

Inclusion at Botany Downs Kindergarten

Centre of Innovation 2006 - 2008

Final Research Report

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Centre of Innovation (COI) research shared in this report focuses on inclusion in an early childhood education centre, Botany Downs Kindergarten (BDK) in Howick, Auckland. The teachers' philosophy of inclusion states:

We believe that all children belong together, that they are all individuals and they all have rights to develop and learn together in a climate of acceptance.

It rests on the human rights principle that all children have the right to good quality early childhood education in a setting of their parents' choosing. Nationally, this philosophy was made manifest in the education policy of 'mainstreaming' that was enacted in the Education Act, 1989, which gives students with disabilities the right to a full education at a school of their parents' choice.

The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) states,

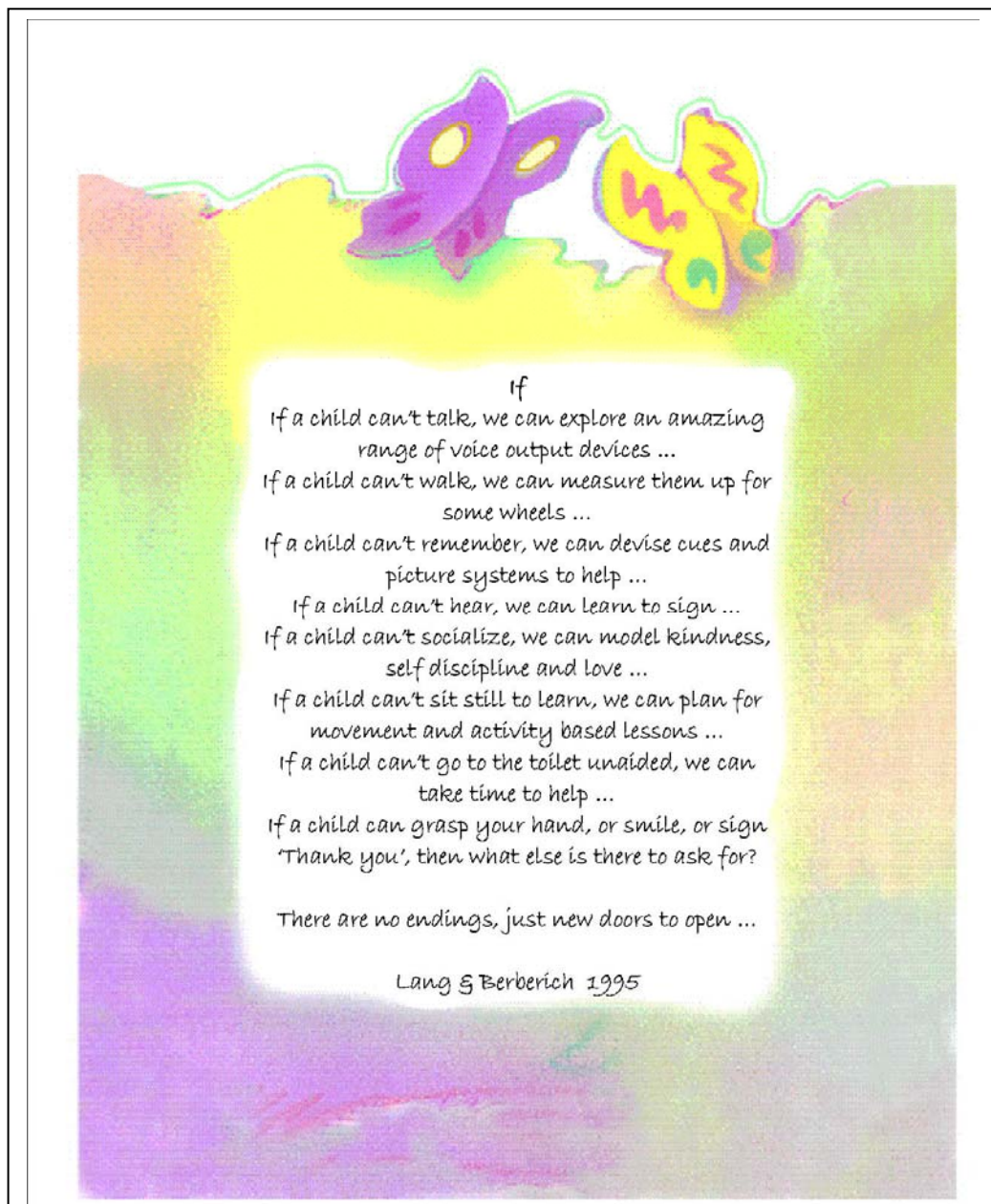
Te Whāriki is designed to be inclusive and appropriate for all children and anticipates that special needs will be met as children learn together in all kinds of educational settings" (p. 11).

MacArthur, Purdue and Ballard (2003) state, "From a socio-cultural perspective, then, inclusive settings provide rich contexts for the growth and development of every child" (p.134).

Botany Downs Kindergarten teachers have a commitment to welcoming and valuing all children, their families and the wider community. We have opened our doors to all children whose parents enrol them at the kindergarten. When a child has additional needs we don't say, "Yes, but only if ...". For all situations in which challenges arise we engage in *possibility thinking* (Cremin, Burnard, & Craft, 2006). This approach aligns with the creative ways in which we think of developing a sense of belonging for all children as they all join us from diverse, rich and interesting backgrounds. Thus, inclusion is implemented for all – some children just happen to have some different and additional needs.

Inclusion

The teaching team at BDK feels that this poem captures their view of inclusion:



The innovation at BDK is this: When the teaching team finds an approach or system that has opened new doors for children with additional needs; we commonly adapt that system or approach for all the children at kindergarten. In this introductory chapter, three examples (below) will illustrate some of what we do. More illustrations are provided later in the report, but even so, they amount to only a sample of changes made to enhance our inclusive practice between 2006 and 2008.

The *first example* is the process and attention to detail given to the preparation of the visual communication tools and the environment to welcome a child and their family into the community of BDK. Their portfolio, name tags, locker and communication pocket are prepared and waiting for them so that their sense of belonging is enhanced on the very first day.

The *second example* emerged as we reflected upon our practice and gave thought to our use of visual communication tools. Initially we began to make and use visual communication tools to help children on the autistic spectrum come to know the people in the environment of BDK and the routines of BDK. For instance, we made Jack a book showing photos of the teachers, education support worker (ESW) and administrator to take home. As well, we made a book of his routines as he arrived at kindergarten – in the gate, put name tag on the magnetic board, put bag in locker, choose an activity with ESW and so on. To begin with these books were for him personally, until we recognised their value for others. We broadened the use concept for use with all children. These will be shared later in the report.

We made more books and sequence cards that showed the sequence of different routines (e.g., steps in going to the toilet, and the sequences around

special events). The books help children make transitions to unknown or less familiar experiences. Our observations showed that these books were successful in preparing children for different experiences.

The *third example* is the sound augmentation system that has been installed in the area where group time is held. The advantages of this system are two fold. The sound is distributed equally to the periphery of the group of children (thus increasing the chances of engagement) and the teacher can maintain a quiet level of voice and yet be heard by all children.

Group Special Education in the Ministry of Education is clear that the scope of inclusion is for all children. It suggests that:

Inclusion in education is about valuing all students and staff. It involves supporting all children and young people to participate in the cultures, curricula and communities of [their local early childhood education service]. Barriers to learning and participation for all children, irrespective of their ethnicity, culture, disability, or any other factor are actively reduced, so that children feel a sense of belonging and community in their educational context. (Ministry of Education, 2008)

Current definitions of inclusion reflect an international move towards discourses that emphasise human rights and social justice. Ballard (2004) and others argue that the term *inclusive education* means ensuring participation of all children who may be excluded as a result of gender, ethnicity, disability, social class or other difference that is given significance within a particular context. Some key concepts in official and research literature in relation to inclusion in education are 'human rights', 'valuing', 'supporting', 'participation' and 'reducing barriers'. These concepts are usually applied in relation to groups who may be excluded. Thus, the term inclusion is wider, or more encompassing, than the term *special education* that is seen as being about "the provision of extra help for children with learning, communication, emotional or behavioural difficulties, or intellectual, sensory or physical impairments" (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The differences in these definitions and our focus on inclusion posed some challenges during our tenure as a COI, as a number of people assumed we

would focus on researching extra help, adapted programmes, and specialised equipment and materials for children with ‘difficulties’ or ‘impairments’. Instead, we focused on the kindergarten environment and aspects of our teaching that enhanced the participation and learning for all children. Acting strategically, we made changes that were likely to be beneficial for all and, simultaneously, were likely to reduce any barriers for children with additional needs. Our aims for including all children were to strengthen their sense of belonging to our community and to develop their social competence. Because of our broad approach to inclusion, much of our COI research looked at what happened for children other than those who were identified as having additional needs.

For us, inclusion is underpinned by the belief that children belong together in regular settings. Thus, a climate of acceptance of children with special needs is established when teachers are united in this belief.

Inclusion of children with additional needs at BDK may not entail ‘extra help’, adapted programmes, or specialised resources. We *do not* say that we will include a child with special needs but only if extra resources or extra support is provided. We *do* say that inclusion entails working within some particular values (we often call them beliefs). The values of respect and acceptance affect the way we relate to children and their families and work with the principles of *Te Whāriki*. The values we hold are infused in our actions - in setting up and adapting the environment, and in implementing *Te Whāriki* and our pedagogy. To live by our values and beliefs, the teaching team continually engages in reflection and possibility thinking to reduce barriers and ensure all children can participate in ways that give each child a sense of being accepted and belonging, and feelings of competence and confidence.

A child with additional needs can attend kindergarten irrespective of whether their education support worker is at kindergarten or not. We use possibility thinking to figure out systems that work. For example, when Kevin is at kindergarten without

his education support worker (ESW) the float teacher becomes his prime caregiver. Kevin's mother describes such an example:

On days that our ESW has been unable to attend staff cheerfully accepted responsibility for Kevin themselves. They have made the statement that, 'Kevin is on the roll and has just as much right to be here as any other child'. As a mother I have been delighted at how Kevin and I have both personally been welcomed. There is a culture here at Botany Downs Kindergarten of friendliness and acceptance. People who I don't even know will greet Kevin by his name and pause for his delayed response. They welcome and chat to me and I feel very happy to have Kevin here and to be coming here regularly myself.

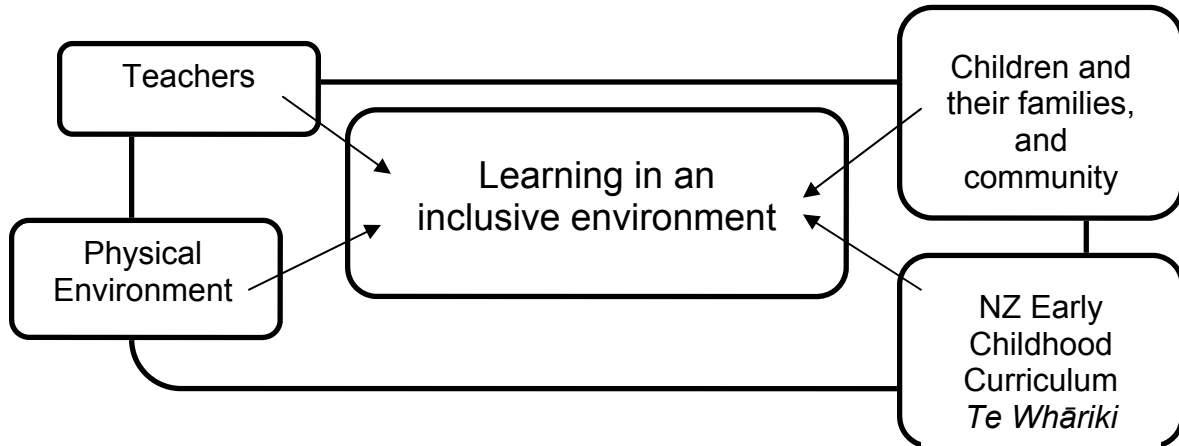
Inclusion is not confined to the children at BDK. It was important to Kevin's mother to feel included, to be part of BDK community, and through this feeling Kevin's sense of inclusion is enhanced (Wills, 1998).

At BDK our commitment to inclusion means including all children, their families, the teachers, the ESWs, relievers, administrative support staff and the wider community in the extensive range of activities that constitute BDK. During the first cycle of our COI research we documented the range of inclusive acts at BDK and noted that the systems and approaches that we have put in place treat everyone with respect and treat everyone as we (the teachers) want to be treated.

What is an inclusive environment?

Conway (2008) suggests a model with four factors that constitute an inclusive environment: teachers, children, curriculum and physical setting. We adapted Conway's model to reflect inclusion at BDK by adding families and community in the box with children in order to reflect our commitment to the principles for the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which recognises the importance of family and community.

Figure 1: DYNAMICS IN BDK's INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT
Adapted from Conway (2008, p. 101).



These four factors are in play through all the phases of inclusion. For BDK, they were pinpointed when discussing the pre-inclusion phase by considering theoretical and research knowledge, and the need to meet legislative requirements and curriculum guidance.

The first factor: The teachers

Formulating a vision for and acting to develop an inclusive environment start with teachers. Our vision is broad: it is about the society we want to help create and to live in.

Early on in our COI work, we felt some discomfort that we, the teachers, hold the power about our kindergarten environment. Soon we realised with relief that that power includes the teachers' decision to 'share the power with the children and their parents to build an inclusive environment' (Bronwyn's journal notes, 2006). We noted that we also 'establish the roles of the teachers, children and their families; decide how the curriculum will be implemented and how the physical environment will be presented. These are strongly embedded in our philosophy' (Research meeting notes, April 2006).

Our philosophy of practice was very significant for us deciding to adopt the broad definition of inclusion, and paying a lot of attention to developing an inclusive environment. The main value that guides us is to 'treat others as we, the teachers, want to be treated - with respect' (Research meeting notes, April 2006).

The second factor: The children and their families

Whilst the concept of inclusion is primarily associated with children with special needs, at BDK inclusion means including everyone – children, adults, siblings, pets and community. Inclusion, we concluded 'has less to do with children with special needs. It has more to do with how you view society and the vision of the society you want to create and live in. All children are special and many need different kinds of support' (Research meeting notes, April 2006). This notion is in line with the thinking of Soan (2004) and Wills (1998).

Community 'ownership' is important to the teachers, and therefore participation is welcomed. 'We are the facilitators of the kindergarten, and the kindergarten belongs to the parents and the community' (Research meeting notes, May 2007). The way parents respond and contribute makes a significant difference to the inclusive environment at BDK. Exit survey data confirmed that creating a feeling of belonging and good communication with families is critical for the inclusion of children and their families at BDK (Research meeting notes, April 2006). One parent wrote on their exit survey form:

It was welcoming from the first phone call. On his first day Riley told me how he was introduced to the class. They always told Riley how lovely it was to see him every day. He was told he could bring news ... so he wanted to everyday. Even if he wants to share the most trivial thing he is treated like a king and made to feel like it is the greatest thing ever. That is very special to him, and his feeling special is important to me. We took his portfolio home everyday in the first week. Riley couldn't wait to share his kindergarten with his Dad and brother.

Another parent responded, 'I like the way we are not rushed. Friendships are encouraged and our littlies are welcome to join in the play. We are not forced to do parent help and can stay whenever we want. That makes it easier because I don't know when my two year old is up to staying.' (In the parent's mind, the question about her toddler staying was not about 'whether', but 'when'.)

Reciprocal relationships are built. Another exit survey response commented on use the kindergarten resources, 'I am just learning to use *Publisher* [software] and the teachers have shown me little steps on their computer each day. I can write my own learning stories with photographs added now.' This is a small example of how parents come to contribute to the inclusive environment.

The third factor: the New Zealand curriculum, *Te Whāriki*

The principles and strands of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, underpin all that we do at BDK. The curriculum challenges us to examine our environment, our links to family and the community and the values we share as we promote children's learning. MacArthur, Purdue and Ballard (2003) applaud the positive inclusive rights statement in the curriculum:

Te Whāriki is designed to be inclusive and appropriate for all children and anticipates that special needs will be met as children learn together in all kinds of educational settings. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11)

We model this approach to children and their families at all times.

The fourth factor: The physical environment

Te Whāriki expects environments to be planned to maximise familiarity and exploration. Our environment is also influenced by Reggio Emilia. We identify with the writing of Carlina Rinaldi (2001). Rinaldi believes that the environment is a powerful teacher. The Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan has adopted a similar philosophy suggesting that, "environments have the power to shape the learning that takes place" (2008, p. 44). We particularly identified with their statements:

In a high quality programme, educators understand the importance of preparing children's surroundings to support all aspects of their development and growth. The environment communicates how the adults perceive children as learners.

And:

When educators ensure that the setting reflects what children can do and what children can be, the environment sends positive messages to everyone. The setting can tell children that it is a place where they are valued as people capable of exploring materials and learning with the educator, other adults and each other (ibid).

Initially, our records made several mentions of 'a responsive environment'. We later altered this to 'a responsive, flexible environment' (Research meeting notes, August 2008) to acknowledge our use of the notice, recognise, respond pedagogical framework (Cowie, 2000). We were committed to 'changing the environment, rather than the child' to achieve optimal learning outcomes for children (Research meeting notes, April 2006). Examples of changes include installing the sound augmentation system, and changing some spaces at BDK at appropriate times to recognise important cultural festivals (e.g., Diwali).

Introducing Botany Downs Kindergarten

Botany Downs Kindergarten is governed by the Auckland Kindergarten Association. It is a three teacher kindergarten situated in Howick, Auckland. The core teacher researchers involved in the COI project were Bronwyn Glass, Kerry Baker and Raelene Ellis.

The kindergarten is 30 years old, and delivers its programme in sessions – five morning sessions and three afternoon sessions per week. Children start in the afternoon kindergarten at approximately three years three months, and transition to the morning session at approximately four years and two months. The children move on to one of eleven primary schools when they transition from kindergarten to school, usually when they turn five years of age.

At the time of our application to join Round 3 of the COI programme, BDK had eleven children identified as having special needs (eight on the autistic spectrum) attending the morning session supported by ESWs employed by Group Special Education. The mix of children with special needs changed as children transitioned to school and new children started kindergarten.

