and young people between the ages of 5 -19, have the right to attend their local state-funded school; disabled children and young people's right to attend their local school is enshrined in Section 8 of the 1989 Education Act which states that "people who have special education needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at state schools as do people who do not".

Disabled children and young people in New Zealand have access to two types of state-funded schooling options, the local state-funded primary or secondary school or a state-funded special school. Both of these options sit within what is essentially a single education system; all schools are funded and resourced through the same systems and are subject to the same statutory and regulatory requirements including those relating to curriculum. While most disabled children and young people attend local state-funded schools some parents still opt for special school enrolment for their child; under current regulations they must gain approval from the Ministry of Education in order to access a special school placement.

Although there are different schooling options for disabled children within the New Zealand education system, there is no separate system of special education training in initial teacher education in New Zealand. All prospective teachers are educated to work in the general education system and have to meet the same national graduating standards which are set by the New Zealand Teachers' Council; the standards describe what graduating teachers are expected to know, understand and be able to do, and the dispositions of an effective teacher. Historically, teachers who wish to specialise in "special education" undertake postgraduate training in "special education" after the completion of their initial teacher education programmes.

The revised New Zealand curriculum was introduced in 2007 and :

> applies to all English-medium state schools (including integrated schools) and to all students in those schools, irrespective of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, belief, ability or disability, social or cultural background, or geographical location. (MOE, 2007, p.9)

The New Zealand Curriculum includes a vision for learners who are confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners. It is written as a curriculum for all students and this is expressed in the principle of inclusion which states that "the curriculum is non-sexist, non-racist and non-discriminatory; it ensures that students' identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.9). Under the principle of coherence the document states: "The curriculum offers all students a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions, and opens up pathways to further learning" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.9)

The Curriculum provides a framework for pedagogy and assessment through eight learning (subject content) areas including English (literacy), mathematics and statistics (numeracy), science, arts, learning languages, health and physical education, technology, and social sciences. The learning areas are presented in levels of learning outcomes, with level 1 being the beginning or foundation, level 8 being the most complex learning outcomes expected by the end of secondary school.

Years and Curriculum Levels
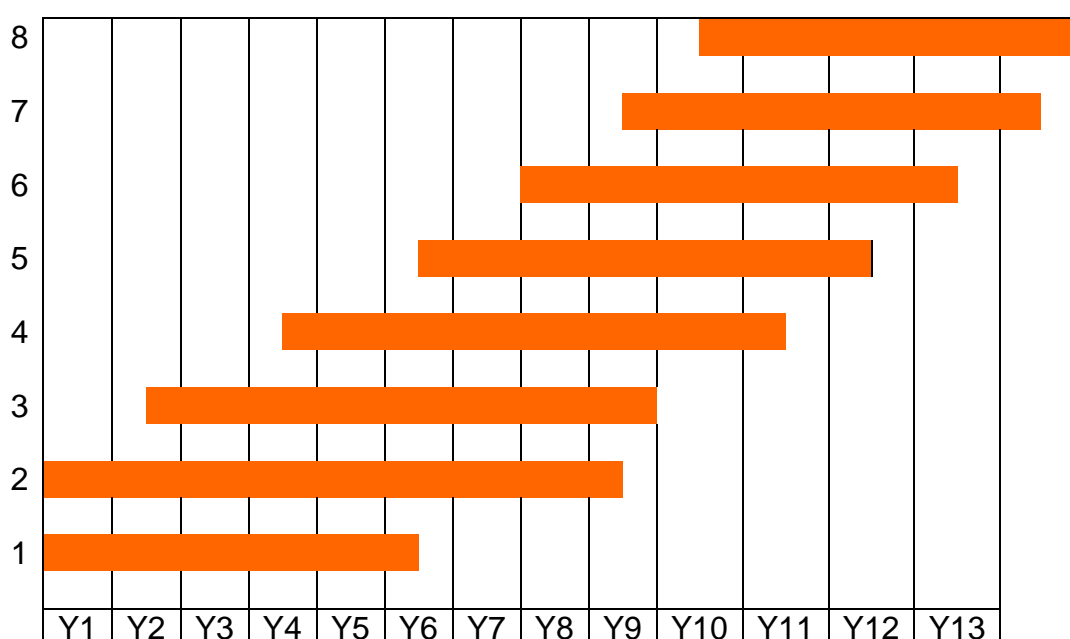
The learning areas set out the criteria for learning, and thus guide assessment and pedagogy. These learning areas are presented in successive levels of learning outcomes, with level 1 being the beginning or foundation, and level 8 being the most complex or sophisticated learning outcomes expected by the end of secondary school..

