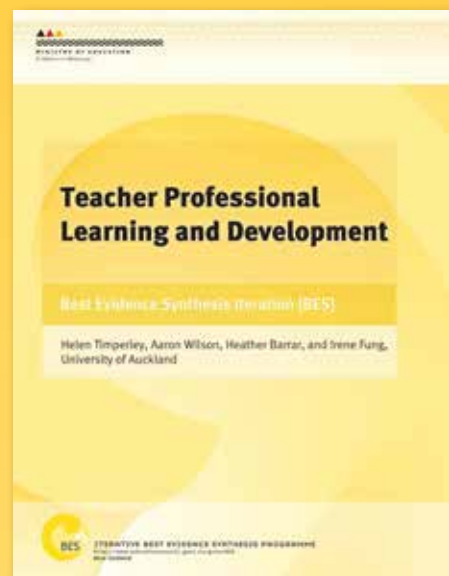# Develop inclusive practice through a social studies programme

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.

Teacher Professional Learning and Development

Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)

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BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about 'what works' for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and Development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes
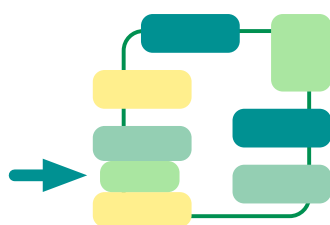
The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

Develop inclusive practice through a social studies programme

This New Zealand case provides a range of tools to help teachers develop inclusive practice in classroom teaching and foster inclusion in the peer culture across a school. It is informed by action research carried out by the teacher of a very diverse new entrants' class but it has implications for teaching across the school. The teacher adopted a social constructivist approach that supported the development of an inclusive classroom community where student diversity was a valued resource for teaching and learning.

The case also explains the use of 'thinking books' to improve responsive teaching and learner self-management. Thinking books are a form of high-impact 'learning log' that can be effective for even 5-year-old students. This is a practical strategy for teachers seeking to support young learners to think about their learning. See also BES Exemplar 5: *Learning logs/He kete wherawhera*

Translating theory into practice

Setting

Ms Nikora was the deputy principal and reception class teacher at a school located on the suburban/rural margin of a New Zealand city. The school was decile 3 with a roll of 125. One student in the school had spina bifida and used a wheelchair.

Time

This study represents just one part of the teacher's continuing exploration into creative uses for 'thinking books', in which students record their thoughts about their learning.

Focus of PD

The focus of this professional development was to explore ways to develop inclusive practice through a social studies programme in a new entrant classroom. Ms Nikora had attended two university teacher education courses, 'Social Contexts of Learning' and 'Theory into Practice', which included training in action research and provided opportunities to apply this training in the classroom.

Goals

The goal of this learning journey was to draw upon new theories and understandings about students with disabilities to address Ms Nikora's increasing awareness of the marginalisation of Zack, a senior student with spina bifida. Her specific aims were to:

- include Zack as a respected and valued member of the school community;
- increase understanding about spina bifida to reduce students' fears and misunderstandings;
- have Zack recognised as a person with needs and abilities rather than an embodiment of his disability;
- prepare students to interact positively with others with disabilities that they might encounter in the future.

Impact on student learners

Prior to PD

Students' responses in their 'thinking books' and the comments they made during the unit were the main sources of information used to assess changes in attitudes and understandings. The pictures at right are both by the same child. The first was their drawing of a wheelchair before Zack had explained its use and the second was after his explanation.

After PD

By the end of the unit, Zack had moved from being on the outer to being in the midst of the group. A year later, of the 11 students who had been in Ms Nikora's class and were still at the school, eight remembered Zack for his role as an older peer helper in their classroom. Only one child remembered no details other than that he had been in a wheelchair.

What was learned and how the learning occurred

Cognitive dissonance

Ms Nikora planned to work with her students to support Zack's inclusion in the school community. The catalyst was a playground incident, witnessed by a number of her new entrant students, in which Zack had a seizure and collapsed. This incident brought the students' fear and lack of understanding to the surface, raising the teacher's concern both for her students and for how their attitudes would affect Zack in the future. To address the issue directly, Ms Nikora decided to educate her students about spina bifida.

