

NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

TE HUNGA RANGAHAU MĀTAURANGA O AOTEAROA

# Rae Munro Award 2009

*The thesis is titled: It's the small things that count: Making sense of working in a partnership to support the inclusion of a child with autism spectrum disorder.*

It is unusual in a masters level thesis to find an original contribution to knowledge. This thesis by Annie Guerin has made such a contribution.

When Annie began her thesis study she was working in the role of a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in a rural primary school. She wanted to undertake a project that would, in both topic and method, contribute to the inclusion of 'Duncan', an eight-year-old student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She wanted the project to work in a way that was sustainable, that did not rely on her presence for continued success.

In her thesis Annie set out to document and describe in detail the way a group of four people worked together to support Duncan's presence, participation and learning. He had previously been excluded from pre-school, and had already attended two other primary schools. The four people were Duncan's mother, his classroom teacher, the teacher aide, and Annie, the SENCO. The thesis traces the stages of the group forming through to performing, documenting what they learned about how to support Duncan's learning. Moreover, it traces what the members of the group learned about their own and each other's learning, about how to work in authentic partnership.

We believe the thesis exemplifies the key aims of Rae Munro's work; the possibilities "of teacher change through applying action research approaches to teachers' professional development." It could have been a thesis focused on techniques for working with Duncan. Instead, Annie focused on "creating change through teacher challenge in professional development." This thesis provides an example for others to emulate in that it attends to the processes used to establish effective dialogue that treats all partners with respect thereby maximising the knowledge and skills of the partners. This thesis illustrates how a parent can be encouraged to work closely beside education professionals. By being explicit about the processes used to form this partnership, Annie is able to highlight the potential of the quality learning circle as a professional learning tool for educators and parents.

The contribution of the thesis is two-fold. First Annie has added to the research on participatory action research around inclusion with the use of the quality learning circle as a way to bring the group together. This strategy shifts the focus from the learning difficulties of a particular student to the learning needs of the members of the group – in order to best create and facilitate opportunities for the student to learn. As Annie notes in her thesis, she "experienced the growing confidence of a group of people sharing responsibility for learning, for developing new knowledge and for taking risks... The focus shifted from an individual (Duncan) to the class and school, examining our own practices, finding solutions together with no one person responsible for the decision making" (p.94, 95). The second contribution arises from this subtle but significant shift in focus. Annie has demonstrated the barriers to partnership, and effective learning for both adults and students, when a deficit focus is at the centre of planning, teaching and learning. Her thesis offers teachers, students and their parents, families and whanau, a clear alternative.

