

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Language Matters: Developing Inclusive, Strengths-Based Practice in a Cluster of Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) work with teachers to identify learning and behaviour needs of students who experience barriers to educational success. The language RTLB use can have a significant impact on teachers' response to the inclusion of students with special learning needs and is key to improving educational outcomes for all learners. We examined the extent to which RTLB in New Zealand used inclusive, strengths-based language in initial meetings with teachers and whether shifts could be made through professional learning and development (PLD). Data collected included audio recordings, transcripts of initial meetings pre- and post-PLD, RTLB reflections on both transcripts, and questionnaires. Results indicate limited use of inclusive, strengths-based language prior to PLD. However, PLD that provided targeted opportunities to reflect on evidence of language behaviour and to practise requisite skills markedly increased RTLB awareness, knowledge, and skills with respect to inclusive, strengths-based language. Findings indicate that change often requires disrupting long-held beliefs and practices and a need for evidence of these to be able to do so. The findings have implications for the type of in-depth PLD needed to facilitate change in the language RTLB use when working with teachers.

**Keywords:** strengths-based language; inclusive practice; professional learning; specialist support; language use; problem identification

The Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) Service in New Zealand comprises clusters of itinerant teachers supporting inclusive practice in schools (Thomson et al., 2003; Walker, 2013). RTLB have specialist teacher training to work with teachers to identify learning and behaviour needs of students who experience significant barriers to educational success (Walker, 2013). Research indicates that during initial meetings with teachers who have requested support, RTLB should develop collaborative relationships, establish roles and responsibilities, and clarify the nature of the problem (Newman et al., 2017).

The language and approach used by RTLB in discussing teacher concerns around student difficulties can influence teacher perceptions of the student, as language provides a representation of and also informs thoughts and perspectives (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2010). A significant amount of research on inclusion cites the importance of strengths-based practice and the negative impact of deficit theorising (e.g., Dobson & Gifford-Bryan, 2014; Wilding & Griffey, 2015). Deficit-oriented language may highlight

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negative student attributes and influence teacher perceptions of the student and associated barriers to learning, whereas the use of strengths-based language can provide a more positive view of the student and their potential (Hatzichristou et al., 2017; Sundqvist, 2019). Research highlights that teacher perceptions and the ways in which they speak to and of students are strong predictors of a student's likelihood of achieving long-term positive educational outcomes (Meissel et al., 2017; Mentis & Annan, 2013; Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018). Smith (2014) urges educators to 'delete negative problem-based terms from [their] vocabulary such as resistant, non-compliant, unmotivated, maladaptive, inappropriate, and normal' (p. 158) as these are based on assumptions and opinions.

Teachers and RTLB should critically analyse assumptions made about students, particularly those who are marginalised (Meissel et al., 2017). Providing opportunities to examine these assumptions allows for shared critique of otherwise accepted judgements of students with diverse needs and abilities (Ainscow, 2005). Lawrence-Brown and Sapon-Shevin (2014) recognise that student outcomes are impacted by expectations and the quality of teacher-student relationships. Mentis and Annan (2013) note that how teachers view students will determine whether inclusion is interpreted from a strengths-based or deficit perspective.

However, there is a dearth of research on RTLB practice, especially their language use in initial meetings with teachers. This study aimed to address this gap. It describes an intervention within one RTLB cluster focused on developing inclusive and strengths-based language during initial meetings with teachers. It provided opportunities for RTLB to analyse and critique their assumptions about teachers and referred students. It was hypothesized that deeper conceptual understanding and use of strengths-based language would promote positive expectations of students (Bozic et al., 2018; Wilding & Griffey, 2015). The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of language used by RTLB in initial meetings when describing referred students or questioning teachers?
2. In what ways does professional learning focusing on inclusive, strengths-based language impact on RTLB language use?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examined four linguistic aspects that appear to be key components of inclusive, strengths-based language: avoiding/making assumptions, open/closed questioning, strengths-based/deficit language, and external/internal problem attribution (e.g., Skoning & Henn-Reinke, 2014). An assumption is a belief that is considered true without supporting evidence. Assumptions are often created when we interpret events around us but are influenced more by our prior perceptions and experiences than the evidence that the events present. Greenwald et al. (1998) note that we are often quick to evaluate an event and act. However, assumptions often result from cognitive bias, which is defined by Wilke and Mata (2012) as a 'systematic error in judgment and decision making . . . which can be due to cognitive limitations, motivational factors, and/or adaptations to natural environments' (p. 531). Cognitive biases confirm untested assumptions and skew our perceptions, increasing the disconnect between perception and reality (Le Fevre et al., 2015).