The New Zealand Curriculum also sets out five key competencies as "capabilities for living and lifelong learning"; the five competencies are thinking, managing self, participating and contributing, using language symbols and texts and relating to others The key competencies draw on knowledge, attitudes and values. They are both a means to an end and a valued educational outcome. The New Zealand Curriculum (p.12) describes how key competencies involve the learner in engaging personal goals, other people, community knowledge and values, cultural tools and the knowledge and skills found in learning areas. "People use these competencies to live, learn, work and contribute as active members of their communities" (p.12). Key competencies exist in a constellation interacting with one another, and also with a range of resources and learner dispositions. This resources view of competence is aligned with socio-cultural views of learning as described by Vygotsky (1978); with understandings about learner efficacy and motivation (see Bandura, 1986,1994; Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986); and with situated and activity learning theories (see Lave

& Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2001;Wenger, 1999; Engestrom, 1999; Sfard, 1999). Hipkins (2007), writing about assessing these key competencies, states "new dimensions of learning are highlighted by the inclusion of the key competencies at the heart of the curriculum. These dimensions challenge some assumptions that are deeply embedded in traditional assessment practices" (p.5).

The *New Zealand Curriculum* identifies the following aspects of effective pedagogy (pp.34-36):

- creating a supportive learning environment;

- encouraging reflective thought and action;

- enhancing the relevance of new learning;

- facilitating shared learning;

- making connections to prior learning and experience;

- providing sufficient opportunities to learn;

- teaching as inquiry;

- e-learning and pedagogy, as a support to the teaching approaches outlined above.

Inclusion and Access to the Curriculum

In recent years the focus of inclusion for disabled children and young people has moved from concern with issues related to placement and resourcing to concern with access to the general curriculum. Turnbull,Turnbull and Wehmeyer(2007) describe this focus on access to the general curriculum as "third generation inclusive practices". The salient feature of this "generation" of inclusive practices is that the focus of effort is on what, not where, the students are taught. Wehmeyer (2006) further argues that "access" alone is not enough. He asserts that unless disabled students are provided with appropriate accommodations and adaptations to the curriculum they cannot benefit from access and makes the point "that "access" does not necessarily equate to progress (p.)".

Clearly a change to a focus on access to the general curriculum and what a student learns, has implications for schools, teachers, students and families. Research both in

New Zealand and internationally (McMenamin et al., 2004) has indicated that many teachers struggle to see how they can include students with significant disabilities in the life of the ordinary classroom and that many teachers feel that their initial teacher education did not prepare them well to be inclusive teachers. (Morton & Gordon, 2006). Kearney (cited in O'Neill, Bourke,& Kearney, 2009) argues that teachers lack a sense of responsibility towards disabled students and so fail to provide for their learning or report their progress as they would for non-disabled students. Other research (Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999) suggests that what Kearney describes as a "lack of a sense of responsibility", may derive from the fact that many teachers lack a sense of efficacy in relation to teaching disabled students and feel that they are lacking in the specialised skills and knowledge that, they believe, are needed to teach these students; in addition many teachers report that they have not had the opportunity to acquire these necessary skills and knowledge during either their initial teacher education or subsequent professional development. The views of some New Zealand teachers reported by McMenamin et al (2004) lend weight to this argument. These teachers expressed a sense of needing to know more to be able to work effectively with disabled students. The teachers articulated a need for professional development and learning in relation to curriculum adaptation and inclusion; they described the professional development opportunities available to them as woefully inadequate and reported that they felt that there was rarely any opportunity to access professional development and learning that was relevant to the students with high and very high needs.