Seeking information

In the research of Christine Rietveld (2002), Ms Nikora encountered two models of how disability can be viewed by the community. This research provided her with a framework for her planning, as she considered how she could introduce inclusive educational practice in her classroom. Rietveld documented contrasting cases of students with Down's syndrome. These highlighted the possibilities and advantages of inclusive practice using a social constructivist approach (see definitions on the next page) instead of coming from a personal tragedy position. She also drew on Swan and White's (1994) thinking book approach, which facilitated students' use of metacognitive strategies by having them record what they had learned and their questions about what they were learning. As part of her earlier action research, Ms Nikora had used thinking books to address issues of inclusion and diversity with her students in science, so she decided to repeat the action research cycle in social studies.
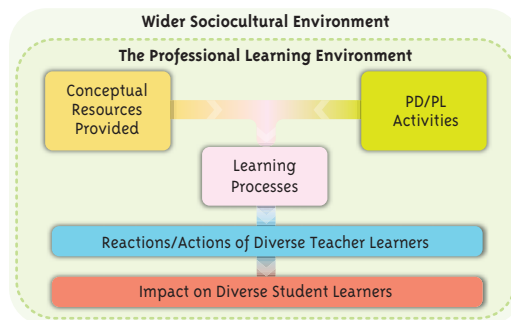
The teacher applied elements of theory in order to incorporate the new learning into her current teaching practice. She used a curriculum-focused approach to inform the students about spina bifida and to help them interact appropriately with Zack within the school community.

Four strategies were used:

- social studies curriculum integration;
- critique of the 'personal tragedy' position;
- multiple positionings;
- curriculum application in the school community.

She used the students' responses in their thinking books and conversations to adapt her teaching to their emerging needs and understandings.

Wider Sociocultural Environment

The Professional Learning Environment

Conceptual Resources Provided → Learning Processes → PD/PL Activities

Reactions/Actions of Diverse Teacher Learners

Impact on Diverse Student Learners

The **'personal tragedy'** model posits disability as a problem or deficit located within the individual and in need of 'fixing'. Operating from this model, a person may feel pity or charity, which, however sincere, lead them to deal with individuals with disabilities in compensatory rather than educational ways.

Ms Nikora also drew on the expertise of her university course lecturers who provided her with information on the broad theory surrounding social contexts and the 'social constructivist' model. She also learned how to use action research to explore the application of research and theory in a practical context.

The **'social constructivist'** model rejects a remediation focus and sees disability not as the result of the person's impairment but as a product of contextual, social factors that create barriers and limit opportunities for full participation.

Why did this work?

Ms Nikora used an action research approach to explore the interplay between theory, research, and practice. Her motivation was to teach her students alternative responses to people with disabilities. To do this, she focused on research that could inform her theory about what the alternative behaviours and attitudes might be and provide possibilities for new practice that she could integrate into her current practice. The theory guided her choice of resources and the learning experiences she planned for her students, as well as the way she introduced Zack to the class, to ensure that he was framed not just as a child in a wheelchair, but as 'one of us'. The theory also helped her as she responded to her students' thinking—as revealed in their thinking books and conversations—enabling her to critique 'personal tragedy' responses and to model a social constructivist position.

While Zack had been in the school for some time—he was a year 5 student—Ms Nikora had not acted until she became aware of the dissonance between the theory she had encountered in her studies and the responses of students following the playground incident. It was a new theory, supported by relevant research, and her awareness that she could improve this situation by applying this learning to her current practice, that resulted in her learning and changing her practice to resolve the problem.

Ms Nikora became aware that her current practice was not helping her students deal with diversity in the school community. She planned to build new teaching and learning links into her social studies curriculum to address the issue, emphasising the social studies aim, 'to enable children's participation in a changing society as confident, informed and responsible citizens'. Her selection of resources was strongly influenced by her aim to critique the 'personal tragedy' model. The key resource was a story and pictures about Tyler, a four-year-old boy with spina bifida, who spends Christmas in hospital having an operation (Smythe, 1996). This story allowed the students to compare their Christmas experiences with Tyler's, and to learn about spina bifida. Ms Nikora was judicious, however, about which components of the kit to use.