The COI research

When we began the COI action research project, the teachers felt confident that BDK had an inclusive environment. We continually sought to enhance a sense of belonging and minimise any barriers to participation. Informal feedback confirmed our perceptions. However, much of what we did was “Just what we do,” without our being conscious of all the features of our inclusive practice and its effects. Therefore, our COI research was designed to better describe what BDK teachers do to meet our goals for inclusion, and to help us – and others - to learn more about inclusion and inclusive environments. One aim of this research was to help those in the early childhood sector, ourselves included, to see and think about the nature of the settings and contexts we need to create to help children attain the socio-cultural aims of education (Glynn, 2008, p. 15).

The overarching research question agreed upon was:

How does an *inclusive environment* enhance the *learning of all* children?

The ‘inclusive environment’ phrase in this question led us to research methods that would help us describe and explore the inclusive elements in our environment. We want make it clear that studying *all* children individually was neither feasible, nor attempted. Our interest was in enhancing the learning of children individually and collectively.

We decided to pay particular attention to visual communication tools for two reasons:

- Visual communication tools are particularly useful to facilitate participation and promote learning for children on the autistic spectrum,
- Anecdotal evidence indicated that these tools were appreciated and educationally valuable for all children.

Therefore, a sub-question for our research was:

How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families?

The focus on ‘learning’ in our overarching research question was a challenge. Learning can be, and is, very broadly defined in early childhood education. To ensure that the research was manageable, we decided to focus on aspects of social learning; on children’s social competence and self-efficacy. There were several reasons for this decision. One reason was that the Auckland Kindergarten Association focuses on social competence in that every kindergarten is required to formulate a statement of teaching practice about how they will foster children’s social competence. Therefore, we had given considerable thought to social competence already. In line with the emphases in *Te Whāriki* on belonging, communication and contribution, developing social competence was seen as important learning for all children. It is of particular importance in our context where several children on the autistic spectrum attend, and where respect for and acceptance of children with additional needs is expected of everyone.

Originally, the wording of our second sub-question was: How do teachers support children on a journey from dependency to self-efficacy? This wording was debated vigorously during our COI tenure. We decided to change it because, for most children, indications of dependency are only apparent in the transition phase. At that time, plenty of support is offered to help children become more independent. We felt we could cover that whilst exploring a broader question. The sub-question was made broader to read:

How do teachers support the development of social competence and self-efficacy in children?

Structure of this report

In Chapter 2, our mixed-method approach to undertaking the COI research is described. The middle three chapters share the findings of our research using the three phases of inclusion described by Lyons and Kelly (2008): Pre-inclusion phase (Chapter 3); early inclusion-transition phase (Chapter 4); and continuing inclusion–monitoring phase (Chapter 5). Each of these chapters connects our findings to the COI research questions, illustrated by case stories. Some children’s case stories stand alone while others are woven into more than one chapter. Chapter 6 is a series of interconnected case stories exploring the influences of teachers, children and their families and the community, as well as the curriculum, on inclusion at BDK. In Chapter 7 we analyse and discuss our findings using the framework of three phases of inclusion. The final chapter (Chapter 8) draws the threads together in some conclusions.

Chapter Two

Our Centre of Innovation Research

Introduction

When Botany Downs Kindergarten (BDK) applied for the Centres of Innovation (COI) programme, we were already deeply engaged in inclusive practice. However, we needed to focus on specific aspects of inclusion that could be researched and shared with education colleagues. We decided to research how an inclusive environment, our use of possibility thinking and our innovative use of visual communication tools enhanced children's learning at BDK.

Features of our practice

We began to deliberate over suitable research questions. Four features of our pedagogy were identified as significant factors in our inclusive practice that could be integral to our research:

1. Adherence to the principle that inclusion means inclusion for all - children, families, teachers, education support workers, support workers, student teachers, pets, other local education institutions and the wider community (Casey, 2006).
2. The use of possibility thinking to seek out many and varied solutions to any possible barrier to children's inclusion and therefore learning.
3. A focus on the use of visual communication tools in:
 - a. the physical environment and in particular the use of visual communication tools in the kindergarten setting;
 - b. documentation of children's learning in children's portfolios and other media to communicate about both learning experiences and learning achievements to family members and other interested people.
4. Our image of the child as capable and competent, and our conveying that image to each child so that she or he engages in the programme with a strong sense of self efficacy.

Our definition of inclusion – the core feature - has been described in Chapter One.

The teaching team at BDK, including the education support workers, has always reflected upon ways to vary or extend our practice to enhance learning and to overcome any challenges (barriers) to learning and participation. We experiment with new ideas, observe their effects, and adapt, adopt or drop them according to the success of actions. In 2007, we found a term that captured what we do. Cremin, Burnard, & Craft (2006) refer to the seeking out of new actions to address individual needs and interests as *possibility thinking*. Possibility thinking, and the actions that follow our dialogic thinking, are important for us operationalising the principle of inclusion for all.

In relation to the fourth feature, earlier informal observations at BDK indicated that children with a sense of self-efficacy were more likely to make considered decisions, and engage deeply in learning situations (Bandura, 1997; Katz, 2008). Their capacity for learning was optimised. The image of the capable child who is an active learner is central to *Te Whāriki*, and to our implementation of the curriculum.

The research questions

The special features of the philosophy and pedagogy at BDK are reflected in the research questions we chose for our COI research.

The overarching research question agreed upon was:

How does an *inclusive environment* enhance the learning of all children?

An inclusive environment was seen to comprise the physical environment (in BDK this includes many communication technologies), the curriculum based on *Te Whāriki* and associated assessment documentation (see Ministry of Education, 2004), as well as the relationships between BDK teachers, children and their families and community. In the first cycle of our research we needed to do a thorough audit of our practice of inclusion and any artefacts that had come out of our possibility thinking to better describe our inclusive environment. In addition, findings from our research to do with the sub-questions (below) also helped address this overarching research question.

As indicated, one special element of the physical environment at BDK that facilitates inclusion and participation is our use of visual communication tools. The research question for this focus of our project was:

How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families?

The teaching and learning principles and processes, and relationships between teachers and children and their families, are very significant for inclusion. Our question to research these features was:

How do teachers support the development of social competence and self-efficacy in children?

These research questions assume a socio-cultural curriculum where the focus is on individuals, the interpersonal and the institution (the BDK environment) (Rogoff, 2003).

Developing research expertise

The prospect of a three-year research project was exciting, scary and a move into uncharted waters for the teacher researchers. To carry out action research, new knowledge, skills and understandings needed to be developed in the team. The Ministry contract with Dr Helen Bernstone and Dr Bill Hagan at the Manukau Institute of Technology was one of the main means for building our research capability.

Two processes were significant in the first cycle of the research. They were: completing our ethics application and facilitating a series of four action research workshops.

Starting to build a community of learners

The action research workshops took the form of 'pizza and research' evenings. Bronwyn Glass, Dr Helen Bernstone and Dr Bill Hagan were the facilitators. In our inclusive style, we invited our extended community. The offer was taken up by our 'buddy' COI, Mangere Bridge Kindergarten, and our 'buddy' education and

care centre, Pakuranga Baptist Kindergarten. Other participants included parents, student teachers and education support workers associated with BDK. The objective was to build our understanding of action research processes, to explore methods (their advantages and challenges), and to consider research ethics. We aimed to build an inclusive team that would provide the core team of teacher researchers with support throughout the COI research.

Ethics

The Botany Downs Kindergarten COI team applied to Manukau Institute of Technology, where our research associates were employed as pre-service teacher educators, for ethical approval (11th April, Ref 06/SS/04). Their rigorous process entailed finalising the research proposal, outlining the likely research methods, and drafting consent forms with an information sheet to explain the COI research project. This process satisfied the ethics requirements in the Ministry of Education contract.

However, gaining ethical approval for the COI research was just the beginning of ethical considerations that the research presented. Research in education that breaks new ground requires robust ethical choices throughout the project. The Early Childhood Code of Ethics is not sufficient to work through research ethical dilemmas that occur (Hedges, 2002). When any challenging situation arises, the research team needs to draw on ethical principles (such as 'Do no harm') and members' intuition to discuss and determine an ethically appropriate path. Bone (2005) suggests that teachers draw on experience – consciously and unconsciously – to make decisions about what 'feels right'.

Research involving children has multiple layers of complexity, starting with informed consent. Can children give informed consent, or must the parent/s give this on their behalf? In our research project, after much debate, we decided that parents needed to sign overall consent for their child to participate in the research. The child could then be asked if they would assent to being

interviewed, to their stories being used in the research report and in oral dissemination, and to his or her photographs being used on the BDK website.

A feature that we introduced in relation to these processes was reciprocal reporting. We reported back to the children and their families after any presentations. This triggered a routine where we would ask permission from our audiences to take a photograph of them in order to show the children the people to whom we were telling their stories.

We created a separate permission form asking to use personal stories and images (narrative data) on the BDK website and 'blog'. The website permission form is very specific with individual photographs being viewed and signed off.

Research approach, methods and design

The COI programme guidelines identify 'action research' as the approach to be used. This approach is broad and many methods can be used (Cardno, 2003). Research cycles can start from a problem, or a curious question about an aspect of practice. We chose the latter. Our overarching research question did not entail testing a hypothesis; it was a 'How do we?' question. It demonstrated that we work within a social constructivist paradigm.

Action research provides flexibility for researchers to act upon emerging information and analyses of data as the data continue to be collected. By having a focus on meaning, research furthers and enriches understanding (Chamaz, 2000). This was our experience in analysing our data on inclusion and acting on findings during the COI project.

Research methods

The definition of inclusion embraced by the teacher-researchers demanded that different 'voices' be heard through the data. This confirmed our decision to choose a range of methods. The methods used fall into two categories:

1. Data where children were the subjects/participants:

- a. Learning stories belonging to all children
 - b. Case study learning stories, also known as ‘moments of inclusion learning stories’
 - c. Still and moving images of children
 - d. ‘Getting to know you’ forms
 - e. Interviews with children
 - f. Research Associate observations of selected children.
2. Data where adults (teachers, or families/community) were the subjects/participants:
- g. Survey of parents
 - h. Feedback forms in relation to dissemination (e.g., Franklin Association)
 - i. Email exchanges between home and BDK, and other written feedback from parents
 - j. Teachers’ journals and related writing (e.g., Raelene’s story)
 - k. Teacher focus group interviews
 - l. Hits on the BDK website (quantitative) and responses to the BDK blog
 - m. Records of meetings or anecdotes shared with teachers when parents/ community members met teachers, e.g., during visits
 - n. Entry/ exit surveys of parents
 - o. Minutes of research meetings with COI research associates
 - p. Notes of discussions with COI research leader.

Research design

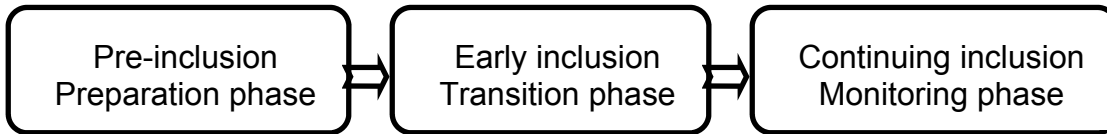
Our first round of data collection involved reflecting upon and monitoring our practice in order to document our inclusive environment. There were many actions taken in earlier times to enhance inclusion of a child or children that had become regular practice - ‘Just what we do here.’ This phase of the research has been published in an article called ‘Documenting for inclusion: How do we create an inclusive environment for all children?’ (Glass, Baker, Ellis, Bernstone & Hagan, 2008).

In the first cycle of our research project, we identified that inclusion started long before children began attending kindergarten; it started with the first contact we had with each family. Then there were many acts of inclusion when the child and family were making the transition to kindergarten. Once children began attending,

we continued to engage in possibility thinking to reduce barriers to their participation – inclusion was ongoing.

In the literature, Lyons and Kelly (2008) capture the three phases of inclusion that we had recognised in our practice. They are:

Figure 2: THE INCLUSION PHASES
(Lyons & Kelly, 2008, p. 432).



The BDK team has adopted these phases to form the framework for analysing the data and presenting our findings. The chapters that follow use these phases to present the findings while at the same time connecting the findings to our research questions.

Reading relevant material about inclusion became a regular feature of our work during the COI project.

Chapter 3

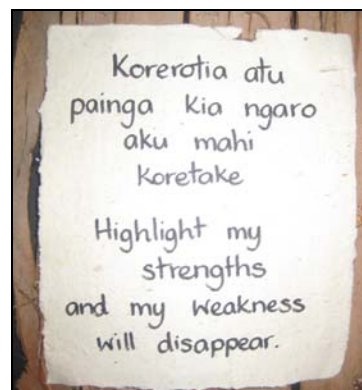
Pre-inclusion – Preparation phase of inclusion

The three phases of inclusion developed by Lyons and Kelly (2008) move from prior to attendance through to departure from the setting. Rather than being distinctively separate, the phases overlap, and each is dependent upon the previous stage for success. In this chapter the processes and practices that comprise the pre-inclusion phase of inclusion at BDK will be discussed.

Research methods

The data in the pre-inclusion/ preparation phase was collected through:

- Parent surveys
- Entry/ exit surveys of families
- Records of anecdotes shared by parents
- Digital images
- Teacher focus group interviews
- Individual teacher journals
- Research meeting notes
- Case stories drawing together data from different sources.



Pre-inclusion-preparation phase of inclusion

Lyons and Kelly (2008) define the pre-inclusion / preparation phase as the period before entry into the new setting. At BDK the pre-inclusion phase begins with the first contact with the child and her or his family and continues until the child and family transition into the kindergarten. Children can be placed on the waiting list from two years of age; however they enrol for starting in the kindergarten session in order of age at just over three years of age. Thus, for the child and family the pre-inclusion stage can begin at age two years.

Looking back to move forward

The first step in the first cycle of our research project was to establish common definitions for terms in our research questions. We needed to define what an inclusive setting looked like if we were to explore how an inclusive environment enhances children's learning. The teacher researchers began constructing their definition of inclusion by recording individual reflections at a teacher focus group and in the teacher questionnaires. Some of the comments included:

"Each child should be seen in the positive. They can all achieve."

"Inclusion is about everything you do. It is in your heart."

"Inclusion is about feeling welcome and developing a feeling of belonging."

"Inclusion is not always easy, but we have to try. Not to try would be such a waste."

"Inclusion is a belief that impacts on all that you do. It is the way you relate to the children and their families. It is what you say. It is what you do. It is even the way you set up the environment. It is just so holistic."

"It is not something that you can see so much as something that you feel and do."

"All children are so different. We have to recognise that and try to connect with all children and their families, so it is important to try to get to know the families as quickly as possible" (Research meeting notes, November 2006).

As well, at the outset of the COI research, brainstorming was used to develop the chart below to describe inclusion.

Figure 3: WHAT DOES AN INCLUSIVE SETTING LOOK LIKE?

What does an inclusive setting look like?

Open door policy
Family / community
always welcome

All children's learning is
documented in a credit
model

All children are settled and happy

Children's backgrounds are
valued and celebrated

Inclusion is not negotiable.
That means that children
attend irrespective of
whether their education
support worker is there or not

Children can expect to be
listened to and heard

Parent / whanau contributions,
discussions, ideas and
feedback is valued and
encouraged

Emphasis is placed on
creating a warm welcoming
environment

All children are expected to
take responsibility for
themselves, each other and the
environment



Children are viewed as
capable and competent

Siblings are welcome

Wide range of resources for
all interests and abilities

Children make decisions about
their own learning

ESW's work with all children
ESW's are treated as teachers
ESW's contribute to ideas and the
environment



ESW's are part of the team
reciprocal relationships
shared responsibilities
support teachers-teachers support
sharing knowledge and
experience

If we don't have an answer,
skill, resource we will source
it or make it

Inclusion is for people and
pets

We are all learners

Parents are the best source
of knowledge about their
child



Three definitions emerged from our analyses of the chart, the teacher focus group interview data, and teacher survey data. We found there was an alignment of these with the literature.

1. Inclusion means inclusion for all – children, families, teachers, the wider community, (Casey, 2006, Fraser, 2006). We also included education support workers, administrative support workers, students, pets, local ECE centres (childcare and kindergarten), and schools.
2. Visual communication tools for enhancing inclusion encompasses everything from visuals in the physical environment, to photos and hand-made sequence books, to the children’s portfolios (Geel, 2007; Jones, 2005; Soan, 2004).
3. Social competence results from individuals’ social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural development that allows them to function well in a variety of settings (Bandura, 1997; Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2007; Katz, 2008).

We decided that a visual communication tool is not only a ‘thing’ (equipment) but also the ‘product’. For instance, a camera is a tool yet so are the photographs and video produced from the camera. It is the way that the camera and the products are used that made them into tools. For instance, a Learning Story (Carr, 2001) is a visual communication tool as it is used to “tell a story for the child, tell a story to the adults, inform the families about our practice and encourage the child to revisit, retell and relive the story” (Teacher research notes, May 2006).

A philosophy of inclusion

Our pre-inclusion actions begin amongst the teaching team. We develop or revise our philosophy statement as a new teaching team comes together, and this philosophy evolves over time. The Auckland Kindergarten Association requires each kindergarten to have a philosophy statement of teaching practice. Our philosophy begins:

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves
after a journey that no-one can take for us or spare us.

Marcel Proust

It continues:

At Botany Downs Kindergarten we view all children as capable, competent learners. We believe that children construct their ideas and develop their thinking through social interactions, particularly through interactions with their peers. Therefore, we place great emphasis on building social competence and resilience (Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2007).

We have a strong philosophy of inclusion; we believe that all children belong together, that they are all individuals and they all have the right to develop and learn together in a climate of acceptance.

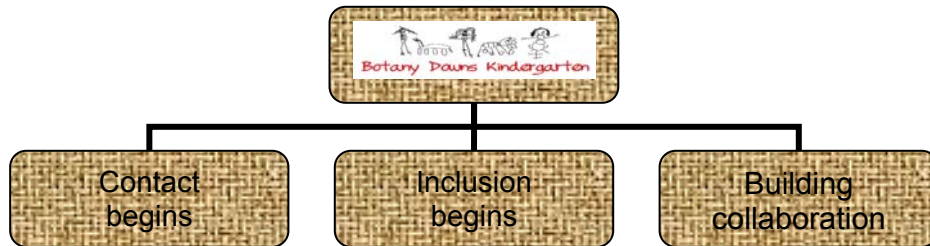
Botany Downs Kindergarten enrolment pack contains a copy of this philosophy and a copy is also placed in the front of each child's portfolio.