Avoiding assumptions is desirable, as the role that these play when we infer meaning from others' actions directly influences how we respond to those actions (e.g., Argyris, 1991; Mentis & Annan, 2013). Coolahan (1991, as cited in Gutkin & Curtis, 2009) found that educators often made 'inferential' comments when noting students' difficulties. Coolahan notes that consultants' use of non-inferential language had a positive impact on the language used by their consultees and increased their use of non-inferential statements (p. 612). Although perception will always be informed by belief and assumptions, safeguarding against these becoming fixed and unchallenged requires purposeful consideration of thoughts and actions (Robinson et al., 2021). It is through checking with others and publicly testing key beliefs and assumptions that our perspectives are evaluated (Robinson, 2016).

A second linguistic aspect is questioning for information and probing for clarification and meaning. Open questions encourage sharing of information, thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (Lee et al., 2012), giving the respondent scope to reply in their own words (Schein, 2013). Such questioning is active and includes probing; for example, ‘What leads you to say that?’ or ‘What else can you tell me about that?’ In general, open questions will begin with who, what, where, when, why, or how. Asking open questions can help move meeting participants towards a greater shared understanding and penetrate beneath immediate, superficial responses (Ratner, 2002; Sundqvist, 2019; Truscott et al., 2017).

In contrast, closed questions generally elicit simple yes or no responses, limiting the sharing of information. These may also be described as ‘leading’ questions when the interviewer gives respondents limited options (Schein, 2013); for example, ‘Do you think he is being defiant or does he not care what happens to him?’ This question allows no scope for the interviewee to provide their own perspective on the nature of the problem. Schein (2013) also suggested that questioning that is closed and indicates little interest in the interviewee’s perspective and knowledge can stifle trust. This perspective is supported by Hughes and DeForest (1993), who identified a notable negative correlation between teachers’ satisfaction with consultation meetings and the use of closed questioning.

The third aspect investigated was RTLB use of strengths-based language. Identification of a student’s strengths and interests shifts the focus away from what is not working towards what is and what might be possible. Mentis and Annan (2013) note that the identification of students’ strengths better supports appropriate intervention planning for students. The use of a diagnostic label that defines a student as not ‘normal’ inhibits seeing them as an individual with their own unique strengths, skills, challenges, and interests (Taylor, 2006). For example, a student is not referred to as ADHD but as a child with a mixture of strengths and abilities, some of which can create difficulty in certain contexts. For instance, a child who is highly energetic during outdoor activities could find it difficult to sit quietly for an extended period, especially if the activity is not engaging.

A fourth aspect is problem attribution. The beliefs people hold about behaviour and how learners develop influence the ways in which they respond to learner difficulties (Mentis & Annan, 2013; Walker, 2013). Teachers tend to attribute the difficulty to an inherent disposition of the learner or their home circumstances, and undervalue or overlook the effect of teaching and class- and school-related factors (Sacker et al., 2001; Worrell, 2022). These attributions locate problems within the student rather than in factors within a teacher’s control. Language can either imply internal attribution, locating the difficulty within the person and therefore fixed in place, or it can externalise the nature of the problem by considering the effect of context such as teaching or school-related factors.

## Method

This research was designed to enhance RTLB awareness of the factors that impact their thinking and lead to increased use of inclusive, strengths-based language following targeted professional learning and development (PLD). Following the granting of full ethics approval by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (reference 021731), written informed consent was gained from all participants before the study began.

## Participants

Twelve RTLB (nine female and three male) agreed to participate in this research. They had from 1 to 16 years’ experience in the RTLB role. The average length of RTLB experience was 7 years. All RTLB participants had completed or were undertaking a postgraduate specialist teacher diploma.