Professional Development and Learning

Whatever the cause it is clear that some teachers lack confidence in their ability to meet the educational needs of some disabled children and are puzzled as to how these children can learn and make progress within the general curriculum. In more general terms research both here and overseas, (Hattie, 2005; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003; Timperley & Parr, 2004) points to teachers needing more than numeric data, grades and marks to support effective learning in their classrooms. Teachers need assessment data that is more holistic, interpretive and reflective. This is particularly so with students who do not conform to the norms suggested by the achievement levels

defined in the New Zealand Curriculum and for whom academic achievement is not a clear measure of success or progress. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that unless these factors are resolved and teachers gain the confidence and competence to include all the children they teach in the activities of the curriculum, inclusion will not fulfil its promise for many disabled children. The question however is how best to address teachers' needs in order to transform their practices in ways that will result in meaningful and successful inclusion of all students in our schools. What type of professional learning and development will support the sort of changes necessary? Research in New Zealand (Timperley et al, 2007) identified a number of factors that may contribute to successful professional development and learning for teachers; time to learn, the availability of external expertise, teachers' active engagement in learning; prevailing discourses challenged, opportunities to participate in a professional community of practice, consistency with wider trends in policy and research and active school leadership. They also noted that integration of theory with practice was a feature of effective professional learning experiences:

> …the interventions involved the acquisition of new understandings and skills related to alternative pedagogies and ways of interacting with students. These were presented in terms of the theoretical principles that underpinned them, together with a clear rationale for the alternatives being put forward were more effective for particular groups of students. (p.169)

 These factors are consistent with features and characteristics reported in some research that specifically focussed on professional learning for teachers working in special/inclusive education. West, Jones and Stevens (2006) suggested that those who mediate teachers' professional learning need to have expertise in the content of an area and an understanding of the application of that content to practice. They identify other factors such as the opportunity to learn from parents and disabled people and the opportunity for teachers to engage in intellectual dialogue as well as self-reflection that they consider to be important elements in professional learning programmes for teachers. They make the point that "professional development should not be an additive model but a transformative model that reflects teachers' voices. This teacher learning should be considered an integral part of the day." (p.194)

Englert and Tarrant (1995) examined the development of collaborative communities for educational changes. They described four factors that were important in

developing a successful collaborative culture; the negotiation of the roles within the group, the recognition of teacher diversity as an asset, the need for discourse within the community to be valued and given time to evolve and the need for time for those involved to construct, experience and transform the community. Englert and Tarrant also noted that the success of collaborative projects may be affected by the willingness of those participating to take risks and the number of participants in the project.

The processes engaged in during in the course of the Curriculum Exemplars project reflect many of the features and characteristics identified in the research and we would suggest that that this project provides an excellent model of successful and effective professional collaboration and learning. However, more than that, we would argue that the context and purpose of the project was also a factor in its success. Our experience during the project indicated that working with narrative assessment can lead teachers to look at students in new ways (as one teacher in the project put it: "Are they doing it because we are watching them harder?") and to notice different behaviours.

> Could it be that what we called "delayed response time" was processing or thinking time?

It also appeared that by using narrative assessment to reflect on student learning and teacher learning, the teachers began to facilitate different learning opportunities and provide students with support for new learning. We would suggest that these changes were facilitated by nature of New Zealand revised curriculum which allows teachers to reframe and reinterpret what their students do, particularly when the key competencies are used as a lens through which to view student behaviours. The teachers in the project concurred that this perspective enabled them to give value to certain behaviours that they could now recognise as demonstrating achievement within the context of a learning area.

The Project

The Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs was a project commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2007. The call for proposals for the project listed the following principle:

A culture of professional development. In this respect this project is primarily and foremost a nationwide change management project to encourage evidence-based teaching practice. The development is an iterative, reflective process and will be based on key principles of Assessment for Learning that underpin the curriculum exemplars and the narrative assessment teachers' guide.

The request for proposals also described some of the background to the project:

Recent research and evaluation has highlighted that many teachers find it challenging to provide meaningful learning opportunities for children and students with significant special education needs. The issues for teachers may include low expectations for a student's learning, a lack of confidence in their ability to teach the student, inexperience in adapting the curriculum, a focus on a student's disability or impairment rather than meaningful learning, and difficulties in assessing some learners and their work.

Curriculum exemplars will help teachers develop their knowledge and skills in assessment for learning where a student requires an adapted curriculum. This resource will help lift expectations of learning, provide examples of student achievement against adapted curriculum goals, and support inclusive teaching practice.

While assessment exemplars will not address all of the issues identified above, they will play a critical role in promoting assessment for learning. The exemplars will assist teachers to use assessment to support learning and plan next learning steps.

The aim of this project is to develop a new range of curriculum exemplars and support materials, a narrative assessment teachers guide, as well as providing professional learning and support to all teachers of learners with special education needs within all school settings within the context of the project scope.