Documenting inclusion

In the first year of the COI research we documented all that we do to enhance a sense of inclusion at each stage of contact with a child and their family. We identified and recorded all the little things we do. The collated data showed that there were many diverse components to inclusive practice and that our inclusive actions were continually expanding. Kerry noted, "I have never thought about what we do in such depth. It is just what we do. Looking at each detail has made me more aware that it is the little things that count" (Research meeting notes, April 2006). The figures below list the many components.

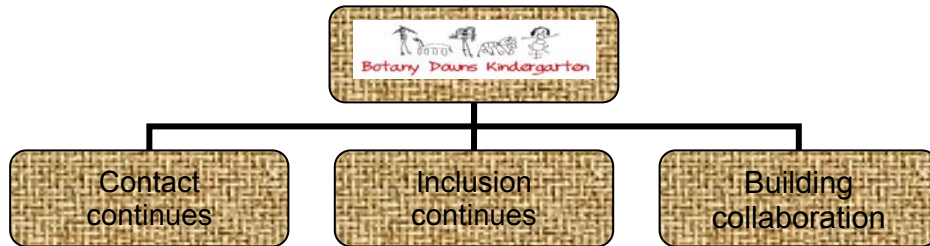
Figure 4 depicts the actions taken when the parents and kindergarten are ready to enrol the child.

Figure 4: SETTING THE SCENE FOR INCLUSION AT BDK



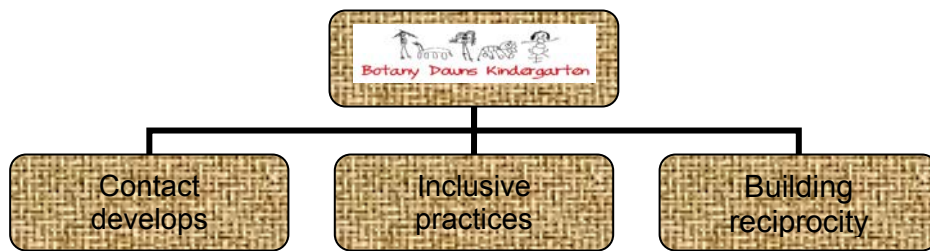
- First person to see person meets and greets
- Give information form with times, hours, parent help, committee, fees, including philosophy
- Invite questions
- Invite them to stay and have a look around
- Invite them to come back and visit
- Ensure that teachers have spoken to the child
- Use child's name
- Use adult's name
- Take child's photo if they are near to starting
- Check that they're OK as they fill out the waiting list form
- Ask if they know other families at this kindergarten
- Offer "year" books to them to look at
- Is this the kindergarten they want to go to?
- Ask are they aware of other kindergartens/ centres in the area?

Figure 5: INCLUSIVE ACTIONS ON ENROLMENT DAY AT BDK



- Phone/email/write to invite child and their family to start
 - Give a date for them to reply
 - If no contact, write a letter
- Ask parent to bring in immunization, birth certificate, family photo to copy
 - Engage in discussion
- Invite parent in to fill out further forms in our enrolment folders (will take 15 mins)
 - These are split into 4 sections for convenience of filling out
 - Give out information pack
 - Enrolment forms to go on file
 - 'Getting to know you' sheets go in child's portfolio
 - Centre of Innovation information pack and consent form
 - Find the parent a free space to sit in, give them a pen
 - They can take the forms home to fill out
- Sit with them or check on them from time to time, engage in discussion
 - Encourage questions
- When the forms are complete, go through all the forms with the parent
 - Check all parts of the form are complete
- Take a tour of the kindergarten - toilets, water fountain, communication pockets, donation box, lockers, painting box and kindergarten environment
 - Take child's photo for our photo library
 - Give a start date for the child
 - Invite family to stay for the session if they wish
 - Invite child and family to visit again before starting
 - Process photo to go on everything the child will have

Figure 6: PREPARATION FOR THE CHILD'S FIRST DAY AT BDK:



From the photos taken on the day they visited make an A4 profile photo
 Create a portfolio with their name on spine.
 Place inside the portfolio -
 an outline of the NZ Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki,
 an outline of assessment procedures,
 our four statements of teaching practice – philosophy, learning and teaching,
 social competence and Treaty of Waitangi
 Put the information the family filled out into the child's portfolio
 Put family photo into the child's portfolio
 Make magnetic name tag for the child (no photo)
 Make a name tag with photo
 Make communication pocket with child's name and photo
 Make a painting slot with child's name and a photo
 Put child's enrolment into Infocare
 Put child's name on roll sheet
 Organise a locker for the child
 Put child's name in the birthday book
 Put contact details into the children's address book
 Put onto the enrolment list and assessment list on the computer
 If coming straight to mornings, give out 'Welcome to mornings' handout and
 ensure the child has a transition to school photo.

Notes from our research meetings revealed several conversations centred upon whether our practice was in line with our espoused philosophy. Over the period of the research we recorded a number of additional processes to encourage children's sense of belonging. For instance, we now email the child at home to tell them how we are looking forward to their starting and telling them what their locker will be (identified by a picture). This addition has been well received. We have had many comments on the initiative. Georgia's mother was very enthusiastic. She said, 'Georgia was so excited to get an email addressed to her.

She told everyone about it and told everyone that she had an orange flower locker.'

Another addition was asking for a family photo to put in the child's portfolio. The photograph gives a starting point to engage in conversations with the child about their family and is particularly helpful in the settling process. For example, Liam liked to visit this photograph over and over again. Each time he would say, 'That's my brother, that's my father and that's my mother and that's me.' Most family photos are put in the child's portfolio prior to them starting. In return, all families receive a photograph of the teachers with the teachers' names.

During the COI project parents had the opportunity to comment on their feelings of inclusion through entry/ exit surveys. In a question relating to their feeling of inclusion when they started kindergarten parent responses were mainly about the friendliness of teachers, the teachers taking time to talk with them, and parents feeling free to ask questions. One respondent also talked about appreciating being greeted personally by a committee member. A typical response in the entry survey was:

I felt very welcome. I had a couple of visits and was spoken to by the kindy teachers and encouraged to visit as often as I liked. The atmosphere was fantastic and the beautifully arranged play spaces made me feel that there's something kind of magical about Botany Downs Kindergarten. Clive came away from each visit happy and looking forward to starting kindergarten" (Entry survey, 2008).

A common theme we found during the first cycle of research was how much attention we paid to detail—in our interactions, actions and the environment.

After the documenting phase, the COI team turned to our research question about visual communication tools in order to gain a more detailed understanding of their use and impact.

Research question: How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families during the pre-inclusion-preparation phase of inclusion?

Over the three years of the COI research project we noted a marked increase in the visual communication tools we had at kindergarten, and also in the ICT tools parents were using at home. At the start of our research 67% of our parents had a computer in their home while at the end of the research that figure had increased to 94%. Accordingly, we thought of possible new tools using computers to inform parents about their children in a visual manner. Two notable additions were our website and Blog. Many families now enrol having some knowledge of BDK kindergarten through looking at the BDK website and blog.

For a term, we researched and kept a note of the questions new parents asked when they telephoned and emailed. Their questions included:

- Starting age
- Length of waiting list
- What age do children come to mornings
- Cost
- How many children are there
- What is the adult child ratio
- Philosophy
- Locality
- Nearest primary school?

We acted promptly on this information and added a section called 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs) and a BDK locality map to our website. These additions extend people's knowledge as they consider which early childhood education service will best suit them and their child.

Research question: How do teachers support the development of social competence and self efficacy in children during the pre-inclusion-preparation phase of inclusion?

Support for children to develop social competence and self-efficacy at the pre-inclusion-preparation phase includes sharing our statement of teaching practice relating to social competence with parents and engaging in discussion about it. Discussions with parents about our philosophy and practice are the norm for all families starting at BDK. The material from Kevin's case story (below) illustrated how possibility thinking is evident when the child has additional needs.

The pre-inclusion of Kevin

Kevin was enrolled onto our waiting list as a two year old. As the time approached for Kevin to enrol in the kindergarten session the pre-inclusion phase began. Kevin, a young boy with developmental delay on the autistic spectrum, became one of our 'case story' children. In our documentation of the pre-inclusion phase we noted that initial contact was made with Kevin's mother, Louise by phone (Teacher journal, October 2007). Kevin was offered a place and Louise was invited to visit the kindergarten with him.

Louise describes her initial contact with us in this way:

During my visit to enrol Kevin I was asked, 'Do you want Kevin to start in mornings or afternoons?' I was blown away by this question and replied, 'Kevin is far better in the mornings but I assumed he would have to start in the afternoon sessions as I have experienced elsewhere.' That was fantastic as then Kevin could still have a sleep in the afternoon a few days a week. Then I was asked, 'How many days a week would you like Kevin to attend?' Again, I was stunned by the question and by their willingness to be so flexible. At the moment Kevin attends an exercise class on Monday mornings and I thought it was very important to continue for his physical development. So we agreed that Kevin would start four mornings a week. I was so relieved. This was the best possible thing that could be done for Kevin and it had been granted so willingly and with so much understanding.

Both Kevin's mother and the teachers took the opportunity during the pre-visits to photograph Kevin in the kindergarten surroundings. These were made into a book for him to read over the term break to increase his sense of familiarity, in order to make the transition into the kindergarten a less stressful time for Kevin. Louise recalled Kevin's pre-inclusion like this:

To ease the transition into kindy I attended one morning with a friend and we took lots of photos of Kevin there doing different activities. The staff were more than happy for us to be there doing this. In fact, being well accustomed to using photographic visuals, they also took photos that they would use. They already had an electronic library of photos which they were willing to share with us. We used some of our photos and some of their photos to make a book for Kevin which we showed him often during the holidays. This helped to familiarise him to the new environment. (Parent feedback, April 2008)

These excerpts from Kevin's case story illustrate two of the ways we use possibility thinking. First, we created options for hours of attendance to suit Kevin and his family. Second, we agreed and collaborated in making a visual book so that Kevin could recall and become more familiar with the kindergarten in the weeks before he started. We will follow Kevin's progress in later chapters.

Reflections on the pre-inclusion phase of inclusion

The pre-inclusion phase is a time to begin the process of getting to know the child and their family. Observations and staff meeting records indicated that children frequently held on to their family member during initial pre-entry visits to kindergarten. Those who ventured into the environment frequently checked with their family member. 'Checking in' was a way to help develop a sense of security. Franklin, the turtle was a great asset, capturing the attention of nearly all the children enrolling at BDK. We explored ways to develop the relationship with Franklin further as we progressed through the research project.

Raelene's journal illustrates how we came to view the pre-inclusion phase. "The pre-inclusion phase is vital to creating an inclusive environment. It is the

backbone. It is a time when teachers debate philosophies and values and a plan for his or her inclusion is formulated” (August 2008).

Through our ongoing processes of self review, the pre-inclusion–preparation phase of inclusion has been continually reflected upon and refined at BDK. Our descriptive data indicate that inclusion goes beyond a policy and tools. It is underpinned by the teachers’ values and by how teachers treat people with respect, attend to details and open their minds to possibilities.

During the pre-inclusion–preparation phase of inclusion the main inclusive actions were:

- introducing families to the kindergarten
- establishing reciprocal and responsive relationships with families
- building and using information resources
- laying the foundations for successful transition into the kindergarten for the children and their family.

Chapter 4

Early inclusion-transition phase

The second stage of Lyons & Kelly (2008) model is the early inclusion-transition phase. We identified our initial transition phase as being the period of time in which a child transitions into kindergarten at around three years of age. Transition times vary for each child and their family and may take place over a short time or over an extended period of time. Later in the project, we extended our definition of transition to include the multiple transitions that occur at our kindergarten: transitions between activities, transitions involving new experiences, transitions between people, transition to school and transition as it applies to both children and adults (Research meeting notes, August 2007). Relationships were considered central to the inclusive process (Dockett & Perry, 2007), and transition times provide opportunities for teachers to continue to develop their relationship with a child and his or her family.

The data in the early inclusion-transition phase was collected through:

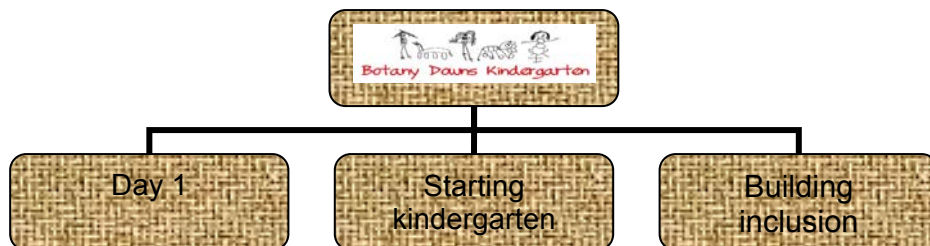
- Parent surveys
- Records of parents' anecdotes
- Digital images
- Observations
- Research associate (outsider) observations
- Learning and teaching stories
- Research meeting notes
- Teacher journals
- Staff meeting minutes
- Case stories drawing together data from different sources.



Documenting transition-early inclusion

As mentioned earlier, just before a child starts kindergarten the teachers do their administration including putting the child's photo on all that is theirs to create a feeling of belonging. Other standard procedures for making the child and the parents feel welcome and included during their child's first week are listed below:

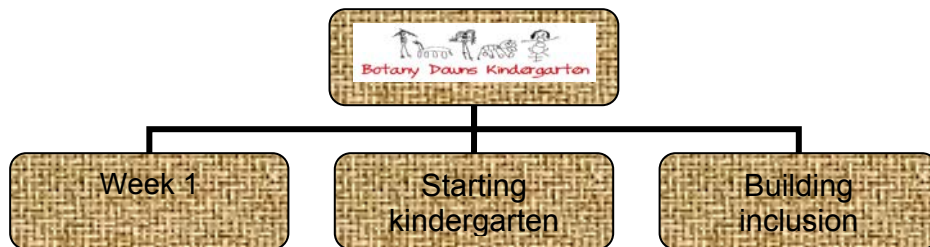
Figure 7: INCLUSIVE ACTIONS ON THE CHILD'S FIRST DAY At BDK:



- Welcome the child and the family
- Re-introduce yourself and the other teachers
- Tell child that they can let you know if they need anything
- Show them the water fountain and how to use it
- Take a tour of the toilets and hand basins
- Show them where their locker is and encourage them to find it by themselves
- Look at portfolio, what colour is the writing on the spine? look at pictures inside
- Encourage parent to read and sign the statements of teaching practice in their child's portfolio
- Show the child and parent where dry paintings might be found
- Have a look at communication pocket, donation envelopes, post box
- Show parent where the parent help list is and how to use it
- Ask parent to come back a little bit early on the child's first day
- Introduce the child at group time; they have an option of coming up the front
- Take photos for portfolio front page and welcome page (and their locker)
- Show them where they can find the morning/ afternoon tea
- Encourage child to wash their hands before eating fruit
- Interact with the child
- Talk to parent about their child's first day at the end of session
- Are further strategies needed to help their child settle?
- Invite parent to stay whenever they like
- Show parent where the kitchen is, they can help themselves to tea/ coffee
- Show parent where the adult toilet is.

As we continued to identify our inclusive actions, we added to the lists throughout the research.

Figure 8: INCLUSIVE ACTIONS IN WEEK ONE OF A CHILD AND THEIR FAMILY'S ATTENDANCE AT BDK:



- Extra care and observation of the child
- Encourage engagement of the child with their portfolio
- Ensure a number of photos go in to the portfolio
- Show the child their photos in their portfolio
- Talk daily to parent
- Notice friendships and interests
- Encourage the child to explore the environment
- Encourage care of belongings
- Have clear expectations
- Ask child to do a hand-print for their portfolio
- Ask child to do a self portrait for their portfolio
- Invite child to write own name for their portfolio

In documenting what happens we noted that portfolios were the most-mentioned inclusive tool we were using in the process of transition (Research meeting notes, May 2006). They were vital to our early inclusion of children and their families. Parent survey data supported these teacher perspectives. Remember Riley? His mother said,

Riley developed an expectation that the teachers would contribute to his portfolio very early on. He couldn't wait to bring it back to kindy just in case the teachers put something in it. Later on he was always planning what he could put in his portfolio from home. He just loves it. He will show anyone who will look at it!

Parent data connected to the early inclusion-transition phase indicated that portfolios are instrumental in the family developing deeper engagement in learning and the kindergarten programme. Portfolios will be further discussed in the next three chapters.

Research question: How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families in the early inclusion-transition phase of inclusion?

Many visual communication tools were found to be particularly useful in transitioning any children on the autistic spectrum. Through possibility thinking those tools were continually enhanced or extended to meet the specific needs of other children. The tools we discuss in this chapter are:

- Noticeboards with images
- Portfolios, including portfolios for the pets and teachers at BDK
- Videos and DVDs made at kindergarten or by family members
- The BDK Blog
- Photographs.

Kevin's story

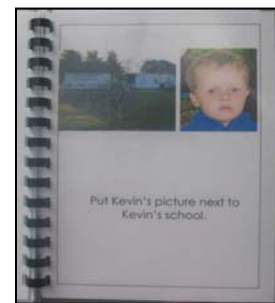
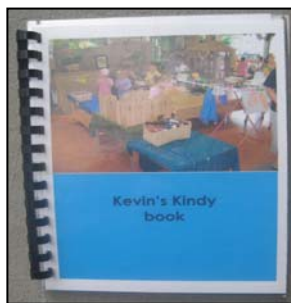
Kevin's mother Louise related how a small adjustment to a visual communication tool enhanced Kevin's experiences during his transition into kindergarten.

When we arrived at kindy on Kevin's first official morning I realised that a printed name (tag) alone of Kevin would have little meaning to him and I suggested a photo of him on his name card. Staff happily accommodated my request and now he arrives and is guided to look for the photo of himself on his name card and put it up on the magnetic board. Throughout Kevin's transition into kindy the staff were very approachable and willing to listen to me and to follow up on suggestions. (Parent feedback, January 2007)

Over time we have created a library of visuals for most of the activities that Kevin engages in at kindergarten. These are used to cue him in to transitions between activities. His visual resources can be on sequence cards or in sequence books.



