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Building Bridges into the Adolescents' World and their Learning Community:

Exploring issues of diversity, special education and the role of Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour in secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

The increasing diversity of our student population, advances in technology, socio-economic changes and increasing awareness of human rights have resulted in the need for a change in the way secondary schools respond to diversity. This would necessitate a reframing of the current deficit paradigm of special education. This thesis investigates the validity of the notion that the concept of learning community could provide a means to bringing about this change.

A small learning group of four Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) and two Ministry of Education: Special Education (GSE) fieldworkers was the vehicle for exploring this concept. One of the features of this learning group was the capacity the group had for providing a context for multi-dimensional learning. Analysis of the findings resulted in three strands of learning.

The first strand of learning focused on the features and processes of effective groups. The impact of the power of the group and how participants experienced that power provided the basis for the second strand of learning. The third strand of learning resulted from themes arising out of the analysis of the group's discourses. These themes not only revealed the complexities of the work of RTLB in secondary schools but also informed and reinforced all three strands of learning.

In addition to the influence that participating in the group had on the personal and professional life of each participant, the work of the group provided an insight into, and affirmed a number of, possibilities for the development of learning communities. The values, attitudes and beliefs inherent in a culture of learning community have the potential to set the stage for reframing the current deficit paradigm of special education. This change in paradigm and the findings in evidence-based research relating to what constitutes quality teaching more than imply – they necessitate - reforms that include changes to funding mechanisms, school and community cultures, school systems and teaching and learning methods. A powerful way to achieve this change is to develop whole-school learning communities where all students are valued and provided with opportunities to be contributing members.

There is potential for RTLB to have a significant role in fostering, learning communities within schools. Recognition of, and advocating for, the role that RTLB could have in further development of both these aspects would contribute considerably to increasing the effectiveness of RTLB support - particularly in secondary schools. This could also assist, both directly and indirectly, with clarifying the role and expectations of the RTLB.

This investigation demonstrated the potential for a small learning group to become a vehicle for growing a wider culture of learning community in education contexts. It also confirmed that a culture of genuine learning community, in which diversity is celebrated and effective teaching and learning strategies are practised, would build bridges into the adolescents' world and their learning community and enable all members to participate in an inclusive context.

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