## Intervention

The PLD presented information on RTLB use of inclusive and strengths-based practice and language. Further, RTLB were supported in analysing their transcripts of an initial meeting with a referring

**Table 1.** Professional Learning and Development (PLD) Timeline and Description of Data Sources

Time point	Intervention	Data collected
<b>Pre</b> PLD Session #1	Initial Meeting 1 audio-recorded	Transcript (IMT-1)
PLD Session #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of strengths-based, inclusive language</li> <li>• RTLB trial codebook on mock transcript</li> </ul>	
<b>Post</b> PLD Session #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RTLB analyse own transcript</li> <li>• RTLB note reflections on transcript</li> <li>• RTLB complete reflection questionnaire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection (IMTR-1)</li> <li>• Questionnaire (IMRQ-1)</li> </ul>
PLD Session #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group reflection</li> <li>• RTLB role and practice</li> </ul>	
<b>Post</b> PLD Session #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial Meeting 2 audio-recorded</li> <li>• RTLB analyse own transcript</li> <li>• RTLB note reflections on transcript</li> <li>• RTLB complete reflection questionnaire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcript (IMT-2)</li> <li>• Reflection (IMTR-2)</li> <li>• Questionnaire (IMRQ-2)</li> </ul>

Note. RTLB = Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour.

teacher. Meetings involved conversations between participant RTLB and the teachers who made the referrals to the RTLB service. The PLD involved two 3-hour sessions, 3½ months apart. As a basis for follow-up analysis and reflection, RTLB recorded initial meeting conversations (with teacher approval) prior to the first and subsequent to the second PLD session. These conversations were transcribed by the first author for analysis by RTLB in the second session. The intervention focused specifically on providing RTLB with opportunities to reflect on their actual practice through guided analysis of language in their own transcripts. RTLB were taught how to analyse their own language and were provided some time to examine their transcript in the PLD session. A full analysis was conducted after the first PLD session and submitted to the researcher, who provided feedback to RTLB and used the data to inform the next PLD session.

Reflecting on and analysing one's own practice has been shown to be a far more powerful and effective way to learn than examining a hypothetical scenario. Huberman (1992) notes that 'we actually find out who we are when we watch ourselves act and what we think when we hear ourselves saying something' (p. 9). Reflective practice provides an important opportunity for RTLB to develop as practitioners and connect their new understandings with prior knowledge, evaluate thoughts and feelings, and develop new skills and knowledge, which results in ongoing opportunities for improved action and reflective practice (Aydon-Pou, 2010; Brown et al., 2000). Sundqvist's (2019) study showed special educators had increased awareness when listening to and reflecting on their recorded consultation sessions. However, complementing self-reflections with supervisor feedback was more likely to have an impact on practice.

## Data

RTLB selected two initial meetings with different teachers to record for analysis. One was audio-recorded and transcribed before (pre) the first PLD session (IMT-1) and another after (post) the first PLD session (IMT-2). Data also included RTLB reflective analysis of both transcripts (IMTR-1 and IMTR-2) and reflective questionnaires after these meetings (IMRQ-1 and IMRQ-2). Table 1 provides an overview of the PLD timeline, data sources, and intervention phases.

Initial meetings lasted between 7 and 57 minutes. RTLB received their transcripts and were asked to re-read and identify their thoughts and language use in the meeting, noting questions and thoughts on the transcripts. Data also included a questionnaire, with questions on the effectiveness of their meeting in eliciting information about student needs, and their thoughts on having an opportunity to review their transcript and reflect on their initial meeting in light of the PLD provided.

### Data analysis

The specific language aspects examined were making and avoiding assumptions, open and closed questioning, strengths-based versus deficit language, and external versus internal problem attribution. Discourse analysis was used to code the meeting transcripts, allowing a clear identification of the perspectives on and meaning given to problem situations (Gee, 2014). A codebook was constructed to allow for a deductive, systematic analysis of the qualitative data. It allowed the researcher to organise text of varying size, from single words up to whole paragraphs, into meaningful units. RTLB reflections and questionnaires were deductively coded for reflections and comments in regard to the same language aspects.

