Promoting access and advocacy through the Participatory Action Research process.

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As a teacher researcher examining issues within inclusive teaching practice I have utilized a participatory action research (PAR) approach within both my Masters and PhD research projects. The PAR approach promotes consultation and collaboration with, and between, participants as they explore common issues together.

My research and teaching practice is situated within a socio-political model of disability. This model proposes that disability is not the result of a person's impairment, but rather of the disabling social-cultural barriers in society (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001; Purdue, 2004). Disability is defined, not as an individual deficit requiring intervention, but as a societal creation (Macartney, 2007).

Socio-political discourse

A socio-political discourse challenges traditional methods of research of, and with, families and people with disabilities (Armstrong & Moore, 2004; Mercer, 2002; Purdue, 2004). Historically research has been carried out *on* people with disabilities rather than *with* them, with scant attention being paid to the influence of researchers on perpetuating negative stereotypes of disability (Morton, 2007; Purdue, 2004). Studies have focussed on the researcher's terms with little consideration being given to the impact, relevance and suitability of the research methods on those involved. Although teachers, students, parents and support staff have been involved in research projects, it has been as the objects of the research rather than stakeholders who have a vested interest in the process and outcomes of such research. Further to this, decision making within research has been the acknowledged domain of the researcher (Park et al., 1998).

Research agendas now require closer scrutiny to determine the relevance of research to those being studied (Turnball, Friesen & Ramirez, 1998). Considerations include identifying whose needs are being met and why the research is being carried out.
Armstrong and Moore (2004) advocate constant questioning during research activities to monitor democratic practice. Such questions could include:

- ☐ Why am I doing this project rather than something else?
- ☐ In whose interests is this project?
- ☐ What connection has it to developing inclusive cultures and practices?
- ☐ Am I consulting others involved as far as I reasonably can?
- ☐ Does it actually challenge existing practices which shore up exclusions and, if so, what are the implications?

(p.8)

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Participatory Action Research
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to undertaking research and it is recognised as one means of minimising the gap between research and practice (Meyer, Park, Grenot-Sheyer, Schwartz & Harry, 1998; Morton & MacArthur, 2002). The PAR process involves researchers and stakeholders taking part in the decision making process from the beginning of the project, through to its conclusions and any subsequent actions which arise from the project (Park, Gonsier- Gerdin, Hoffman, Whaley & Yount, 1998). PAR is specifically characterised by shared ownership of research, community based analysis of social problems and an orientation towards community action (Cardno, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

PAR demands that all participants reflect on the changes occurring and decisions that need to be made before further work is undertaken. Participants work together in the decision making process to investigate questions that are meaningful to them and they have the opportunity to address problems related to the implementation of research as they work. Thus research findings are ecologically and practically valid in the real environment making it more likely that innovative practices will be transferred into the educational environment (Park et al., 1998). When considering research investigations I have focused on day to day issues of inclusion within my teaching practice.

Masters and Doctoral Projects
Within my Masters thesis work I examined the use of an alternative partnership model for a family and school staff working together to support the inclusion of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). I was working as a Special Education Needs Coordinator in a regular primary (pupils aged 5 years – 13 years) school in New Zealand. I was one of a number of people supporting Duncan, a nine year old student with ASD. This was the fourth school Duncan had attended in his short educational life. He had been at this school for 18 months, making some impressive gains academically, but he was struggling socially to cope with the school community and we were struggling to cope with meeting his needs successfully. We, that is school staff and family members, questioned our ability to encourage Duncan to participate and learn with his peers.

As both a Masters student and a teacher I approached the other team members to ascertain if they would like to work together in a participatory action research project where we could try to resolve some of the issues we were challenged with by utilising a different way of working. I would work as a teacher researcher with an additional focus on investigating how we could make sense of working together to enhance Duncan's inclusion. The PAR approach appealed to learning community participants who were focussed on working together to problem solve. We needed to find practical solutions to our problems and to use strategies that could help the student long after the study was completed.