FIGURE 9: A SEQUENCE BOOK FOR KEVIN'S ENTRY TO KINDERGARTEN.



When Kevin started kindergarten he required one to one support at all times and particularly when it was time to choose activities. The teachers made “choice cards” to encourage him to initiate choice making.

At the end of the year (2007) Kevin's education support worker offered Kevin the visual choices of water or sand play. Kevin took the cards and threw them on the ground. His education support worker did not react and waited for Kevin to tell her what he wanted to do. His put his hand into her visuals apron and pulled out a picture with playdough on it and handed it to her. This was the first time that Kevin had made a choice that also rejected choices on offer. We concluded that Kevin was now communicating his choices in a most effective manner to meet his own needs.

All children are exposed to the use of visuals and can access the visual resources. Caelan's story illustrates how understanding and learning develops and is built upon in our style of inclusive environment.

Caelan's story

Caelan had difficulty engaging with the curriculum when he arrived at morning kindergarten. Raelene met with him and brainstormed ideas of the possibilities that are presented in the environment. Caelan said he would like a card like Kevin's to choose from. Caelan chose his cardboard to put the visuals on. He took photos of activities in the environment that interested him, he printed and laminated his photos, added Velcro and he had made his own visual communication tool. Each day he would get his visual cards out, change his pictures into the order he wanted to do the tasks, and then went about engaging with each activity in the sequence he had set himself. Caelan used this method for a few weeks and then he just began engaging with the programme without his visual prompts.

Visual tools were helped children on the autistic spectrum move between tasks. Kevin and Georgia's story describes a transition between tasks using what is called a "picture exchange communication system" (PECS) for a purpose. Georgia and Kevin were age four at the time this story was captured.

Taking Responsibility

As kindergarten teachers we experience so many delights ... however today was even better than that. At one point early in the morning Kevin wandered into our kindergarten administrator's office. In the blink of an eye Georgia sprung into action saying, "Kevin, the office is not available." These are the exact words his education support worker would have used if she had been there. Without blinking an eye Kevin turned and left the office. Georgia didn't have the visual to show Kevin that the office was not available; however she did have the words that had been used extensively alongside the visual.

Later in the day Kevin's education support worker was busy so Georgia took Kevin to the mat to be released for lunch. Kevin sat perfectly on the mat. When their names were called Georgia noticed that his education support worker was not alongside him and led Kevin into the bathroom, she guided him as they washed their hands and then they went to get their bags for lunch. Georgia showed Kevin to the table and together they got his lunchbox out. Georgia accessed his PECS (Picture exchange communication system) and showed them to Kevin. "Kevin showed me that he wants banana," Georgia called out to the teacher ... and she proceeded to give him his banana.

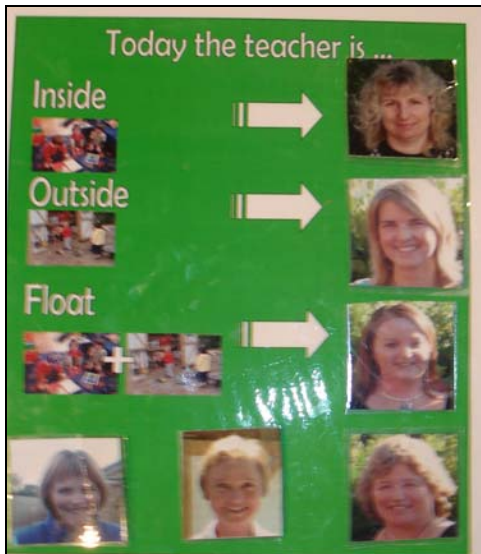
So what is the importance of this observation? It clearly demonstrates that children learn from watching others and that they can competently take responsibility for others. It was evident that Georgia has been observing Kevin working with his ESW and felt confident enough to take on the teacher role. Who needs adult teachers! Georgia showed patience and understanding as she waited for Kevin to make his responses. What occurred demonstrates how an inclusive environment can enhance the learning of all children. We can't wait to see where this develops in the future.



November 2007



We found the use of visual communication tools to be so successful with children on the autistic spectrum that we explored the possibility of extending their use to all children so they have different ways to access information. An example is a board with visual images introduced to show the children who the inside/ outside/ float teachers are.



This board is at the children's height and is changed daily to record our working roster. Photos of regular relievers are also added when they are present. In this way both children and their families know who the teachers are each day and where they can most likely be found. This roster board supports the process of transition for many children.

Two examples illustrate how children use the roster board. In the first example Archie used it to access and ask the outside teacher for a drill that was charged so that he could drill a hole in his wood (Teacher journal, May 2008). In the second one, Anish and Rahil used the board to find the inside teacher to ask for skin-coloured paint to complete their project (Learning story documentation, August, 2008). Children's conversations were captured at the roster board discussing the placement and roles of the teachers, with children communicating their thoughts to each other (Anecdotal records, October 2008).

The children could have just looked for the teacher. However, by using the board they used a method to access information that could contribute to their ability to find and use information sources in the future.

After children had expressed anxiety about who was going to pick them up, further possibility thinking led us to develop another visual communication tool.

The child and their family were encouraged to put the photo of the person collecting them next to the child's photograph on their chart each day. At any time in the day a child can check their chart and feel reassured. We also personalized the child charts to reflect each child's interests. For instance, Joel's had army camouflage, while Madison's had cats (Research meeting notes, March 2008).

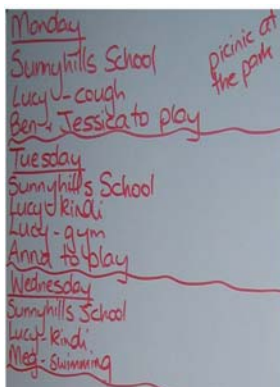
Another successful initiative with visual communication tools was the roster we developed depicting who the mat time teacher is each day:



We have a number of children who check this roster out as soon as they arrive at kindergarten. They come to know who the teacher is that they need to negotiate with if they want to share news or stories from home at group time (Teacher journal, March 2008).

Other visual communication signs have been developed to indicate that the playground is closed and that it is tidy up time.

Noticing the success of visual communication tools in the BDK environment, parents told us anecdotes about how they were using a visual communication tool at home to support transitions. Mel related how she put a photograph of the kindergarten on the fridge to show her children that it was a kindergarten afternoon. She said it 'saved them asking the same questions from VERY early in the morning and it gave them the responsibility for finding out' (Anecdotal records, March 2007).



Another parent, Belinda, told us of how she wrote a list each night sequencing their family schedule for the next day. She said that there was always a scramble in the morning to see what was on the agenda for the day. As a result her children were able to prepare for the day ahead. When this approach was shared with families others said they planned to adopt a similar system of visual communication with their children (Anecdotal records, March 2007).

Many other stories relating to visual communication tools enhancing processes of transition were recorded during the COI research project. Jack's was one of those stories.

Jack's story

Jack found all transitions a challenge. Being on the autistic spectrum, he was adverse to change. His mother, Lourdes, was his education support worker and she was totally committed to using visual communication tools with him. Transition back into kindergarten after a term break was particularly traumatic for him. We had used visuals to ease the transition; however they had limited success. Kerry (teacher) considered the possibilities and decided to make a video of Jack actively engaged in all his favourite activities at kindergarten. Lourdes reported that they watched the video every day. She said,

Jack experiences and understands our world in a different way. He is a very visual and intrapersonal learner. It took him longer than most kids to accomplish what Kerry captured in the video. For instance, it took him one and a half years of concentrated effort to learn to jump – two terms at kindergarten (ie, 20 weeks) to overcome his fears and confidently go on the big wide slide. The video made by Kerry was a tremendous help (with transition back into kindergarten after the term break). His face was full of delight watching the video. His facial expressions tell us, 'It's all coming back to me now.' It's his memory jogger.

When Jack returned to kindergarten, the activities he engaged in were exactly like those in the video. Lourdes went on to say,

There were two added bonuses of having Kerry's video. First, it became one of our analytical tools in assessing Jack's progress in light of the structured programme we designed and implemented from the time of diagnosis in May 2005. It was very good to see from a detached /

objective perspective how Jack completed a target task. The emotion of triumph captured in the video gave us heaps of encouragement to move forward. Second, with the minimum of words and effort, it enabled us to share with our extended family the sort of learning processes and activities that are so unique to Jack. A picture paints a thousand words, indeed!

Later, Jack's older brother, Daniel came in and made a video of Jack doing his favourite things at kindergarten. This time Daniel narrated the video for Jack, giving him encouragement in his endeavours.

The collaboration continued. Well after Jack left kindergarten the family came in to ask for another copy of Jack's video as the copies they had were worn out. They wanted Jack to continue to remember his successes at kindergarten (Research meeting notes, May 2008).

At BDK, we value collaboration, especially collaboration that shifts the focus from the teacher as expert to the mutual exchange of support and knowledge between parties (Fraser, 2005).

Cycles of inclusion

When there were inclusive actions that continue down through a family we called them "cycles of inclusion". Cycles occur when a family moves in and out of kindergarten as one child transitions to school and the next sibling starts kindergarten. Contact often continues with the family throughout the interim period in a reciprocal manner and maintains a feeling of inclusion. The story below illustrates another cycle of inclusion. It was Liam (now at school) who eased the transition in to kindergarten for his younger brother, also called Jack.

Liam's brother Jack's story

Jack had a most successful transition into kindergarten supported by a visual communication tool – his brother's portfolio. When we rang to say that Jack could start kindergarten, his brother Liam zapped off to get his

portfolio and to share the contents with him. Together they predicted what might happen at kindergarten for Jack. On Jack's first day he came to kindergarten armed with Liam's portfolio. He was most insistent that we looked at all the pages of Liam's portfolio. He was confident in his knowledge related to each page. Jack's mother said how proud Liam was to share his portfolio with Jack. And now Jack was the holder of the knowledge.



From our previous interactions with Jack's family we know that they are a very close and committed family who value the educational experiences that BDK provides. Thus, we made the assumption that Jack has absorbed these values as well (Hamer & Adams, 2003). The enthusiasm of the family combined with Liam's portfolio sowed the seed for Jack to develop a sense of belonging before Jack started kindergarten. The portfolio was a 'tool of engagement' in the home setting. ... One of the things we noticed was the absolute care Jack took of Liam's portfolio. He treated it as a precious item, one to be cared for; one to be respected. Jack was so proud, he was fit to burst. He turned each page with care and looked at each photo with such reverence; then he placed the portfolio so carefully in his locker. It was obvious that Jack already knew that portfolios are special. We made the assumption that this was the way the portfolio was treated at home. We were so delighted that his family chose to share this story with us, and that they allowed us to continue the story at kindergarten. Such collaborations enhance children's learning.

Botany Downs Kindergarten Blog

A new addition to our visual communication tools during the period of our research our kindergarten blog. Liam's (another Liam) story below illustrates how our blog was used successfully to assist his transition in to kindergarten.

Liam's story

Liam's story emerged after we discussed with his mother Liam's unsettled start to kindergarten. Unbeknown to us, Liam's mother had been using our kindergarten *blog* to engage Liam with the happenings at kindergarten. Each day they would log on to the *blog* to check out updates. When we discussed his unsettled start with his mother, and absorbed the information about them viewing the *blog*, we prepared a blog entry showing Liam at kindergarten (Blog, September 2008). His mother reported that when he saw himself on the blog 'he just kept smiling' and 'it certainly aided his transition into kindergarten' (Anecdotal record, September 2008).



Pets and their visuals, and transition

It has long been known that pets have a therapeutic effect on human beings (Donowitz, 2002).

It is on this basis that we engage our pets to assist children's transition from home to BDK. Madison would bring a carrot for the guinea pigs to give her



a purpose to come to kindergarten. Daisy would read to our turtle Franklin. The animals appear to have a calming effect on the children.

We began to ask ourselves why we didn't have portfolios for the animals if they were to be truly included at BDK (Research meeting notes, November 2007). We

made some. The children now access the pets' portfolios and read about their adventures (Digital photos, May 2008). For children who are experiencing a bumpy transition into the kindergarten, the stories of the pet's adventures act as a hook for engagement.



Joshua was feeling a little reticent about coming to kindergarten. Each day he would stand by the turtle tank and Franklin would come down to see him. He would stand and look at Franklin or move his finger along the tank for Franklin to follow. Later, when Joshua was feeling more settled he would read to Franklin from his portfolio (Research meeting notes, March 2007).

Developing a new visual communication tool, portfolios for the pets, has added another resource to the *kete* of strategies we can use to ease a child's transition into kindergarten.

Research question: How do teachers support the development of social competency and self-efficacy during the early inclusion–transition phase of inclusion?

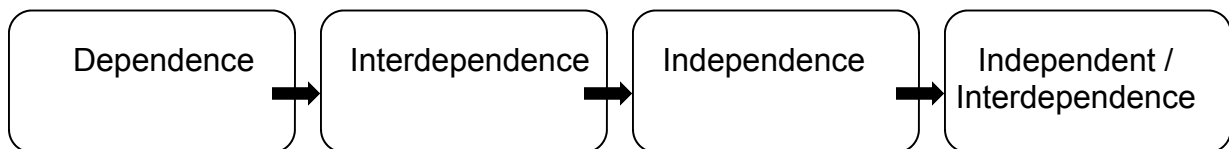
As they transition in to kindergarten children are faced with separation from their mother and family, and teachers reach deep into their resourcefulness to find strategies that suit the personalities and needs of each child.

During the research project, the concept of 'self efficacy' engendered ongoing debate within the COI teacher researcher team. The Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) requires all their kindergarten teaching teams to develop a Statement of Teaching Practice relating to social competence. Questions arose. Did we in fact mean social competence rather than self efficacy? As well, we know that many new children arrive at BDK confident and self assured. We

acknowledge that children come to kindergarten with a diverse range of skills and abilities and this applies to their level of independence and self efficacy as well.

Observations of the children led us to develop this continuum of dependence to independence:

Figure 10: CONTINUUM OF DEPENDENCE TO INDEPENDENCE IN THE EARLY INCLUSION-TRANSITION PHASE



In this diagram we depict the typical levels that many children starting kindergarten progress through, albeit at varying rates. Our observations indicated the children also step onto the continuum at different levels. Their different levels of dependency related to their sense of belonging and inclusion, as well as their growing confidence and competence. At the highest level we believed that a child could move between independence and interdependence as is called for in different situations. We argue that interdependence is healthy when it is needed.

Being able to recognise times when it is appropriate to be independent involves social competence in making good choices. Relevant readings show that social competence and self efficacy build resilient children, and resilient children cope more successfully with transitions (Krovetz, 1999; Fthenakis, 1998). Transition, whether it is in to kindergarten, between sessions or into school, can be a time of apprehension resulting in unsettledness (Fthenakis, 1998; OECD, 2001). Bandura (1997) believes that children who demonstrate confidence and self efficacy have a stronger capacity for learning. When children are socially connected at kindergarten we can assume that their feelings of belonging and inclusion, and their learning, are enhanced.

One example of a child transitioning into kindergarten and building capability was Madison.

Madison's story

Madison had a difficult time transitioning into kindergarten. In fact, her transition lasted for nine months. Even with the support of an adult – teacher or parent - Madison struggled to engage with the kindergarten programme and the children in the environment. We wanted to support Madison to build positive dispositions to learning. It was on that basis that our research associates conducted observations of Madison, across two days (using an observation schedule developed by the Competent Children researchers: Wylie, Thompson and Lythe, 1999) to give an outsider perspective. We hoped that when our initial actions and the data informed some possibility thinking we might come up with new strategies to smooth Madison's transition into kindergarten (Alton-Lee, Nuthall & Patrick, 1993).

The observations confirmed that Madison was not responsive to the other children; however, when the teacher looked at Madison's portfolio with her, Madison smiled (responsiveness, communication). Later in the day, a teacher tried to encourage Madison to interact with other children as they played at the water trough (teacher modelling). While Madison appeared to be aware of the children, she chose not to join them or interact with them.

For Madison, our possibility thinking involved searching for actions that might ease the stress she felt about transitioning into kindergarten. We:

- encouraged her to bring food for the animals
- encouraged stories from home in her portfolio
- gave her a picture of her mother to carry at kindergarten
- experimented with her mother staying
- wrote stories about Madison engaged positively in the programme and looked at her portfolio with her

- developed her interest in cats
- suggested inviting kindergarten friends to play at home.

However, all these strategies had limited success. Madison continued to become stressed upon separation even after we had tried different strategies to build rapport (Staff meeting minutes, March 2008; Research associate observations, November 2007). Madison had moments when her social confidence was stronger. Learning stories recorded her sharing news from home at group time, and feeding the pets. However, she was nearly always with an adult. We felt concerned, as low-level participation in a group has the potential to lead to exclusion over time. In partnership with Madison's mother, we continued to reflect upon what else could we do. Fortunately, there was a break-through, albeit not of our making.

After a term break, she returned with photos of cousins staying at her house. Madison had become confident and articulate. What had happened? Discussions with her mother led us to wonder if there was less pressure surrounding the relationship with her cousins, which allowed her confidence to blossom. Madison is now firmly entrenched in a social circle at kindergarten. We will never know exactly what triggered this change. Nevertheless, the relationship that we built with the family is rewarding.

Another story illustrates how a parents' contribution to an inclusive curriculum can build social competence and self efficacy.

Renee's story

Renee had no difficulty transitioning in to kindergarten because she came with her friend Jack. However, if Jack was away Renee would stay away. Throughout each session Renee never left Jack's side; that was until Renee came rushing in one morning with a CD in her hand. Her mother had had a baby overnight and we had the first pictures to project onto the big screen. Renee drew up a chair in front of the screen to watch the

images of her newborn sister. In no time a group had gathered. Renee proceeded to tell them all about her baby, Katie. The next morning Renee confidently walked in. Looking at the big screen she asked, "Where's my baby, Katie?" In the blink of an eye we had baby Katie back on the big screen. Again, Renee spent the morning gazing at her baby and discussing her with anyone who would listen. This connection between home and kindergarten had two positive outcomes. Firstly, Renee appeared to feel very connected to her family through watching the slideshow with others and that gave her confidence. Secondly, her dependence upon Jack all but disappeared. Thanks to the immediate sharing by the family, and them knowing that Renee could watch the CD at kindergarten, a new self confidence emerged. Renee moved from complete dependence upon Jack to independent/ interdependence in two days. Renee engaged in the curriculum without Jack and she was happy at kindergarten even when he was away (independence). From time to time she would play with him (independent/interdependence) (Learning story, March 2007).