The codebook was developed through an iterative process to support consistent analysis of the language used during the initial meeting. Establishing codes systematises the data in order to clarify and separate themes (e.g., Clarke & Braun, 2017). A review of literature, experience gained as a practice leader, and observations of RTLB language in the field informed the initial development of the codebook, which was reviewed by all authors and pilot tested by RTLB during PLD Session 1. RTLB were provided with a mock transcript and asked to provide feedback regarding the use of the codebook and any suggested edits or amendments. Adaptations were made as a result to ensure it could be applied with fidelity. The codebook contains sections on each of the aspects differentiating between language that was inclusive and strengths-based versus language that was not. Each aspect was described and illustrative examples were provided.

The specific language aspects coded were

- assumptions avoided or made (A+/-)
- questions open or closed (Q+/-)
- strengths-based or deficit language (S+/-)
- problem attribution external or internal (PA+/-).

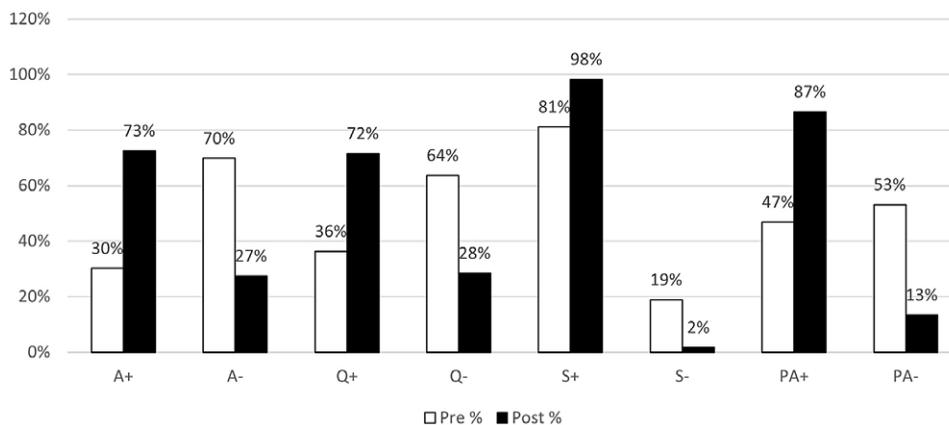
RTLB coded their own transcripts during the PLD time provided. The first author also coded the transcripts independently. Each transcript was analysed and coded to link to the letter code. Language aspects coded as positive (+) were avoiding assumptions, open questioning, strengths-based language, and external problem attribution. The aspects coded as negative (-) were making assumptions, closed questioning, deficit language, and internal problem attribution. The frequency for each code was collated for each transcript. Subsequent to the analysis of each individual RTLB's IMT-1 and IMT-2, the number of instances for each language category was then collated across all 12 transcripts to show occurrence in each meeting and overall shifts in language. The number of occurrences was then converted to a percentage of the total number of instances of either positive or negative language in each aspect using the formula that follows. No statistical testing was done due to the small sample size.

$$\text{Collated Aspect (+ or -)\%} = \frac{\sum \text{Aspect Frequency(+ or -)}}{\sum \text{Total Aspect Frequency(+ \& -)}} \times 100$$

As part of the professional development phase, RTLB were asked to use the codebook to code IMT-1 and IMT-2 for language use. It is through insight into their own and others' language that awareness is raised and change is possible (Brown et al., 2000). Qualitative data derived from RTLB reflections (IMTR-1 and IMTR-2) and the questionnaires (IMRQ-1 and IMRQ-2) were deductively coded for evidence of reflection on the same positive or negative language aspects.

### Trustworthiness

All transcripts were coded twice by the first author. The second coding was completed to ensure consistency of application through all transcripts and to check calculations. In addition, three randomly selected transcripts from IMT-1 and IMT-2 were coded by the other authors for independent code crosschecking. As MacDonald and Weller (2017) suggest, a process of critical self-reflection was used



**Figure 1.** Comparison of Language Aspects in Initial Meeting Transcripts ( $N = 12$ ).

to ensure trustworthiness by consulting regularly with the other authors and engaging actively with all feedback. This helped the first author to broaden her perspective and drew attention to any bias or flaw in her thinking. Triangulation occurred through a wide range of contexts in evidence in the initial meeting transcripts and through employing several different methods of data collection. Reliability is supported by an audit trail that enabled the researcher to follow the progress and development of the research step by step (Shenton, 2004).