The project team were expected to "help answer the question, 'What does learning look like for students working within Level 1 of the NZC?'" The key outcomes of the project were:

> A new range of curriculum exemplars within Level 1 of the New Zealand Curriculum will be developed for teachers of learners with special education needs.

These Exemplars will

- directly help to develop teachers' knowledge and skills in assessment for learning   where a student requires an adapted curriculum,
- provide examples of achievement against adapted curriculum goals to help lift expectations of learning, and,
- support inclusive teaching practice through a focus on learners accessing the curriculum.

The project team included 26 classroom and visiting support teachers (from primary and secondary schools, regular classrooms and special schools), working with a team of school support staff (curriculum advisors and assessment facilitators who are contracted to work in schools providing in-service professional development), parents, and teacher educators.

From the beginning of the project our ethos was that none of us on our own were experts on everything we might need to know to produce these resources. One early decision (subject to some debate) was to bring in school support staff with an in-depth knowledge of the learning areas in the *New Zealand Curriculum*, rather than professionals skilled in say functional analysis of behaviour, or the development of alternative curricula based on functional skills. The 26 teachers in the project were each already teaching students considered to be working at level one of the curriculum, and likely to be working there for their school career. The assessment facilitators had worked alongside some of these teachers as part of 'in-depth' work in their schools thinking about assessment for learning (formative assessment) rather than assessment of learning (summative assessment).

The parent and the teacher educators also brought a commitment to a social model of disability as expressed in the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (*NZDS)* (Ministry of

Health, 2001). The *NZDS* argues that we need to pay attention to how our institutional practices may unintentionally exclude disabled people. An important implication for teaching and learning is that we cannot use a student's disability as an explanation for why we might not have met their learning needs.

> Disability is the process which happens when one group of people create barriers by designing a world only for their way of living, taking no account of the impairments other people have. Our society is built in a way that assumes that we can all move quickly from one side of the road to the other; that we can all see signs, read directions, hear announcements, reach buttons, have the strength to open heavy doors and have stable moods and perceptions.
>
> …
>
> People and groups of people should not be judged by one particular aspect of their lives – whether it's their race, gender, age or impairment. Individual beliefs and assumptions, as well as the practices of institutions, mean that many disabled people are not able to access things that many non-disabled people take for granted.

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In the first year of the project 12 teachers (we came to call them teacher-writers) in the South Island of New Zealand were invited to develop an initial 20 to 25 exemplars that would in turn feed into the development of the accompanying resource *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers*. In the second year a further 14 teachers joined the project as teacher-writers, along with 8 of the teacher-writers continuing from the first year. Participants' roles occasionally changed, a curriculum advisor in the first year became a teacher-writer in the second year. A parent on our advisory group became a parent-writer writing exemplars based on her son, and her son's teacher joined the teacher-writer team in the second year. In the second year we developed a further 50 exemplars and edited and re-edited the *Guide*. (The full set of resources can be accessed at www.inclusion.org.nz/throughdifferenteyes).

We met as a whole team (cluster meetings) seven times each year. The first meeting in both the first and second year oriented us to the aims of the project, gave us a chance to get to know everybody in the group including prior experience using narrative assessment, to share some of the key principles of the project and negotiate future cluster meeting times. Some teachers in each group were able to talk about their experiences of learning to use narrative assessment, including what had been challenging for them and what had proved to be less difficult that they expected. As a

group we explored what we understood the new Key Competencies to be about, and shared readings from other educators and researchers writing about the Key Competencies. We also shared readings about the socio-cultural views of teaching and learning that underpinned narrative assessment.

Between cluster meetings, the curriculum advisors and assessment facilitators visited teachers in their schools and classrooms encouraging them to take their first steps towards noticing, recognising and reporting their students' learning using narrative assessment. Teachers were encouraged to use photographs and samples of students work as well as their own teacher narratives. These first, and subsequent attempts, were brought back to the cluster meetings for discussion.

We established some group norms around giving and receiving feedback on the pieces of writing teachers brought to the cluster meetings. Many were nervous as they did not know how their writing attempts would be received. We read and re-read the stories, wanting to understand why the learning that had been documented was significant to the writer at this point in time. We were looking for connections to the key completencies and to the learning areas. Two important insights emerged from these discussions. The first insight came when teachers described how they had discovered that IEP goals that had been set (and re-set) were in some cases already met – the students were demonstrating learning in areas that had not previously been recognised. The teacher-writers talked about how they were now "seeing their students through different eyes".