In the case stories in this chapter we have shown the value of an inclusive environment that is responsive to individual needs and flexible in diverse ways to help new children settle. However, it is not just new children who need support to make transitions.

Ryan's story

Although Ryan appeared settled in the afternoon sessions, he became quieter and seemed reluctant to interact with the children when he transitioned from the afternoon group to the morning group. As he went into the second week of solitary play, we talked to his mother to find out what his current interests were at home. She said that at home he was totally obsessed with the movie *Cars* (Lasseter, 2006) and related memorabilia. After some possibility thinking in relation to this transition the teachers invited Ryan to bring in his *Cars* stuff. When he arrived with his

Cars memorabilia the next day, Ryan became the *Cars* magnet - he had so much knowledge to share related to his interest. He quickly became “the expert” in the kindergarten.

Day by day, play with *Cars* continued. The implications for our philosophy had to be explored (because we do not “do” commercial things, nor do we encourage toys from home. The change in Ryan was too significant to deny him bringing in more cars. His social competence and confidence grew significantly as he developed an ability to initiate and maintain relationships with other children through their common interest, an interest that endured for two terms. In order to foster Ryan’s feelings of well-being and belonging, we unwittingly engaged many children in a *Cars* experience - an emergent curriculum gained energy. Ryan became confident and never again retreated. He had become a popular holder of knowledge that was valued by the children.

Reflection

Working in the context of an emergent curriculum is very exciting; as we never know in which direction the learning will go. In this instance the teachers became the learners and the children, and in particular Ryan, became the teachers.

This was graphic illustration of how our inclusive practices positively affected lots of children at the kindergarten, even though it raised philosophical challenges for us. The power shifted when we went with a child’s interest. The change was positive for Ryan – he was included. It was also valuable for the teachers and the programme - the children learnt that their ideas and expertise are valued at BDK. The drama and role play was captured digitally for re-visiting. The stories that children created based on the characters in the *Cars* story extended their literacy repertoires. Ryan flourished. Ryan and his cars helped us accept that a curriculum based on socio-cultural principles may need to embrace popular media. This was a ‘wow’ moment in the research.

Another 'wow' story

A parent arrived at kindergarten with a box of 'display' mobile phones. In a flash, the box was opened and the children were selecting their mobile phone. As we watched not one child put the phone to their ear - they all started texting and taking photographs. Some had two phones – a home phone and a work phone! I tried to explain to the children that when I was their age I was on a “party line” and you had to turn a handle on the phone to create the Morse code signal. It was obvious that our childhood experiences were worlds apart and I had two choices: I could dwell in past experiences or I could embrace the children’s experiences and learn from them. Wow. (Bronwyn’s journal, October 2007)

Kirsten’s story of inclusion into BDK challenged the teacher researchers not to make assumptions, but to notice, recognise and respond (Cowie, 2000); in this case, in order to respond to a child who was experiencing language barriers. We adapted our curriculum to meet her needs. Davis, Gunn, Purdue and Smith (2007, p. 102) state, ‘An inclusive setting is clearly about valuing and responding to diversity. Such places transform the social, cultural and physical environment in order to meet the needs of all those within it.’

Kirsten’s story

Kirsten was four when she joined our kindergarten having attended kindergarten in the Philippines. She stayed on the periphery of play and no amount of interaction with teachers helped her to communicate. She appeared to understand English as she listened intently to her mother as she spoke English. After a few days we decided to chat with her mother to find out her strengths and interests. We discovered that Kirsten did in fact speak English, yet she didn’t understand much of what we were saying. She had attended an American kindergarten in the Philippines and many of their words are different to ours. For instance, they called the lockers “cubby holes” and the taps “faucets”. Each day she would go home and ask her mother for translations!

Her mother shared that Kirsten liked to do *'Dot to dot'* pictures at home. The next day we put *'Dot to dot'* pictures out, and Kirsten immediately went to them. Within minutes, a group of children had joined her. Within weeks, relationships began to build for Kirsten. *'Dot to dot'* pictures are not something we would typically include in our programme. However, the adjustment to our practice allowed Kirsten to feel included into the programme, and a greater sense of belonging. Inclusion was more highly valued than dogmatism – we want it for all children. Teacher adaptability helped Kirsten's successful transition into kindergarten.

Our inclusive practices were also applied when Raelene joined the teaching team.

Raelene's story

When Raelene was appointed to a vacant teacher position, both Bronwyn and Kerry asked to be actively engaged in the interview process. It was important that the successful applicant shared our values. For her transition process we decided to apply all the principles and practices we apply to a new child starting kindergarten. We asked Raelene to send a photograph so that we could include the children in smoothing her transition into our kindergarten. On Raelene's first day Erika rushed up to her holding a newsletter with Raelene's photograph on it and said, 'It really is you!' 'What greater welcome could you want?' (Raelene's teacher journal, 2006).

We also used the photograph to:

- create a communication pocket for her
- identify her shelves, and
- create her portfolio.

Prior to her starting, we invited Raelene to upcoming events and emails kept her current with what was happening at BDK. Another initiative was to photograph our regular relievers and list their details, so that she would know who she was ringing. This was so helpful that we created a similar visual chart for our tea and coffee making orders in the kitchen.

During her transition phase Raelene experienced *ako*, where boundaries can blur between teacher and learner as she explored ICT. Raelene was assisting a child to write a digital story, a task that requires some computer skills specific to Apple computers and she was still adapting to them. Dominic noticed Raelene's hesitation in merging photographs he had taken. His response was: "Raelene, you just drag and drop it, like this." He was the holder of the knowledge and the teacher assisting her transition. It was healthy (and pedagogically appropriate) for Raelene to recognise that this was an interdependence situation.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2007) refer to such examples as the interaction of co-players; together the adult and child have sustained engagement in mutual learning. Jordan calls it co-construction (2002).

Raelene captured her thoughts regarding her transition in her journal (November, 2006):

The enthusiastic welcome I received from the children, families and teachers built my personal feeling of inclusion. It gave me first-hand experience of what transition might be like for children. I was able to experience the attention given to the detailed processes that constitute inclusion at Botany Downs Kindergarten. The experience will forever make me think of how my actions impact on children and their families.

Conclusion

The stories and actions shared in this chapter explored how the teaching team at BDK are open to new ideas during transitions, and how they develop their knowledge and skills so that BDK continues to build an inclusive environment.

Key inclusive actions were: attention to detail, responding to individuals, immediacy of actions, personalising responses, building quality relationships with children and their families, and constantly seeking new ways to be inclusive. Teachers' noticing, recognising and responding to challenges for children during the early-inclusion-transition phase smoothed their transitions in many ways.

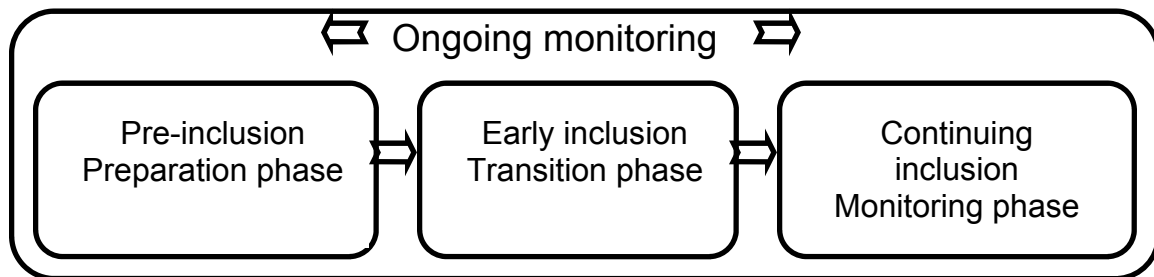
Chapter 5

Continuing inclusion-monitoring phase

The third component of Lyons and Kelly’s (2008) model (see Figure 1) is the continuing inclusion–monitoring phase. During this phase, teachers cement, reflect upon and continue to develop inclusive practices. Lyons and Kelly talk of the “‘flow’ from one phase to the next that constitutes the process of inclusion.” They stress that “inclusion is a process – not an event or a simple point in time” (p. 432).

Initially we considered the continuing inclusion monitoring stage to be the time after transition until the child leaves BDK to go to school. However, it became increasingly evident that aspects of our monitoring phase looped back over the transition and pre-inclusion phases. The looping back occurred through our commitment to ongoing reflective practice. We modified the diagram to reflect this reality (Research meeting notes, October 2008).

Figure 11: THE ADAPTED INCLUSION PHASES
(Adapted from Lyons & Kelly, 2008, p. 432).



The data in the continuing inclusion / monitoring phase of inclusion was collected through:

- Parent surveys
- Teacher focus group interviews
- Entry/ exit surveys



- Interviews with the morning children
- Interviews with former students
- Anecdotal records
- Digital images
- Research meeting notes
- Staff meeting minutes
- Observations
- Case stories drawing together data from different sources.

For each child and their family, as they reach the continuing inclusion–monitoring phase of inclusion we examine the processes we have in place and the relationships we have built. Further possibilities are explored.

Research question: How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families in the continuing-monitoring phase of inclusion?

Early in the COI research, portfolios were identified by the teachers as a visual tool of engagement and a key tool in the practice of inclusion (Research meeting notes, August 2006; Teacher focus group interview, November 2006). Portfolios contain information for families, welcome pages and narrative learning stories. Through the portfolios children’s learning progress can be monitored, their interests built upon and their learning extended. In the first week of a child’s attendance we encourage connection with their portfolio by inserting stories and photos immediately.

A parent survey focused on portfolios

In our first year as a COI, we decided to explore the functions portfolios have for processes of inclusion. A survey was carried out to ask parents about their child’s portfolio. Fifty six of the 90 parents given the survey form in November 2006 responded.

The first question was, ‘Who initiates looking at the portfolio?’

- 37 said that both adult and child initiated looking at the portfolio
- 14 said the adult initiated looking at the portfolio
- 4 said that their child initiated looking at the portfolio
- 1 said that their school child initiated looking at the portfolio

When these findings emerged, we wanted to the reasons for these answers. A mini cycle of observations was conducted. These showed us that parents tended to look at their child’s portfolio with their child as they arrived and they looked at the portfolios by themselves while the children were at group time at the end of session. We observed parents using the portfolios as a tool to settle their child at kindergarten (Research meeting notes, August 2007).

Joshua provides an example. Every day upon separation he chose to look through his portfolio with his mother. She commented, “Everyday we would start at the beginning of his portfolio and look through every single page. He made sure we never missed a single page out. After we had looked at each page he would move off to an activity without an adult.” (Anecdote, December 2007).

Another question asked, ‘What do you look at in your child’s portfolio?’

- 21 respondents mentioned photographs
- 14 mentioned recent activities
- 11 mentioned stories
- 9 mentioned the teachers’ comments
- 7 said “Everything”
- 5 mentioned what the child was doing
- 3 mentioned the child’s voice
- 2 mentioned the child’s drawings
- 2 mentioned the child’s writing
- 1 mentioned the child’s work
- 1 mentioned the child’s handprint
- 4 had no answer.



It was evident that the visual aspects of the portfolios - the photos - were a significant “tool of engagement”. Most learning stories have one or more photos embedded within them. Combining the relevant categories, there were 58 mentions of the photos. Typical comments included: “I enjoy the stories and the photos and how it reinforces memories for John. It creates a lot of conversations,” and “It is the only way we can see what the children are doing at kindy without being there. I feel privileged to see he has these great moments.”

It appeared that parents were able to be included in ‘what their child did all day’ through reading their child’s portfolio. They frequently expressed surprise over their child’s achievements, as there were comments such as: “I never knew my child could do that.” The parents also said that they enjoyed seeing their children’s learning developing over time. Comments from the parents included:

“It’s very encouraging to see my child’s development from different perspectives.”

“I can see how he has developed in the year since he started. We take photos at home but the portfolio gives a time frame to his development. We feel so proud of him when we look at it.”

“The pleasure it gives my child. Just holding it gives him a little smile. I also love all the entries - handprints, writing, self portraits, stories and photos. They are a snapshot of his childhood.”

“A great momento of my child’s happy pre-school years and his development. It’s great to look back on, to revisit and it gives parents a better understanding of how valuable kindy time for young children really is.”

“I like the joint input from the kindy teachers and us.”

The comments helped to confirm that we were making connections with the child’s family, and through the portfolios we were including more parents in their child’s kindergarten experiences.

For the question, ‘What does your child look at in their portfolio?’ families reported that their children engaged with the photos and recounted the stories to them via that medium. Sharing photos and recounting stories recorded in portfolios at home supports and extends the children’s learning in both environments. Revisiting kindergarten experiences strengthens their sense of belonging to our place. Moreover “reading” portfolios is in line with the socialisation model of emergent literacy (McNaughton, 1995). McNaughton argues that each setting provides activities that reflect their valued socialisation practices, and the children’s expertise is situated in these activities.

When we asked the question, ‘Who has taken their child’s portfolio home?’ we found that 45 of the 56 respondents had and 11 had not. Most were taken home monthly or every two months. Three said that they took the portfolio home weekly. At home, families had more opportunities to engage with it, to gain understanding of what their child was learning at kindergarten and to make their own contributions to the portfolio. We found that 38 of the respondents had made contributions to their child’s portfolio before the survey. The survey triggered a flurry of additional contributions to the portfolios, with many parents making comments such as, “I really must do that.”; “I’ve been meaning to do that!” Such comments encouraged us to give gentle reminders to families regarding making contributions to their child’s portfolio.

We asked the families who they thought their child showed their portfolios to at home. The replies were categorised as follows:

- 25 Dad
- 16 Siblings
- 16 Grandparents
- 7 Visitors
- 1 The dog.



We were intrigued with the response regarding the dog. When we shared the photo of the child showing their portfolio to a dog on our big screen projector, two other parents came forward to say that their child also showed their portfolio to the dog. The analysis of the data led us to a greater appreciation of the connections a child and their portfolio can make with important people and animals in their lives.

From further analysis of the parent responses we found that three themes emerged regarding what they wanted to see in their child's portfolio:

- 1 Insights into child's day (61 comments)
- 2 Recording of achievements (43 comments)
- 3 Memories, revisiting kindergarten experiences (38 comments).

Twenty also expressed appreciation of the contributions made by teachers.

Analysis of the teacher focus group interview and survey data found a clear alignment between the two sets of data. Teachers valued portfolios because connections with the child's family, and because they record and celebrate the child's achievements.

As a result of the findings and our reflections we took a number of action steps. We introduced:

- an invitation to children to take their portfolio home on their first day to show their family, thereby starting the expectation of reciprocity and contributions from home
- a sheet inviting parents to share what their child had to say about their first day (and later, their first day in morning session). This is placed in the child's portfolio to complement our record of the child's first day
- written 'snippets' in children's portfolios. With 90 children, it isn't logistically possible to write a full learning story very often. However

it is possible to often capture a 'snippet' so that families gain more insights into their child's day at kindergarten

- acknowledgements of family contributions to children's portfolios by writing a response
- 'thank you' notes in portfolios after parents help at working bees, gave gifts, or made special contributions
- sharing family portfolio contributions from home at group time.

Anecdotal data indicated that the link between home and kindergarten was strengthened by more frequent, two-way flows of information. One parent commented, "Jarrod couldn't wait to show his portfolio to his Dad and brother and he couldn't wait to bring the portfolio back to kindergarten just in case the teachers had something else to put in it."

Interviews with the morning children about their portfolio

After gathering adult perspectives on portfolios, it was decided to explore children's views and identify what it was that engaged them with their portfolios. Two questions were asked of our forty five morning children in individual interviews conducted by the teacher researchers during three morning sessions in November 2006:

What do you like best about your portfolio?

Who do you like to show your portfolio to?

Children for whom English is an additional language were interviewed in their home language by two parents fluent in the children's home language.

Many children liked to start at the front of their portfolio and work through each page. We often had to re-ask the question: "*Which is the page that you like the best?*" to bring focus onto these pages. Two features emerged as favourites.



The first was contributions from home. The second favourite feature was any page common to all children's portfolios. For instance, Lucy identified her

favourite part as a photograph of herself at the beach sitting on her father's shoulders. Jack said his favourite photograph showed him making a paving slab at home with his dad. "I only like my paving stone that was written down. My Dad wrote it down. I made it for all of us. It's in our garden. That's the page I like looking at." Antony said, "That's when we went to Burger King and my Dad came; your Dad came later." (Children's interviews, November, 2006).

The second most popular type of portfolio page related to events at kindergarten. Children said, "I've got one like that." We decided to call this group of responses 'the familiar'. The events included BDK customs of celebrating birthdays and having fundraising events such as a kindergarten family night at Burger King. For instance, Jacob said, "Look, that's my party (4th birthday at kindergarten). I got a patch (badge!) I got lots of patches now (name badges from trips)."

This choice was validated from video data. Antony was videoed looking at his portfolio with Ryan saying "I've got one like that" to a generic page recording a trip. He went on to say, "I was there too, and my brother came, and your brother came too, eh?" In videos taken of children on the sofa by the portfolio shelf the children sit together with their portfolios finding pages that are the same.

In addition, during the *poroporoaki* (farewell) when a child leaves, most show a preference for the pages that are common to all portfolios. "I liked doing my hand prints. See that's my hand, its bigger now" (places his hand onto the picture).

Children also showed a preference for photos where they were photographed with their friends. Noah said: "Do you remember Joshua? I like him. He's gone to school now. Do you remember him? Look there's Josh again - we're playing with those block things and building roads. Look, Josh is happy." Noah obviously enjoyed making the connections to his friends again through his portfolio. There did not appear to be a preference for photographs that the children had taken themselves.