## Results

The aim of this research was twofold: to identify and examine language practices of RTLB in initial meetings and explore potential shifts in RTLB language after professional development. Findings are presented in two sections: the first focuses on the language used during the meetings and the second focuses on RTLB reflections after professional development.

### *Language Use During the Initial Meetings*

A comparison of RTLB language use in the initial meetings between RTLB and teachers is presented in Figure 1. It provides percentages of the incidence of the language aspects: assumptions (A+/-), questioning (Q+/-), strengths-based language (S+/-), and problem attribution (PA+/-). The data show the impact of the two PLD sessions on RTLB language, with the use of negative language decreasing. These results are described in detail in separate sections for each aspect.

### *Assumptions*

Overall, RTLB increased positive language use in this aspect from an average 30% to 73%, and decreased assumptions post-PLD from 70% to 27%. An example of assumptions made (A-) is seen in RTLB6 comments in IMT-1: 'so you obviously have a very high influence with him'. The language indicates an assumption about the level of influence by the interviewee on the student. It also draws a conclusion ('obviously') between the behaviour reported by the interviewee without testing this assumption. An example of reframing a statement to avoid an assumption was illustrated by RTLB9 in IMT-2. The teacher described the student as being 'not incredibly empathetic'. The RTLB paraphrased and reframed the statement: 'You feel that he doesn't really show any empathy or kindness'. The initial part, 'you feel', takes the comment away from a statement of fact towards

opinion. RTL9's next comment, 'We don't see the empathy very often', allows for the possibility that the student may have empathy, moving away from deficit theorising; that is, it is not that he is unable to show empathy or kindness, but rather that he has not been observed showing these in this context.

### Questioning

When comparing IMT-1 and IMT-2 data, occurrences of RTLB asking closed questions decreased from 64% to 28%, whereas open questions increased from 36% to 72%. RTL10 in IMT-2 provides an example: 'What are the possible triggers . . . the factors within the context that may lead to these difficulties occurring?' The question prompts a full response from the teacher rather than a simple yes or no. Additionally, it avoided telling the teacher what they should or should not think.

In comparison, in the first transcript, the same RTLB used closed questioning: 'Do you think that there is comfort for him in being at a level where he is achieving?' Here, the question led the interviewee towards a particular response; that is, there is more comfort for the student being at the level he is achieving. A more open framing could have been, 'How do you think he feels about his current level of achievement?', which would have encouraged the teacher to provide their own perspective.

### Strengths-based language

RTL increased their use of strengths-based language from 81% to 98%, although incidence was high in transcripts at both time points. An example can be seen in IMT-2 when RTL4 stated, 'Okay you mentioned his strengths . . . you said oral language is a strength. You said working 1-1 is an interest as well'. The RTL highlighted what worked for the student and what they *can* do. From a strengths-based perspective, concerns should be described as the difficulties the student may be experiencing to indicate any need for adaptations within the classroom environment.

In contrast, an example of deficit language is a comment in IMT-1 by RTL3 (emphasis added):

Interviewee: *Yep, I would say interacting with peers, because he is often quite isolated because nobody wants to play with him.*

RTL3: *Because he is quite rigid is I think what you . . . shared.*

RTL3: *Difficulties with transitions from activities, from play across the school day just in general and mum has concerns about personal safety, no boundaries when it comes to kids and adults and he has difficulty interacting with peers.*

Absolute statements that the student has 'no boundaries' allow little room for positive options — that is, that in some contexts, the student has boundaries.

### Problem attribution

RTL increased the frequency with which they externalised problem attribution from 47% to 87% between IMT-1 and IMT-2. Internalised problem attribution decreased from 53% to 13% and is illustrated by RTL8 in IMT-2, commenting that 'he may have outgrown the school, too complacent' and 'he thinks he is the top dog'. These statements conceptualise the problem as internal, being part of the student, of their choosing, and imply little contextual responsibility for the difficulties.