The resource had something about developing a sympathetic relevant understanding … and I remembered the readings I had done in … 'Theory into Practice' and the lecture about the personal tragedy side of it and that word 'sympathy' just didn't work for me … I thought the children would relate it straight back to the personal tragedy—'Oh, you poor little thing!' …

Teacher

Ms Nikora's knowledge of how her students learned was both part of the theory that informed her decisions and the method of inquiry she used to assess her practice. She provided a range of tasks and contexts to help her students learn about spina bifida and, throughout the unit, considered how this content was working with the students. She had them illustrate the current focus of the study in their thinking books, together with the metacognitive strategies they were using. She also used students' comments and behaviours as indicators of how they approached and viewed a student with a disability.

Ms Nikora used her new theory not just to set goals but to decide how to achieve them. She used the idea of multiple positionings to frame disability as a social construction rather than a personal tragedy. Zack was first introduced to the class some weeks before the unit was to begin as an older peer helper. This was to provide a context where his strengths and abilities were self-evident and directly helpful to the students. He was positioned as a member of a tutor programme staffed by older students, rather than as different or disabled. The teacher then arranged for Zack to address the class, positioned as an expert resource person on spina bifida. In the students' third encounter with Zack, he was positioned as 'one of us' rather than 'other'. Students and their tutors were asked to draw a picture showing what they were good at. Zack shared his strength as a cricketer and Ms Nikora used this to win his acceptance by the group of students who admired sporting expertise.

> *I have learnt today that Zack (is) good at playing cricket and William (is) good at playing soccer.*

Student

Throughout the unit Ms Nikora used the 'personal tragedy' model as a tool to help her to reflect on the students' responses to Zack. Rather than challenging students whose responses reflected a personal tragedy focus, she provided evidence of Zack's competencies and modelled informed, respectful, and appropriate ways of interacting with him.

By integrating social constructivist theory with her knowledge and use of the social studies curriculum and using techniques such as reframing students' views of a child with a disability through multiple, positive positionings of him, the teacher/researcher acted to resolve the dissonance between students' current behaviours and attitudes and a new and more appropriate approach.
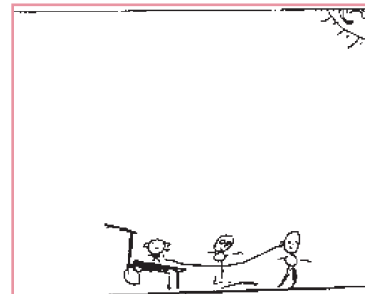
> *You don't just teach people by showing you know! You can teach them by telling!*

Student

How did the teacher make this work?

Ms Nikora taught her students to frame disability as a social construction rather than a personal tragedy. This theory posits that disability should not define a person and that multiple positionings are possible for an individual. Barriers in specific contexts create limitations. Rather than 'fix' the individual, these barriers to learning and inclusion need to be overcome using a problem-solving approach. The teacher used thinking books to access students' metacognitive responses to learning situations so that she could reflect on the effectiveness of her practice and continuously adapt it to meet both her students' learning needs and her own teaching goals.

How this case links to the synthesis

Reframing teachers' social constructions of students

9.2.1.1 Infrastructural supports

9.2.1.5 Prevailing discourses

9.2.2.3 New vision for teaching, learning, and relationships

9.2.2.4 An emphasis on pedagogical relationships

9.2.3.1 Professional instruction followed by multiple opportunities to learn

9.2.3.2 Activities that integrated theory and practice

9.2.3.3 Examining student outcomes and understandings

9.2.4.1 Creating dissonance with current position

Reflective questions

Zack had been in this school for some time.

- What factors helped Ms Nikora to recognise that there was a problem with the way other students were responding to him?
- What enabled her to act so constructively?

Source

Alton-Lee, A., Rietveld, C., Klenner, L., Dalton, N., Diggins, C., & Town, S. (2000). Inclusive practice within the lived cultures of school communities: Research case studies in teaching, learning and inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 4* (3), 179-210.