Contrary to expectation, the learning stories developed by teachers did not rate a mention by the children. It appeared that children preferred to see events that were familiar to them. Not only were they able to articulate the story related to the picture but these familiar events allowed them to make connections with each other enhancing their feeling of belonging and inclusion. (Research meeting notes, March 2007)

In response to the question, “Who do you like to show their portfolios to?” most of the children stated that they liked to show it to their Mum and Dad. For instance, Nathan said: “I like to show it to my family ... to my Dad and my Nanny and to Stella. I like showing it to my dog Stella. She says “woof”. Stella said, “I like that part where you made that doggie (a wooden dog that Nathan had made for Stella).” Rhea stated: “That’s Sammy (dog). I showed him but he went to sleep on it. I show it to my Mum and Dad and my sisters.” Lucy also referred to her pet. She said: “I show it to Mummy and Daddy and Meggy and Nana and Grandad when they come over to my house and Casper too. He’s my cat. I like to show it to Poppa. He says it’s brilliant.”

One action step that followed from the responses about children’s preference for stories from home was the development of *All about Me* books. Children took photos of all the things that were important to them at home. They took photos of their bedroom, their toys, their house, their letterbox or anything that was important to them. They arrived with their photos on CD, pen-drives or emailed them to us. Some children borrowed our kindergarten cameras to take the photos. Each child dictated their words to go with their pictures and then they published (laminated and bound) their books. On the day they were published the children were happy to share them with their friends and then the books were taken home.



We had anticipated the books staying at kindergarten so that the children could show their special things to their friends. It seems that the children really needed to show their family at home. We needed to engage in possibility thinking again. It led us to publish two “All about Me” books – one for kindergarten and one for home. By the end of the week, without any further promotion, children were bringing in their photos in many formats to make their own books. The books stimulate our discussion with the child about their home, strengthening our understanding of each child. As well, the conversations with parents led the parents to share personal information about their child that deepened our relationships. At kindergarten, the children would often walk around with their book under their arm ready to show it to anyone who showed interest (Research meeting notes, December 2007).

A second action step involved us developing another style of portfolio to extend our connections with children and their families, the digital portfolio.

Digital portfolios

Each child has a digital portfolio in which their photos and stories are archived at kindergarten. When a child leaves this digital portfolio is burnt to CD with a photo printed onto the CD label for the child to take home. In response to a short questionnaire asking families what they thought of the digital portfolio, how it was used and how it compared to the child’s portfolio in a book, all families indicated that these were a popular addition to the family photographic archives.

One parent told of how, on her daughter’s fifth birthday, Lucy had said, “Can we look at them now, before we open up my Bratz doll?” “She sat there glued to the slide show (and so did I), and loved seeing all her friends who had since gone to school. She recalled all their names and gave a running commentary. It will be something that she will treasure for life”. “A great visual which prompts the memories of a special time (we don’t seem to remember our pre-school years!)”. “A valuable visual that complements the fantastic portfolios”. Another parent said, “He got really excited when he saw his portfolio”. Another parent said, “He got

really excited when he saw the photos. He remembered what he had done and loved all his friends in the photo”.

It appears that the digital portfolio had an impact at the end of the child’s time at kindergarten, providing a feeling of belonging to BDK way beyond the child’s years of attendance. Digital portfolios added another element to feeling a sense of belonging to BDK. In isolation, that may appear unimportant. The CD provides a means of maintaining memories and feeling connected. Moreover, a number of families said that they had copied the digital portfolio and sent it to family in New Zealand or in other parts of the world so that they feel included in their relatives’ lives. They provided virtual memories for extended families. Parents said they would not have sent the child’s portfolio in book format as it is too precious.

Interviewing former students about their memories of kindergarten

Following this thread, we decided to interview six school children who had previously attended BDK. We were curious about their ongoing sense of connection with their kindergarten experiences two years after leaving kindergarten. All six said they looked at their kindergarten portfolios regularly. Three had them on a bookshelf in their bedroom. One child said his portfolio was away in a safe place. Five of the six children talked about the other children in their portfolio who were still their friends even though some did not go to the same school. All the children could relate events recorded in their portfolio. These older children referred more to the stories in the text rather than the pictures. For example, Benji talked about sliding down the slide in a cardboard box. Benji also talked about a puppet show based on the story, *The Little Mole that Knew it was None of his Business*.

Benji’s story

During the interview Benji said that his teacher didn’t know the mole story. I asked if he would like to borrow the book to show her. He did. He came back the next day and said that his teacher had read it and they had all

laughed. He had explained to the class that we used to perform the story as a puppet show. In that moment my possibility thinking led me to suggest that Benji and I perform the puppet show for his class. Perhaps he could write a letter of invitation? On Friday Benji and I performed the puppet show to his class and the kindergarten children on the school field. One of the kindergarten parents who came along said that she had the story in German. We invited her to come and read the story in German for the children, lengthening the thread of inclusive connections.

It appeared that portfolios provided a strong connection between the child, the family and the kindergarten. A heart warming comment came from another BDK 'graduate', who said, "I'm going to keep it forever and show it to my children" (Liam). Through the portfolio, memories could be shared and revisited maintaining a sense of connectedness and increasing opportunities for enhancing the children's learning. Connections between home and the early childhood setting are significant in the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Portfolios are very important tools that teachers use to build strong connections with families.

Other visuals and ICTs that promote inclusion of children:

The action steps taken as part of our COI research frequently involved the addition or use of ICTs to enhance our inclusive environment. A summary of the range of tools that were added in connection with our tenure as a COI includes:

- using the fax or email to communicate with sick children or children on holiday
- supporting children to fax or email their friends
- having a visual for who is the inside, outside or float teacher
- using the digital video camera as a webcam so the children can watch themselves dance on the screen in our dance studio or walk inside

- using the digital video camera as a webcam to capture children's impromptu stories straight on to the television screen
- using stills on the camera to tell stories about the children and their favourite characters directly onto the television
- adding the writer's photo to learning stories
- making visuals to depict the sequences for processes and events. Some visual sequences are photos, others are in booklets made up of photos, some are loaded into the digital photo frame and others are shown via a slide show projected on a screen
- adding images to the OK/ Not OK behaviour chart.

Each term at BDK we develop a behavioural contract for the kindergarten with the children. One of the contracts developed during the research project is captured below:



The contract is used in a number of ways, and adapted when necessary. For example, after reflecting on a sand-throwing incident we made an addition to the

Ok/ Not Ok group contract about sand (Staff meeting minutes, August 2007). We realised we needed to add photos to make it more user-friendly for children who respond best to visuals. We have been told many anecdotes about this process being used at home by parents, and by children with their siblings.

Some ICT innovations were initiated by parents.

Georgia's mother Kelly had attended a visual communication course that we had run at kindergarten as part of being a COI. Her enthusiasm for visual tools led her to make a video about BDK for Georgia to have as a keepsake. She supported Georgia to take photographs of her favourite things at kindergarten, and together they had edited the photos into a movie. We were so impressed with the result that it became the introduction to BDK on our website.

Visual communication tools have had a powerful impact on the programme at BDK (Research meeting notes, August 2008). Very often the children are the teachers and the teachers are the learners. Visual communication tools are not our only tools of communication but they are tools that reflect recent socio-cultural changes in society, tools that help us build an inclusive environment (Burbles & Callister, 2000). Additionally, visual communication tools are a means through which children's social competence and self efficacy can be developed.

Other tools add value too. One further action step taken to strengthen our inclusive environment and to assist children who learn better through visual representation was teachers accessing those with language skills to write in children's portfolios in their home language.

Research question: How do teachers support the development of social competence and self efficacy in children during the ongoing inclusion-monitoring phase?

Literature about social competence indicates that as children have the opportunity to practice and manage different social situations they become more

confident and more adept, more resilient. Moreover, resilient children are likely to be critical thinkers who can assess situations and find solutions. Longer term, these children are able to believe in themselves - and to take charge of their own lives. They become independent, competent, self confident and self reliant (Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2007).

To help foster social competence, 'random acts of kindness' (Lundin, Paul & Christensen, 2001) are recognised and shared. The story below is a 'snippet' that was written for Philipp, shared with the children and his family, and then placed in his portfolio.

A random act of kindness

Philipp, I just had to write a note to you today because I was so impressed with what I saw you do. A random act of kindness.

You noticed that Jac was playing by himself and that he looked rather lonely. You went over to him and quietly put your hand out and said, 'do you want to play with us?' (Of course, Akshay was the other person in the us!). It was the combination of your kind words and the way that you so gently approached Jac that impressed me the most.



May 2007



Building social competence and self efficacy in the children at BDK is not only a goal (Bandura, 1997; Katz, 2008); it is also a means of creating a caring, inclusive kindergarten environment.

Teachers are constantly watching for opportunities to build social competence, often assisted by information or advice from parents.

Caelan's story – a sequel

Caelan found his own way, through his visual sequence cards, to interact with the curriculum. However, he continued to be dependent upon adults for direction. His portfolio contributions from home captured his interest in drumming. We looked around the kindergarten and pieced together a drum kit; then his drumming expertise was captured on the blog to share with family and friends. After recognising that Caelan had advanced musical skills, further possibilities could be explored. We supported him to make his own music CD using “Garage Band”, an Apple programme. Drawing Caelan further into the kindergarten programme using his musical talents gave him status with his peers and this in turn, developed his social competence and inclusion.

Research question: How does an inclusive environment enhance the learning of all children in the ongoing inclusion–monitoring phase of inclusion?

The children at BDK see the use of visuals as part of the daily routine and will assist the children on the autistic spectrum by fetching their visuals to show them what to do. For instance, Tahlia was making noises at group time and Conner zapped off the mat to get a visual showing Tahlia making noises with a red line crossed through it. Tahlia looked hard at the visual resource, pointed to it and stopped the noises.



This was an excellent example of how a child with additional needs had learned to respond appropriately, given a prompt from a visual tool, and other children had learned to enhance the inclusive environment. We argue that this is how all children learn and benefit from an inclusive environment.

Documenting points of difference

Being part of the Centres of Innovation programme prompted us to document our points of difference with regards to inclusive practice. One is times of attendance. Sessions are discussed with parents of children with additional needs as they transition in to kindergarten. A common adaptation is accepting the child directly into the morning session, even though she or he may be relatively young. Not only does the time of day work better for the child in question, we have noticed that older children are more competent communicators for the child with additional needs. The older children have a better understanding of how they can assist and include the child; they contribute to our inclusive environment.

Other points of difference documented in our COI research records included:

- Not asking the ESW to sign the visitors' book as they are not considered to be visitors
- Asking ESWs not to wear their name badges that say 'Group Special Education'. We feel it is impossible to truly 'include' a child when there is an adult standing nearby with a badge identifying them
- Expecting ESWs to work with all of the children so they come to be viewed as a teacher who can facilitate relationships between all children
- Encouraging (and giving support to) ESWs to use the cameras and to write learning stories.
- Expecting ESW to work together for support and mutual problem solving.
- Encouraging flexible hours that suit the child, the family and the ESWs
- Ensuring ESWs (also the cleaner and administration staff) all have communication pockets (the same as the teachers) so that they can receive newsletters and correspondence

- Calling the ESWs teachers and role modelling respect for them.
- Encouraging ESWs to have portfolios and large photographs (like the teachers) to share their home lives with the children and other adults
- Using visual communication tools for all – children and adults.
- Developing, making or buying resources to meet the learning needs of individual children
- Inviting parents to attend professional development with staff, and
- Offering parents the use of the technologies and resources in the kindergarten.

Another point of difference was our reporting to the children about the COI research. At each presentation of our research we asked for permission to photograph the audience so that we could show and tell the children who our audience was and explain why they were interested in their stories. These actions included the children in the flow of information in relation to COI work.

This list keeps growing and evolving.

Exit surveys

In 2007, we asked six families who had just left kindergarten to share their thoughts on being 'included' and given a sense of belonging at BDK. Below are the responses that gained more than one mention:

- being told to 'make yourself at home'
- being made to feel welcome
- child always being greeted
- teachers always available
- teachers always happy to answer queries
- photographs being emailed home

This survey affirmed that attention to detail was appreciated by the families and helped them feel included at BDK. Ongoing monitoring ensures that this standard is maintained.

Conclusion

Continued monitoring using data collection and analysis keeps us noticing, recognising and responding with inclusive possibilities. The next chapter shares case stories that illustrate inclusion in action at BDK.

Chapter 6

Including Simon: Inclusion in action

Throughout the research project we captured many case stories to help us examine “how an inclusive environment enhances the learning of all children”. Of these, Simon’s story has been chosen to share in greater detail because of its complexity, its challenges and its celebrations. Not only does this story describe how Simon was included at BDK through the three phases of inclusion, it also weaves in stories of learning that occurred as children interacted with Simon.

The data in this chapter was collected through:

- Administration forms
- Teacher journal
- Research meeting notes
- Staff meeting notes
- Learning stories
- Anecdotal notes
- Case stories.

Pre-inclusion phase of Simon’s inclusion at BDK

We invited Simon’s parents to enrol Simon at our kindergarten after discovering that he was being cared for by the caregiver (home based educator) of another child at our kindergarten. Prior to Simon starting kindergarten we only had contact through his caregiver who, in turn, communicated with Simon’s parents. There was an initial parental reluctance to enrol Simon in an early childhood centre due to previous experiences of exclusion. We recognised Simon’s exuberance and energy and felt that he would enjoy being at our kindergarten. Usually we communicate directly with parents rather than through caregivers. In this instance it was not initially possible, so we entrusted his caregiver to communicate our philosophy and practices to Simon’s parents on our behalf.

Visual communication tools helped BDK engage with Simon and his family

Our enrolment pack includes handouts covering information that parents need to know about BDK, photographs of the teachers and options for communication (telephone, email and fax). Simon's family was asked to provide a family photo to put in his portfolio so that we could build conversations about his family. We took a photograph of Simon to put on the welcome page in his portfolio, his name card and his communication pocket. We knew we would use these with Simon on his first day.

With the admission forms duly filled in, we learnt that Simon was an only child who loved superheroes and adventure. His mother's aims for Simon at kindergarten were:

- development
- learning
- integration
- new playmates
- his individual interests extended.

(Simon's 'Getting to Know You' form, January, 2007).

Preparation for Simon's first day at morning kindergarten was undertaken as per Figure 6 and Figure 7 to build towards Simon's successful transition into kindergarten.

Transition phase of Simon's inclusion at BDK

Simon, being four years old, started in our morning session attending five mornings a week. It didn't take long to get to know Simon. Each morning he would enthusiastically greet each teacher by name, seeking them out no matter where they were. Raelene noted that, "I really look forward to seeing Simon each day because he is so pleased to see you" (Teacher journal, March 2007). In our notes we described Simon as "gregarious", a "leader", a "competent climber", "talks enthusiastically", "has some difficulty staying still for more than a moment"

and “extremely challenged when things are not the way he likes them”. Soon there were a large number of entries in our incident book bearing his name. We explained, “Sometimes Simon digs a hole, but does not have the skills to dig himself out again” (Research meeting notes, March 07).

We met to develop strategies to promote the successful inclusion of Simon. We decided that:

- consistency was paramount
- we would seek advice and guidance from Simon’s family and caregiver regarding their management of Simon’s behaviour
- we would have a space where Simon could collect his thoughts (he chose a large cardboard box complete with cushions)
- we would talk to the children about keeping themselves safe
- we would revisit our OK/ NOT OK policy with all children and families.

Development of visual communication tools in Simon’s transition phase

Throughout the COI research project we continued to use children’s portfolios as tools of engagement. Simon’s portfolio was used extensively for this purpose. On Day One we added a page about his first day at BDK and sent the portfolio home so that his parents could feel included on his first day. It came back the very next day with an addition from home. This was the beginning of a strong communicative relationship with his family. Simon was so proud of his contributions from home. He always made sure that he showed the contribution to every teacher (and anyone else who would look and listen). He quickly learnt that these contributions could be shared at group time and used this time to eloquently share them with all the children. The sharing was also documented for Simon’s portfolio so that he could revisit the events. Here is one example:

Simon, you were so pleased and proud to share your photos from home. Without hesitation you whipped up onto the chair and eagerly showed the children the photographs. I like the way you held them so the children could see them easily, turning the photo around for the group. Simon, when you share photos from

home we all get to know you better. We learn about your home and your interests. Perhaps we could put the photos in your portfolio?
(Learning story, February 2007).

Supporting Simon on a journey towards social competence

It was becoming apparent that Simon's inclusion would be more successful if we focused on supporting his development of social competence. His challenging behaviour was impacting on other children and these children and parents were not happy about that.

Monitoring phase of Simon's inclusion at BDK

In the transition phase we began to observe, monitor and document Simon's behaviour. We came to know Simon as a vibrant, imaginative, humorous child who showed natural leadership skills. He had the ability to think of a superhero game, assign roles to other children, create costumes for those roles and direct the play. Simon could articulate his thoughts, think in the abstract and could climb anything we had at kindergarten with ease. Part of a learning story at the time noted:

Simon, what physical prowess you have! You have treated us to so many of your climbing skills! On the monkey bars you are able to swing across, hang upside down and I have even noticed that you can climb across the top of the monkey bars. You seem to have no fear and lots of climbing ability. We like it when you choose to climb on the monkey bars. Perhaps you could show some of the other children how to climb and swing. It would be great to share your skills (Learning story, March, 2007).

In this learning story Bronwyn was trying to reinforce his socially acceptable climbing and not mention his climbing expedition onto the roof of the playhouse. It was hoped that each time his read this story the positive behaviour would be reinforced (Staff meeting minutes, March 2007).

Four months into Simon's time at BDK Bronwyn met with Simon's parents. As a result a joint referral from the kindergarten and Simon's parents was made to a paediatrician (Staff meeting notes, April 2007). Simon received a double diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Did the diagnosis change anything for us? Only slightly. The

diagnosis directed us towards suitable books to read and gave us a foundation for communication with Simon's family.

At this time we applied to Group Special Education for additional support hours for Simon. While hours were allocated, there was a shortage of ESWs at the time, and it was two months before Simon received his support. We had read Kerry Purdue's doctoral thesis (2004) relating to the exclusionary actions of a group of parents within an early childhood centre. She identified lack of resourced support as a factor influencing the views of parents.

We were not altogether surprised when negative murmurings began to fester in our community with regards to Simon's impetuous behaviour. A list of concerns was raised by concerned parents. These were:

- Simon's aggressive behaviour
- Our response to Simon's behaviour
- The teacher time taken with Simon's behaviour
- The safety of the other children
- Children copying Simon's behaviours at home.

Although we addressed individual concerns as they arose, some parents were not appeased. Criticisms of our practices and tensions rose to the point where we decided (with the approval of Simon's family) to hold a public meeting to allow the community to have channel for discussion relating to disability and behaviour.