### Reflections on the Initial Meeting

RTL provided written reflections when reviewing their transcripts (IMTR-1 and IMTR-2) and reflected on their experiences after each meeting in a questionnaire. A comparison between the frequencies with which RTL referred to the positive and negative language aspects in their reflections and the questionnaire responses revealed increases in regard to all four aspects, which may indicate enhanced awareness of their language use (see Table 2). RTL8 in IMTR-2 noted that they were

**Table 2.** Frequency of References to Language Aspects in Reflections and Questionnaires ( $N = 12$ )

Language aspect	Reflections		Questionnaires	
	IMTR-1 frequency	IMTR-2 frequency	IMRQ-1 frequency	IMRQ-2 frequency
Assumptions avoided or made	31	44	7	17
Open or closed questions	15	41	7	14
Strengths based or deficit	27	37	5	7
External or internal problem attribution	1	3	1	2

Note. IMTR-1 and IMTR-2 = reflective analyses of transcripts prior to and following the professional learning and development (PLD); IMRQ-1 and IMRQ-2 = reflective questionnaires completed after each PLD session.

‘consciously trying to ask open questions, avoid assumptions, be strengths based and attribute problems to the situation, not the child’.

### Assumptions

A review of RTLB reflections provided insights into the potential impact of the PLD and increased RTLB awareness of assumptions being made or avoided. For example, RTLB2 stated in IMT-1, ‘transient by the sounds and causes trouble in the classroom socially’. However, the reflective comment highlighted a developing awareness of their language use:

*I did not know [student] was transient and should never have made this statement, but was influenced by having seen several schools on the enrolment form.*

Further, when the interviewee later noted ‘[student] does something physical to them if he wants the attention’, RTLB2 reflected that the interviewee appeared to make judgements and that ‘[interviewee] doesn’t know this for sure. [Student] may hit for another reason’.

During the first initial meeting (IMT-1), RTLB1 noticed positive behaviours and asked, ‘What do you see happening?’ They commented, ‘I want [interviewee] to provide information based on what he has seen/observed’, evidencing an awareness of the need to gain more information and avoid assumptions. Later, the RTLB prompted the teacher to elaborate further by asking, ‘So when you say negative behaviours, what do you mean?’ The RTLB’s inquiry was aimed at understanding what behaviours the teacher perceived as negative.

Further examples were evident in questionnaire responses. In IMRQ-2: Q1, RTLB2 noted that there were missed ‘opportunities for me to paraphrase for clarification’, and that they endeavoured to ‘take all statements at face value’ to avoid making assumptions as to the underlying thoughts or attributions of the interviewee. RTLB5 felt that it was ‘a bit confronting to see how ready [I was] to make assumptions and agree with the teacher’ (IMRQ-2: Q12).

### Questioning

RTLB became more aware and reflected on their use of closed questions. When receiving a ‘no’ from the interviewee in IMT-2, RTLB2 recalled thinking, ‘How silly of me to ask a closed question. I should have asked “What do you want to ask?”’ They subsequently asked another closed question, which they ‘had to amend to obtain information’. Several RTLB noted their tendency to ask too many questions at once and not pause long enough for each answer.

The questionnaires provided further evidence of reflection on questioning. For example, RTLB3 noted that, in future, they would ask ‘more open questions. Ask one question at a time rather than stacking them together’. RTLB12 felt they needed to work on their questioning by ‘framing [their]

questions clearly, asking one question at a time, giving the teacher enough time to answer the question' in addition to 'being very clear as to what [they] are asking'. RTL11 noted that they would spend more time 'prompting for thoughts rather than getting yes/no responses'.

RTL12 recognised in IMTR-1 the importance of 'asking one in-depth question and giving [interviewee] enough time to answer'. On IMTR-1, RTL4 wondered 'Did I clarify or coerce?' when responding to an interviewee's response to a closed question. Asking 'How does he participate in group work?' would have allowed the teacher to give a more detailed response. RTL8 noted that open questions allowed '[interviewee] to identify the issues as [they] see them, not guided by the RTL' (IMTR-1).

RTL responses indicated that they felt a positive shift in the quality of their questions towards more open questions. RTL1 noted that they felt that the opportunity to review their questioning 'meant there were a lot more open questions' and that 'the teacher was able to contribute more to the discussion'. RTL8 was pleased with 'the high proportion of positives regarding questions'. RTL9 felt it was 'fantastic to really spend time thinking about the impact of [their] questions and words [they] chose. Afterwards [interviewee] said it helped him clarify his thoughts'.