Throughout the project we worked together in an alternative partnership model where traditional roles and responsibilities were shared. This approach to research and curriculum required focused discussions, regular communication and meetings, and a

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clarity of language and decision making for all participants. The group consisted of professional and family members. We recognized these roles as having historical significance as to whose voice had been heard in previous decision making. We questioned ourselves about who was participating and who was not. The PAR process allowed us to reconsider ways of working and to determine our own ways of moving forward. Over time all participants determined that they had formed an authentic partnership where their unique views were valued in decision making. All partners had access to information, to strategies for supporting a partnership and for supporting inclusion.

We felt we could advocate for Duncan in a role of shared responsibility. Our team focused on supporting Duncan while also supporting each other with this new way of working. The PAR process enabled us to question and challenge ourselves as well as traditional ways of working and interacting within our school community. School management encouraged this work and responded to our new learning by introducing changes to some curriculum and school practices. Duncan was able to participate in his school community with less support and this was maintained for the year after the project finished.

Similarly I am now attempting research within my doctoral project exploring the introduction of a new form of assessment with students labeled as disabled, within their community high school setting. Participants within this project are drawn from family and school environments. We have agreed that a collaborative approach to this research is a model that we wish to enact. As we strive to work within a democratic fashion it is also a challenge for us to consider how to promote student voice within this project. Two of the participants are labeled as disabled and conventional methods of engagement need to be questioned as we identify ways of working together where all participants' views can be heard and considered.

Working within PAR
The PAR model of research has required the teams I have worked within to take the time to clarify roles and responsibilities, to set common goals, to communicate regularly, to clarify jargon and to negotiate and problem solve issues and decisions to support new learning and inclusion for all. Research participants have found that it requires more time than our traditional meetings to address these challenges in a democratic manner. All participants require access to information and decision making in this process. Historical positionings of power have needed to be recognized and addressed. As a teacher working with family and students with disabilities this is critical to promoting a democratic partnership.

Learning communities
In my experience PAR is not a research process that fits neatly into stages. The stages often overlap and original thinking may be challenged early in the PAR process so that previous plans may become obsolete. The research partnerships I have been involved in within both masters and doctoral work have also involved the participants working within learning communities. One of these learning communities is known as a Quality Learning Circle (QLC). The QLC approach promotes the notion that participants are active learners who

shape their own learning choices. Such a journey may be regarded as learning occurring on the "edge of chaos" (Lovett, 2002, p.101). This is because rather than relying on others to provide learning choices, the group is responsible for sharing, reflecting and choosing its future learning needs. There may be some uncertainty about outcomes, hence the reference to learning at the edge of chaos. These elements are inherent in the practices of the group throughout my masters, and now doctoral work.

Utilising a critical friend
As a teacher who had not been involved in PAR I realised early in my Masters planning that I would need someone not directly involved in the project to support me as I worked within this research process that was unfamiliar to me. I needed a critical friend. Costa and Kallick (1993) describe a critical friend as
"a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work."
(p.50)

I was aware of Mills' (2003) caution against having too many critical friends giving various points of view and decided that one knowledgeable critical friend would meet this need. A priority for me was a critical friend who had a good understanding of the participatory action research process. Similarly I am drawing on the knowledge of a single critical friend to engage and reflect upon PAR practices and process in my doctoral work.

Criterion for judging the success of PAR
I have found Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) criterion for judging the success of PAR is relevant to this study. They state that the
"criterion for success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully but rather whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice"
(p.563).

Impact of this approach to research on my teaching practice
Reflecting on my teaching practice during the last five years I note a further impact of this research approach that goes beyond the research itself. As a teacher who enjoyed this collaborative model where shared responsibility and investigation resulted in more inclusive practice I began to question the way I worked within the daily teaching, learning and assessment practices of myself and my students. Students with disabilities in New Zealand may be supported by teams drawing on school, home and professional members. The students may be in these teams too. PAR has challenged my assumptions about what it means to work together, what it means to be inclusive. It continues to challenge me, to challenge the teams I work within.

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