It is unrealistic to expect parents to agree with us all the time. Indeed, in an inclusive environment we need to accept the views of others. We became aware that we were viewing inclusion on a macro level, while a number of parents were looking at a micro level, their child. However, we were deeply challenged when some views ran counter to some of our fundamental values. For the small number who expressed their concerns, their position seemed non negotiable.

However, by expressing their views publicly, doors opened for us to engage in further conversations together rather than outside.

The morning after the community meeting we were overwhelmed by hugs, flowers and baking from a community embracing their support role. It was the first time we cried publicly. Support was also forthcoming for Simon's mother and his caregiver. We had record attendance and support at our next committee meeting. This period of time was a learning situation for us all. Inclusion is not always easy. We are grateful for the ongoing support of Katie Marshall (our professional support manager), Vanesse Geel (our local psychologist), Helen Bernstone and Bill Hagan (our research associates) and Anne Meade (COI Research Leader), among others, during that period. Raelene had earlier worked in childcare settings, and she noted, "The response to this situation could have been much different in childcare. It is a business and parents' fees sustain the business. These services cannot afford to have dissension and, therefore, they might choose to ask the child concerned to leave" (Research meeting notes, June, 2007). This reflection helped us understand challenges inclusion can present in different settings.

Analysis of the community responses captured through conversations, written complaints and the minutes of the community meeting indicated that Simon's aggressive behaviour and our response to that behaviour constituted the bulk of concerns. Three themes emerged:

- Simon's aggressive behaviour as it related to the safety of their child
- Simon's behaviour as a poor role model to other children
- Simon's behaviour often requiring the attention of two teachers, therefore their child was missing out.

There is no doubt in our minds that additional resourcing in the form of ESW support would have help diffuse some of the issues that arose at BDK, although

we will never know for sure. Other issues arose for us as well. One of those was children using exclusionary language. It is not always easy to identify moments of exclusion as not all exclusionary behaviours are overt. From time to time we heard, "I don't want to play with you." For the teachers at BDK this created another conundrum. We believe that when teachers insist children play together this action has a negative impact upon the "good choices" we encourage children to make in the programme. It flies in the face of developing life skills. We say, "You don't have to be friends, but you do have to be friendly". This principle is embedded in the BDK programme.

When we heard a group of children saying, "Let's chase Simon," knowing that he would react adversely, we responded in several ways. We:

- increased our supervision of the group
- held a meeting with the group to discuss their behaviour towards Simon
- talked to all the children at group time about BDK's OK/ Not Ok behaviour
- consulted the psychologist
- visited Simon's home
- talked to parents in the BDK community about our behaviour management strategies and our aim of building socially competent, resilient children.

These strategies appeared to be successful as the chasing stopped (Research meeting notes, April, 2007).

Extending the use of visual communication tools to facilitate Simon's inclusion

It was at this time that we used our possibility thinking again. We wanted to further include Simon in the BDK programme in a positive manner. We:

- developed visual books for Simon depicting positive behaviour he engaged in at kindergarten. We called these 'Smile' books. They fed in the language of developing friendships
- developed a book for him relating to routines so that transitions between activities became more predictable and less stressful for him

- developed an 'All about me' book for him
- added visuals to the Ok/ Not Ok behaviour contract
- focused even harder on reinforcing Simon's positive behaviour
- made the float teacher (the teacher who can be both inside and outside) the key worker for Simon on any particular day.

In our research meeting notes two weeks later we noted, "Having the float teacher responsible each day is working well ... She can go through our book about the day [at kindergarten] with Simon at the start of each day". We had previously noted that he liked to make the teachers happy, so we started each page of one of the books with: "Bronwyn, Kerry and Raelene like it when you ...". Another kindergarten-made book gave Simon strategies to build his social competence. It contained statements with photos of Simon modelling his own actions, such as:

- When Simon wants a toy he can ask, "Can I have the truck when you are finished?"
- When Simon wants to play he can ask, "Can I play with you?"
- When Simon is feeling frustrated he can:
 - Ask an adult for help
 - Walk away
 - Take some quiet time in his chosen space.

The success of these books was immediate. Simon liked reading about himself and he could articulate the expected behaviours. One moment that we recorded illustrated the success of the books.

Today Simon hit ... over a toy. When he noticed my presence he rushed off and got his visuals book and turned to the page that outlined the procedures and showed me what should happen: "Simon should stop," "Simon should say 'sorry' to the child," "Simon should get a teacher if the child is hurt," "Simon should not hit," "Friends don't like it when you hit them". This is the first time we have seen Simon

use his visual book with this understanding. I think this has to be progress”
(Research meeting notes, May 2007).

Building Simon’s social competence

From the start Simon had a high level of self confidence and self efficacy. He believed he could do anything, often to the exclusion of all else. “I can do that, guys,” and “Come on guys, follow me” were frequent statements Simon made. As early as March 2007 we were giving guidance to Simon through photographs and stories in his portfolio. One example was:

Simon, I love the way you are playing in such a friendly manner with T. Together you were filling the jug full of sand, then you would zap over and get some water from C. What a gooey mixture you made! The more water you added the gooier it became. It’s such fun to work together with a friend, isn’t it? Friends like it when you play gently and help by getting the water. Kei te pai (Bronwyn, March 2007).

As well, we revisited our most recent Ok/ Not Ok behaviour chart.

Throughout Simon’s time at BDK we recorded the impact his attendance had on other children in our incident book. For example, Kyle had recognised Simon’s potential for impetuous behaviour and in a particular incident over a truck Kyle was seen to move a distance from Simon and say under his breath, “Stop it, I don’t like it when you take my truck”, practising the language that we promoted at BDK. Simon had not heard, but Kyle was using the skills he had learnt to develop his confidence in challenging situations. When we shared this story with Kyle’s Mum she said that Kyle was using these strategies on her and his little brother at home. A couple of weeks later Kyle was heard to say to Simon loud and clear: “Stop it! I don’t like it when you hit me.” Kyle was further developing his social competence and confidence.

Other relevant teaching strategies we used in this research cycle to build social competence in all the children were:

- Role playing puppet shows at group time exploring actions and feelings
- Documenting and sharing random acts of kindness

- Reinforcing good choices
- Making 'visuals' to support positive behaviour.

At this time we recorded that Simon “seemed really comfortable in his own skin” at times, and at other times he recognised that some “children avoided him”. One comment he made was, “I’m a really funny guy, why won’t they play with me?” (Research meeting notes, April 2007). Simon would often reach out for friendship. As he was being the king on the throne at the Queen’s birthday he was heard to call out, “Hey lady, will you be my Queen?” adding, “Who would like to be my helper and bring me things?” (Learning story, May 2007). Our reading of the literature related to social competence informed us that children who are likeable and friendly tend to elicit positive responses in others ... and because they receive more positive responses they become more likeable and friendly (Katz, 2008). Simon was trying to build relationships and social competence.

How does an inclusive environment enhance the learning of children individually and collectively?

Simon’s behaviour sparked a number of questions amongst the children. One question was: “Why does Simon hit the teachers?” Micah’s story captured his concern as he asked his mother this question. Micah decided that he would pray for Simon, praying that Simon could be helped to make good choices. Micah and his twin sister Milla often role-played being Simon at home, only ever played him making good choices. It became evident that they were following the modelling of the teachers at BDK when they made positive responses to Simon at kindergarten. Bandura (1977) suggested that children learn through observing role models and imitating the behaviours they are exposed to. Micah and Milla’s mother later reported that this play went on long after Simon and the twins went to different schools. Micah and his sister were now in after-school care with a family of a child on the autistic spectrum and dealt competently with that child’s impetuous behaviour. Their mother said that she believed they had learnt skills

for life through having been to kindergarten with Simon (Anecdotal notes, September 2008).

Another story illustrating how an inclusive environment and inclusive processes enhance others' learning and build social competence is Mackenzie's story.

As MacKenzie and Simon were tidying up one day MacKenzie leant across Simon to pick up a puzzle piece. Simon's response was a right hook to MacKenzie's face. Through our reading we understood that children on the autistic spectrum do not like others to invade their personal space (Clark, Feehan, Tinline & Vostanis, 1999). Both children's parents were informed of the incident. Simon's parents were mortified. MacKenzie's mother was very concerned. She wanted to know more. A meeting was arranged. She didn't want MacKenzie to get hurt at kindergarten; neither did we. Bronwyn explained the challenges of ASD, and in particular, the aversion to personal space being invaded. MacKenzie's mother listened, and then noted that MacKenzie was an 'in your face' sort of child. At home and with visitors, her mother said, MacKenzie was often 'in your face'. She called MacKenzie in to the meeting and explained the concept to her. MacKenzie listened and nodded, and was never seen to invade the personal space of others again. MacKenzie's mother took a book on ASD to read (Meeting notes, June 2007).

A year after MacKenzie had started school her mother returned to tell us that MacKenzie was doing well at school. Mackenzie had a child with ASD in her class; and her mother felt that she was unfazed by his impetuous behaviour due to her previous experience with Simon. She had learned strategies at kindergarten and at home that built her resilience. (Anecdotal notes, July 2008).

Gabarino (1999) believes that community has a role to play in building resilient children, encouraging the building of connections and the transmission of values.

Around the same time we documented another story that had a different outcome. This is the story of a child we will call Mary.

Simon accidentally stood on Mary's hand on his way to sit on the mat. (Spatial awareness is a challenge for children with ASD.) This was the only time Mary was hurt by Simon. Her parents expressed their concern to the teachers. We went through the same explanatory procedures that we had used in our communication with MacKenzie's mother. However, the family's response was very different to MacKenzie's family; they wanted Simon to change his behaviour ... right now. Each day they asked Mary if Simon had hit her and Mary was reminded to report any incident to us. One day Mary reported, "Simon almost hit me". That statement concerned us. We talked to Mary's mother about creating a victim mentality in Mary. We discussed our commitment to building resilience in children. However, that was not a viewpoint they wanted to adopt.

As we monitored Simon's inclusion at BDK, our possibility thinking led us to trial a strategy that felt like a challenge to our philosophy of inclusion because it could be interpreted as (partial) exclusion. We had noticed that Simon's impetuous behaviour increased at the end of the session when we have group time and parents arrived to collect their children. We recommended Simon be collected fifteen minutes before the end of session for the following reasons:

- He would leave kindergarten on a positive note
- He would not provide a 'floor show' for the parents, the only snapshot some had of Simon, not his accomplishments.
- All teachers would not be tied up with his behaviour and possibly the recipients of 'impetuous' behaviours, leaving time to interact with parents.

We had to compromise on attendance procedures to gain the outcomes we were seeking. Notwithstanding, we hoped this would be a win/ win situation for all. A positive outcome was immediate. Warm goodbyes were said to Simon as he left early, and we hoped positive thoughts of kindergarten remained with him until the next day. Parents could focus on their own child and the teachers were no longer

being watched for their responses to his behaviours. In time, Simon began to extend his group time with more positive results.

Throughout the transition and monitoring phases of inclusion of Simon we were in email contact with his mother, with a reciprocal sharing of information, photos, photo stories and video of Simon's challenges and celebrations at kindergarten. At the time Simon transitioned to school we had just begun to blog.

Simon's transition to school

Simon's story requires an additional section. At the end of 2007, as Simon prepared to transition to school, we:

- met with all involved - class teacher, school principal, ESW, psychologist
- developed a timeline for Simon's transition to school
- arranged visits to the school for Simon and his family
- arranged for visits to kindergarten by the new entrant teacher
- took photos of the school environment and routines to develop 'visuals' books for Simon to have at home and at kindergarten.

Unfortunately, not all transitions go according to plan and within the first week at school Simon was stood down. As our research reached its conclusion Simon was still only attending school part time. It was noted:

We invested so much energy into making Simon's inclusion at BDK work. We put so much energy into his transition work. It is devastating to see the momentum of inclusion interrupted. Has all our work been in vain?" (Research meeting notes, 2008)

Discussion

Simon was an affable character in our kindergarten whose impetuous behaviour tested us and our community. Many questions arose and challenged us during

his year of attendance. Sometimes there are no answers to the questions, just more questions.

One question was about rights. Whose rights are paramount? We all have the right to be safe, teachers included. What happens when safety cannot be guaranteed despite our best endeavours? We knew we were committed to inclusion, whether or not there was an ESW. We just had to explore the possibilities to make the times when she wasn't there work. We asked ourselves: If we had a bottom line for inclusion, what would that bottom line look like? After long discussions we confirmed that we were committed to inclusion. We argued we would know if we had reached our bottom line through continual self review of our programme and inclusive environment – checking out the teacher, child, family and community effects on BDK's inclusive environment, and evaluating our curriculum and physical environment (Conway, 2008). We remained totally committed to including Simon.

A second question that arose related to privacy. What should/ could we have said about Simon to other parents? Something was obviously amiss, yet we were saying nothing. Initially there was no diagnosis so there was no information to explain his impetuous behaviour. A number of parents pointed the finger and said that his behaviour was just the result of poor parenting. As teachers, we were being closely watched and, at times, criticised over our behaviour management strategies. For some, "parent help" became "teacher watch". It was not a comfortable situation to be in.

Later, we noted in our reflections that the lack of information about Simon given to parents had indeed exacerbated the criticisms in background conversations. At the time when tensions were high, we believed that Simon and his family had the same rights to privacy as all the children and their families at the kindergarten. However, this view changed. In the later stages of the research project, we revised our stance. When children with additional needs [and

specifically those with challenging behaviours] enrolled, we negotiated with their parents to share their child's strengths as well as their medical diagnosis to other families. We found that openness and knowledge built support and understanding.

At the start of the COI research project we had a child attending BDK with severe multiple impairments. Even though she frequently attended kindergarten without a caregiver, and at times required the attention of two teachers, never once did we receive a complaint from parents. In fact, they frequently offered support. We believe that the different reaction was due to the fact that she had a visible impairment and Simon's condition could only be viewed through his behaviour (Research meeting notes, August 2008).

A third question was how to write honestly, recording the learning of a child with challenging behaviours in a positive manner. If we were to document all that we were noticing, recognizing and responding to in Simon's learning journey would maintaining a "credit" viewpoint be possible? We experimented with wording that encouraged a change in behaviour knowing that Simon liked to read these stories with an adult and appeared to respond to suggestions with enthusiasm. This is a point for discussion that we have raised on many occasions with visitors and seminar audiences. Is it a deficit model if descriptions of challenges are included? If we describe and celebrate a child's progress toward swinging across the monkey bars, should we not also describe and celebrate growing social competence and self efficacy? Such documentation is an aspect of our practice that we want to continue to explore and monitor, and share with others for critical feedback.

We asked Simon's mother's whether her aims for his attendance at kindergarten had been met. She said, "I am grateful for the work you did with Simon. You made him what he is today. He still talks about you all the time" (Anecdotal notes, March 2008).

Conclusion

Conway's model of the dynamics of an inclusive environment (Figure 1) provides a helpful framework for reflecting on this case story. The first factor in it is the teachers. We were continually thinking about and trialling different possibilities to build Simon's social competence in ways that would benefit everyone. Our commitment to Simon's inclusion remained staunch in the face of opposition.

The second factor is the children and the families. Simon's family worked hard to communicate and contribute to his inclusion. Amongst the families in the BDK community, there was a split, with a small group wanting his exclusion. For a tense period, some families sought Simon's exclusion. However, the public meeting when information about his disability was shared was a turning point with increased appreciation being shown for the teachers' work to include Simon and support offered to his family.

Whilst the curriculum factor has not been discussed explicitly, it is continually there as an underpinning to this chapter; for example in Kyle, MacKenzie's, Mary's and the twin's stories, and in the account of group chasing Simon and subsequent discussions. Their stories give us examples of "how an inclusive environment enhances the learning of some children". We argue that Simon's inclusion in our kindergarten resulted in a positive learning experiences for many children. They watched the commitment of their teachers working consistently, persisting with difficulty, giving positive guidance and role-modelling unconditional acceptance. Research supports our view that these are positive life skills (Kaiser & Sklar Rasminsky, 2007).

Additional visual resources for Simon (and others) are examples of how the physical environment was adapted to enhance the inclusive environment.

Our vision is to create an inclusive environment in which the learning of all children is enhanced. Is it achievable? Is a vision just something to be worked towards with commitment and intent? With Simon, we did what we thought was best at the time. We learnt from our experiences and have a more inclusive environment as a result.

Chapter Seven

Discussion of phases of inclusion

The inclusion phases

The BDK Centres of Innovation research team identified several phases of inclusion early in the research project in the process of examining our inclusive actions as children entered and attended kindergarten. That is when we became conscious that inclusion did not begin when a child started attending kindergarten. However, it was not until we were entering the third year of our research that we discovered the phases of inclusion model described by Lyons and Kelly (2008). Lyons and Kelly naming the three phases in such a clear and concise manner provided a shape for the research project.

Pre-inclusion–preparation phase of inclusion

Pre-inclusion has two facets:

1. creating our vision and developing our philosophy of inclusion as a team
2. building a relationship and discussing possibilities with parents before a child starts kindergarten, and preparing for the child's first day.

Building upon a vision

The teacher researchers at BDK have a vision of the environment we work to create, and inclusion is a valued component that we want to underpin the programme at BDK. Our philosophy is built upon past personal and professional experiences (documented and shared at a research meeting, March 2008), and is informed by relevant current research and theory.

Building an inclusive environment is not value free; and teachers *and* the families and community contribute to the values relating to inclusion. Raelene and the

existing teachers were very aware of the need for their values to be compatible when Raelene applied to join the teaching team in 2006. And, families choosing to come to BDK are exposed to those values. At all times, our goal has been to create an inclusive environment to enhance the learning of all children. Families of children with additional needs appeared to know about our values and welcomed our vision. But did all the families understand and share this vision from the outset?

Developing an inclusive environment requires not only vision but time as those studying our lists of inclusive actions will appreciate. However, in our view, by being designated a professional, and through job descriptions, time for inclusive actions has to be seen as within the role of teachers. The challenge was to share our vision and then to keep building our practices in response to feedback from families.

Preparation for new children and their families

The teacher researchers came to view the pre-inclusion phase as a time of foundation building. We used a metaphor: “strong foundations lead to stable buildings” (Research meeting notes, November 2008).