The teachers were excited and invigorated by the process of collecting together a group of stories, then looking back and across stories documented over time to see other learning that may not have been noticed or recognised originally.

> [When looking back] You can see where [we] have come from.

This led to the second important insight. It became increasingly apparent that progress is often evident with the benefit of hindsight. This recognition challenged the belief that learning progressions should be predictive and predictable. It also challenged our ideas of assessment as being only about looking for predefined learning or goals already set. Narrative assessment reminded all of us of the complexity of teaching and

learning; it also provided us with the means of better describing some of this complexity.

The teacher quoted below indicates using narrative assessment has affected her thinking. She talks about how this kind of assessment has made a difference for her student, the student's family, and her colleagues.

> Now I can capture what the child can do on a particular day, not what others have dreamed up for the student … [I can capture] what and how he will learn best.

> In the past, we were getting the student to do things in classroom contexts in ways that suited us. Now we can see the student do things in authentic contexts. The key competencies have assisted us to see the student's achievement. In this project, I have been able to see things with different eyes, through the support, for example, of the maths adviser.

Working alongside curriculum advisors with expertise in a number of the learning areas gave the teachers new opportunities to discuss the new curriculum. The advisers were able to show how many of the descriptions in the narratives had clear links to the learning areas. The teachers described how they (and others) had come to see their students as more competent learners than they had previously appreciated. In some instances, the students had begun to exceed their teachers' expectations.

> Have our students **always** had these competencies – perhaps we simply hadn't noticed before?

Teacher-writers in this project appreciated narrative assessment as a way of assessing that allows them to show learners as they see them. The teacher-writers felt that, in the past, the ways they assessed did not portray their students with special education needs as capable and competent. Learning stories allowed the teachers to report in ways more congruent with their beliefs and philosophies about teaching, learning, and assessment.

> Learning stories allow you to teach and assess honestly. As a teacher, through learning stories, I am able to express better what happened.

Assessment tools can both enable and constrain what can be noticed and reported. Teachers appreciate narrative assessment as an approach that supports noticing

student learning in more personalised and holistic ways. One teacher comments on how her exemplar learning stories evolved:

> The difference between the first and later drafts is that they are now more personal.

The more personalised and holisitic qualities of narrative assessment show learning in a way that is highly accessible to students and their families and whānau.

Conclusion

The project provided an opportunity for teachers and advisers to act as a community of practitioners and co-construct professional knowledge, while at the same time developing new understandings about their own learning. The teachers in the project shared their emerging work in an atmosphere conducive to learning that fostered positive, descriptive feedback for learning (Watkins, 2000). An approach to professional learning based on the idea of a community of learners (Rogoff et al., 2001) models the learning and assessment paradigms that also underlie narrative assessment. The focus on constructing knowledge through co-participation in professional learning encourages participants "to view their contribution collaboratively rather than through an expert lens" (Anning, Cullen, and Fleer, 2004, page 79). In this project, working as a community of learners was supported and enhanced by the focus of our learning.

Participating in the project allowed the teachers to look closely at the key competencies in *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Their professional learning gave them the language and a framework to consider what these capabilities would look like in their classrooms.

> Now [that] we're focusing on the key competencies in these learning stories, it opens up the world for these kids.

> Learning stories work well because, in the reflective process, we are designing curriculum that meets the needs of the individual rather than focusing on little bits of skills that link to curriculum.

> This gives us a different set of eyes – what learning happened? And what else happened?

With the support of curriculum advisers, the teachers began to see more evidence of their students achieving within level 1 of the learning areas and began to see more clearly their own role in the teaching and learning process.

Participation in the curriculum exemplars project empowered the teachers and resulted in them becoming what Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond (2006) describe as "interventionist teachers", that is teachers who "see themselves as responsible for reducing barriers to access for those students with disabilities and special needs." (p.541) These are teachers who adapt their teaching to allow participation of all, accommodate students' ways of responding and provide many and varied opportunities for students to learn. Wehmeyer (2006) argued: "It is time though to move beyond access to focus on progress. We need research and practices that inform us as to how best to measure progress for this population within the general education curriculum." (p.325) The curriculum exemplars project was able to move beyond aims of accommodations to question and 'stretch' what is valued in our curriculum; this project demonstrates research and practices that stretch the boundaries of the 'general educational curriculum'.

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