Focusing on and documenting the extent of the details of a child and his or her family’s entry into BDK drew our attention to the small details in the process of preparing for a child to start. We concluded that it was not one action that built an inclusive environment, but rather the combination of many small actions. The combination also made a positive difference for relationships.

Comments from parents in the parent survey, and on the exit forms, affirm the importance of our giving time, building relationships and initiating genuinely reciprocal conversations. These parents said that they appreciated these actions, which contributed to a feeling of belonging for them even in the pre-inclusion phase.

However, in our reflections using the principles of *Te Whāriki*, we asked: If teachers are the key decision makers can we realistically talk about partnerships with parents? In reality, parents have few choices in their relationships with teachers. We concluded that rather than building partnerships with parents we were engaged in building collaborative relationships (Research meeting notes, July 2008). In a collaborative relationship the emphasis moves from the teacher as the expert to the mutual exchange of support and knowledge (Fraser, 2005). We wondered if developing a collaborative relationship with adult family members influenced the child. This was not a question we could answer through our data. We hoped that by welcoming all the family members a positive path forward might be found by all (Research meeting notes, July 2008).

Were we giving parents choices in their relationships with us? Looking over our records, it appears that the choices offered were more pragmatic. Louise, Kevin's mother talked about the choices we offered her with regards to Kevin's attendance at kindergarten – session, days and attendance not conditional on ESW presence. Children who did not have additional needs were not offered the option of choosing sessions. Was this inclusion? Yes it was, according to the "If" poem (see Chapter One) that guides us. Some children need unequal share of the resources in order to begin to have equal opportunities. Offering Kevin a morning space maximised his opportunity for learning from his more experienced peers.

Crowe and Connell (2003) talk about 'automaticity'. Automaticity is the ability to complete actions without a conscious awareness of having completed them. Many of our pre-inclusive actions fell into this category. Each of us found the conscious focus on detail to be a personally empowering exercise. Discussions of details with each other were some of the most professionally rewarding times of the research project. Raelene commented,

[Data collection] makes you aware of all the things that you do. They are so ingrained in your practice that you don't think about them. I wasn't at Botany Downs Kindergarten when the documenting of inclusive actions took place but as a new-comer I could see and understand the actions that were important to this team, and the research records aided my inclusion into BDK (Research meeting notes, April 2008).

Documenting our inclusive actions was so valuable that we started other teachers on this process when we were running workshops for interested groups as part of COI dissemination. In that way those teachers were able to begin to examine the inclusive processes and actions in their own centres.

During the pre-inclusion phase it was difficult to identify the learning that children gained from the BDK inclusive environment. Did a child who acted in a confident manner feel more included than a child who clung to a family member? Observations indicated that the initial contact was not a reliable indicator of how a child might settle at kindergarten. We did discover that Franklin, our turtle was a focal point for enrolling children and their families. By positioning Franklin's tank in a quiet area close to the door children were drawn to him. Observing this 'settling tool' in action we used our possibility thinking to extend the interest by providing a mushroom seat so children had the opportunity to spend more time with Franklin.



The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2008) states that preparation of the environment not only supports children's learning but is an indicator of how teachers value children.

Early inclusion – transition phase

This phase, we believe, is strongly dependent upon a carefully considered and implemented preparation phase of inclusion. Transition, according to Dockett and Perry (2007) is about building relationships. Moreover, they assert that the connections that a family has with the school is a predictor of how well the child will do at school. One of our main aims during this research project was to build a feeling of belonging and inclusion through strengthening relationships in the transition phase.

A worldwide increase in visual communication tools has been noted by British researchers (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2007). We noticed the power of visual communication tools increased in the early inclusion–transition phase. This was probably because of combined way we used the tools. Visual communication tools enable connections to be made. Renee's feeling of importance when sharing photographs of her new sister on the projector overcame her previous reticence. Liam made a daily connection with his family photo in his portfolio and this advanced his feeling of inclusion at BDK. Jack and Liam's story told of how Liam's portfolio provided a transitional bridge for Jack as he started kindergarten. Time and again portfolios were mentioned as tools of inclusion at BDK.

Through the use of visual communication tools we are introducing additional possibilities for children to notice and respond to information in new ways. This was our expectation when we introduced visuals tools to communicate about routines at kindergarten. Having knowledge of the 'givens' of routines freed the children to think more deeply about who they might negotiate with or what might

happen. Most importantly, such visuals allowed the teacher and child to focus on deeper learning opportunities (Odam, 2000).

We decided to extend the transition phase to include transition between activities and transition to school. The visual communication tools developed to assist transitions (eg, going on an excursion) have been a successful addition to the programme at BDK. When a transition takes place we ask ourselves how we can represent that visually to cue children in to the new action. Sometimes it is a question from the children that leads to the introduction of new visual resources, as was the case when a child asked, 'Who is the mat time teacher?'

Transition to school prompted much reflection after Simon's experience. We now wonder if our enthusiasm for inclusion sets some children and their families up for disappointment when our practices of inclusion may not be embraced in the compulsory sector. All the time we invested in making his transition smooth felt wasted when Simon was stood down in his first week of school. It broke our hearts. At the time of writing, nine months after he started school, he attends for two hours ten minutes a day. This is a child who designed a camera! Did our inclusion of Simon increase his parents' expectation that his inclusion would continue at school? "Yes" his mother said. We asked ourselves: Do we have the right to set such children and their families up for the likelihood of backwards steps? After much soul searching we decided that we still have to do what we believe is right for the families of BDK.

Smooth transitions matter for all children. Such disruptions and disappointments have systemic roots, not of our making. At present, it feels as though government policies throw such children, their family and the classroom teacher off a cliff; the system sets them up to fail. Only a few hours of funding for support are available when a child with additional needs transitions to school. Given that a child on the autistic spectrum is most likely to have difficulty when encountering a new environment and routines, it is imperative that this time is well supported.

We would like to make some suggestions for policy changes. For a child on the autistic spectrum who receives significant GSE funding for support in early childhood settings, but who does not qualify for funding for support at school there is a gross anomaly. What this policy seems to say is there is a magic cure when a child turns five! What this policy says to us as early childhood teachers who have invested so much in the inclusion of children with additional needs is that that investment is just sunk. We suggest that early childhood funding should continue through transition and that applications for Ongoing Resource funding (ORS) should be applied for after the child is at school and their needs have been evaluated in that setting rather than their requirements being guessed.

Ongoing inclusion–monitoring phase

Ongoing monitoring or reflection is very much part of our daily teaching practice at BDK even when children are settled. The monitoring processes take many forms: incidental teacher discussions, incidental discussions with parents, formal meetings with parents and formal meetings with teachers. The move towards recording staff meeting minutes in Google Docs enabled the extended teaching team to access and contribute to the reflective process of monitoring inclusion. Central to the monitoring of inclusive practice are the children's individual portfolios – our tools of engagement.

We noted that there was a strong correlation between what the parents saw as the role of the portfolios and what the teachers thought the portfolio role should be. First and foremost the parents wanted to know about their child's day at kindergarten while the teachers talked about the portfolios strengthening their connections with families. As the number of mothers working increases, ways to do this via different methods of communication becomes more relevant as we seek to create a feeling of belonging and connection for those who can spend less time in the kindergarten.

Collaborative relationships with families were identified as important through each of the three inclusive phases. In the pre-inclusion phase the foundations were laid, during the transition phase the relationships were built upon and during the monitoring phase the relationships strengthened and became more reciprocal. The creation of an environment that respected adults and children was important to our inclusive practice. Parents talked about being accepted at BDK, that the teachers took time to talk with them. Kevin's mother Louise also talked about being accepted, not only by the teachers but by the children and their families. From a socio-cultural perspective, children learn best in an environment where there is evidence of reciprocal and interdependent relationships between adults and between adults and children (MacArthur, Purdue & Ballard, 2003).

Parents can also present challenge. We were challenged to identify our limit of inclusion in this phase by some in the community. Did we have a limit? At what point do the rights of the group outweigh those of an individual? We cannot answer that with absolutes. What we believe is that every child's rights are worth fighting for and the work that we do sets the child on a positive path for the future.

Making visual resources is an important feature of our inclusive practice, especially for children on the autistic spectrum. In addition, we have found the benefits of having space for them to keep their visuals of activities and sequencing boards to cue them in to the routines of the day, and of creating a quiet space for them to complete activities without distraction.

Conclusion

Inclusion is for all, but not the same for all - different children take different paths to inclusion. Inclusion is not about getting an equal share but rather getting equitable resources to have equal opportunities (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Creating an inclusive environment through adults adapting the environment and modifying their actions to be more inclusive is preferable to trying to change the child.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the limitations of the study, reiterates the research questions and summarises how the action research has answered these. Conclusions are drawn and the significance of the study described. The value this action research could have on inclusive practices in early childhood education is noted.

Limitations of the research

The research was conducted with an ever changing group of subjects as children left kindergarten and moved on to school; and new children and their families began kindergarten. As well, the number of children with additional needs in the kindergarten programme fluctuated. The turnover of children enhanced our kindergarten programme by providing new case study children to research, yet at the same time limited the research by constantly changing who was involved.

The teachers, the children and their families, the curriculum and the physical environment (Conway, 2008) were seen to comprise the variables and dynamics in the inclusive environment at BDK. The research could never be replicated as the same factors and dynamics between them could never be replicated; in any case, action research never can.

How do visual communication tools invite and extend engagement with children and their families?

The teacher researchers entered this action research project with limited ICT skills, but with a preparedness to learn and experiment with new tools and build

new skills. There were three main reasons why we learned to use and introduced many new communication technologies:

1. To communicate in varied ways and more effectively with families at BDK
2. To communicate more effectively with the children, in particular children with additional needs
3. To disseminate our COI work and findings to a wide range of audiences.

Always, we wanted to engage in reciprocal dialogue with them. We found visual images in print, Powerpoint slides and on our Website and 'blog' successfully increased the interest of people (big and small) and the depth of their engagement.

Frequently, we needed to move outside our comfort zone. However, working together with children and their families to explore the possibilities for improved communication developed a climate of shared learning and assisted the building of relationships. If the tools fitted the different jobs then extended engagement with children and their families followed. This climate of adult learning to support children's learning, and our adoption of a widening range of technologies, will continue in order to invite and extend reciprocal communication with children and their families. Relationships and communication are at the heart of the inclusive environment at BDK.

Extending engagement with families

The lives of many of the families have become more complex; fortunately, there are more ICT options to keep communication flowing. Parents do not have to be physically present these days to know what happens at kindergarten for their child. Like many other ECE services in New Zealand, we have witnessed the powerful role that portfolio records of children's learning play in communication between teachers, children and families. This is why we researched portfolios extensively, using a number of different methods (parent survey, interviews with the children and interviews with former students at BDK). The role of portfolios

for giving the children and their families a sense of connection with and belonging to BDK, so important for inclusion, was affirmed. As a COI, we were carrying out *action* research, and we decided to take action to broaden the range of communication tools.

The diversity of ICT tools allowed us to experiment with alternative means of communication to include families in life at kindergarten. We and/or families introduced:

- Digital versions of the portfolios on CD given to families enabled them to share the CD version easily wherever they wanted without fearing for the safety of the precious portfolio in book format;
- Movies and DVDs made of special moments and events at kindergarten or of children were given to families
- Our BDK website opened our doors to the world
- Our BDK blog added to our open communication, and later some secure blogs within the BDK blog devoted to particular children with additional needs allowed information to be shared but only with invited family and professionals
- Emails were exchanged with updates of a child's achievements. Emailing learning stories provides immediacy while the story is still fresh
- Texts were sent and received to inform or reassure
- A big screen was installed connected to a computer for kindergarten slide shows, or family videos, like that of baby Katie.

Since BDK teachers moved from a 'one-size-fits-all mode of communication', families have responded positively and in different or a multitude of ways according to what suits them best. These days, many parents enrolling at BDK have read our website and visited our blog before they arrive to enrol their child. This prior knowledge has meant that we begin conversations on a higher level, one that is based on programme and systems knowledge.

Extending engagement with children

Having identified the positive impact of working with visual communication tools for children on the autistic spectrum (eg, sequence books) we were inspired to extend these and similar techniques across our teaching practice to benefit both children and adults. Caelan's visual resource helped him choose where to spend his time each day. Georgia confidently used the visual communication tools with Kevin and illustrated how the children observe teachers at work, and act similarly to support a child with additional needs. In Raelene's story we demonstrated how visual information can be used to assist the inclusion of adults.

Emailing messages home excites children while informing families.

Many of the new technologies introduced to better communicate with adults (described above) originated from children (eg, Georgia's individual experience of movie making was added to the BDK website, to the benefit of all who explore the website), or they used the technologies too.

Renee's story illustrates how running slide shows or sharing photographs from home on the large screen engages other children and their families while building the child's positive perception of herself.

The addition of the *blog* has given a whole new dimension to our visual communication tools. There is a daily interaction with the blog. Children will often suggest, 'You could put that on the blog,' and offer to help with the process.

Visual communication tools continually invite and extend engagement with children and their families. Looking back, we can see we made enormous changes to the physical environment of BDK (Conway, 2008) through the addition of many technologies in the last three years.

Extending engagement with colleagues

The story of dissemination by the BDK team during our tenure as a COI has already been published in *Generating Waves* (Glass, Baker & Ellis, 2009). We will simply add here that we came a long way in using PowerPoint during our tenure as a COI; for example, we learned to reduce the amount of information, yet add more features such as embedded video.

The blog has been a useful addition to our professional communication. Our professional support manager comments that she always knows what is going on at Botany Downs Kindergarten because she checks the blog a couple of times a week. Visitors check out the blog before coming in person, or after making a visit.

How do teachers support children to develop social competence?

The original wording of question challenged the teacher researchers to clarify their practice and remind ourselves that we wanted to build competent, capable learners. By identifying that our professional focus is on developing social competence we were able to move forward.

We knew that our knowledge of child development and our values allowed children the opportunity to experiment, to make mistakes, and to reinvestigate possibilities. When it comes to encouraging a child to stand up for themselves in response to another child a teacher has the responsibility of deciding whether to intervene. However, if a teacher always intervenes the opportunity for the child to learn disappears. It is most important for the child to know that you trust them to solve the challenge although you will be there for them should they need support. Kyle's story [about building and experimenting with learning] is one illustration of teachers supporting the development of social competence. In it, the teachers supported Kyle by holding back rather than intervening, allowing him the opportunity to deal with the situation himself. This showed Kyle that we believed in him. By believing in children, we are supporting their development of positive

dispositions to learning. We stand alongside children (though not always in the physical sense).

Supporting children to develop social competence takes many different paths. Madison's story took us on a long and bumpy path towards transition into BDK. We needed to try many actions in our transition *kete*, and possibility thinking led to further options. Could Madison's transition be considered successful? Some days her mother says so. Even though neither her mother nor we could identify an exact turning point for her, Madison can now separate from her mother and has developed relationships with the other children. While a conclusion could not be drawn, our knowledge was extended and some of it may be adapted for other children in the future.

In our kindergarten setting where many children with additional needs attend, a curriculum priority is supporting children on a journey towards social competence and/or self efficacy. The pedagogical framework of noticing, recognising and responding (Ministry of Education, 2004) was confirmed as being very important for us.

The COI research found that our valuing and enacting collaborative relationships with families was a key factor in enhancing inclusion. But it was not a one-way street. Many families initiated and maintained actions that contributed to the inclusive environment at BDK (Conway, 2008).

How does an inclusive environment enhance the learning of all children?

Throughout the research we argued that an inclusive environment enhances the learning of all children. The inclusive environment exists whether there are children with additional needs attending the kindergarten at that point of time or not. We believe that an inclusive environment has more to do with beliefs and values than it has to do with specific individualised education plans and adapted

programmes. That is not to say that the latter two points are ignored. Individual goals and plans are incorporated into the programme in such a way that inclusion for children with additional needs is seamlessly aligned with the inclusion of all children. The children will tell us what they are interested in and what they want to learn about.

If we listen to children's voices, including non verbal voices, we can plan for the best learning outcomes for every child. Our kindergarten programme is modified and extended through listening to all children. It has been led in directions we could not have imagined because we continually challenge ourselves with the questions: 'Is this inclusive?' and listen to the answers from children and their families. We constantly ask, 'What can we do to achieve the ideals of inclusion in our own setting?' (Casey, 2006, p. 2).

Some of the answers have been surprisingly innovative. For example, children's secure blogs have extended the ways communication of the children's learning takes place at BDK. Having children, parents, education support workers, teachers and Group Special Education working and blogging together, listening to children and extending their own learning through a team commitment to learning has been rewarding. As well, celebration is immediate. To have committed bloggers sharing with the child's wider community has opened a whole new set of possibilities for a team approach to reducing systems barriers for a child with additional needs. Now, Kevin's mother blogs about his school experiences and she dreams that his school teacher might become a blogger.

We discovered that it was unrealistic to answer the question, 'How can an inclusive environment enhance the learning of *all* children?' However, through our case stories and numerous examples, we were able to illustrate how an inclusive environment enhances the learning of *many* children. We think that our inclusive practices enhanced the learning of many more children than we recorded. However, Mary's story was an instance that challenged our viewpoint

that 'all children' can benefit. We speculate whether Mary took a little of our inclusive perspective on board. After this experience, we had to assume that not all families embrace our notion of inclusion—and children reflect the discourse and actions they are in contact with at home as well as at kindergarten (Purdue, MacArthur & Ballard, 1998).

We also had the opportunity to learn through being confronted by community division and some parents challenging Simon's inclusion. Not all learning is easy. As a result of that experience, and the in-depth discussion that ensued, children, teachers and the community of BDK have benefited by more robust practices, improved communication and closer monitoring of the programme.

Continuing to build an inclusive environment

There have been numerous changes in actions and practices outlined in this report that come as a direct result of the COI action research project. Through ongoing monitoring reflection and change, inclusive practice at BDK will continue to develop. Through risk taking and possibility thinking new strategies will continue to be explored and actioned.

Our current definition of inclusion is:

Inclusion is creating a climate where everyone is valued, respected and listened to; where actions and interests are noticed, recognised, responded to and built upon. Through possibility thinking barriers are reduced and new possibilities emerge.

Children belong together. We are all the same with different paths of possibility.

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