### *Strengths-based language*

As noted in Table 2, RTL showed an increased awareness of both strengths-based and deficit language, with 27 comments during the first reflection compared with 37 during the second. Analysis of IMTR-1 showed that there was already some awareness of strengths-based language. For example, RTL2 noted that they were thinking 'how positive [interviewee]'s words were, looking forward, being hopeful and building positive growth mindset'. RTL4 reflected on a comment, 'I'll try to clarify that, could be a strength', and that the interviewee was 'trying to think positively'.

IMTR-2 provided evidence for increased awareness of strengths-based language. RTL5 noted that the interviewee's comments 'were affirming and strengths based' and that the interviewee 'knows this student and can easily identify his strengths, [interviewee] has a positive view of the student'. Further, RTL7 reflected that they were 'really pleased as to how the meeting was progressing within a strengths-based framework. Lots of positives being recorded . . . so many strengths to capitalise on'.

There was also evidence of RTL reflections on language that was not strengths based. When considering a comment by the interviewee in IMTR-1, RTL5 felt that 'considering what [student] is doing as a "random thing" is maybe not strengths based' and they endeavoured to 'explore specifically what [student] can do, looking for strengths'. RTL2 observed that the teacher stated the student 'cannot do anything by himself' when they had previously mentioned several independent capabilities.

Recognition of the benefit of finding students' interests and strengths at these initial meetings was evident. In IMTR-2, RTL2 was 'hoping to hear [student]'s Lego interest was used for maths and literacy motivation'. RTL10 wondered whether the student's love of particular characters could 'be a strategy to use for learning'. RTL12 reflected whether '[interviewee] can incorporate [student] strengths in the other subjects?' RTL5 reflected on the importance of strengths-based language:

*To slow down and really think about what each person said and whether our language was mana [status] enhancing, positive and supportive was important. The student we are discussing is someone's much loved [child], they want the best for [them] and it's important we treat everyone with respect.*

### *Problem attribution*

Analysis indicated a reduced number of explicit comments on problem attribution relative to the other three aspects. As indicated in Table 2, the total number of comments were 7 for problem attribution compared with 99 related to assumptions avoided or made, 77 open or closed questions, and 76 strengths-based or deficit-oriented language aspects. There was some evidence of RTL recognising internal problem attribution. RTL11 noted their concern that the student was 'being "placed in a

box” by their teacher and peers’. RTL5 noted that a teacher ‘assumed the student simply wanted to avoid the tasks’. RTL2 recognised that their comment had been misleading and recalled thinking they ‘certainly didn’t mean that the “whole child” was the problem . . . [they] certainly never saw [student] as the behaviour’. RTL8 noted that they were endeavouring to ‘emphasise that the potential problem issues are external [to the student], not internal’.

## Discussion

Language and the way it is used have an impact on and is significantly impacted by people’s perceptions and beliefs (Patuawa et al., 2022; Sinnema et al., 2021). The language used by RTL in initial meetings with teachers was investigated to determine whether shifts could be made through PLD focusing on inclusive, strengths-based language. Key findings from the quantitative and qualitative data are discussed and suggestions made for further research.

First, our study revealed that despite espousing principles of inclusion and strengths-based practice, RTL appeared to have difficulty applying relevant knowledge and skills prior to the PLD in all four language aspects. These findings stand in contrast to calls by many that such skills are needed for RTL to engage effectively with educators to promote positive outcomes for students with additional needs (Holley-Boen, 2017; Thomson, 2013). Several researchers (e.g., Gerich et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2015; Sundqvist, 2019) suggest that consultants may receive insufficient training to possess such skills. However, there is limited research on actual RTL practice in meetings and consultations or their training for such meetings (an exception being Walker, 2013). This study adds to the research area with a detailed analysis of different language aspects.

Second, this study evidenced that RTL language use in initial meetings and awareness of this markedly improved in all four aspects after targeted PLD that provided opportunities to learn, reflect on actual evidence of their practice, and practise the requisite skills. This research thus supports the findings of Walker (2013), indicating that engaging in systematic opportunities to reflect and develop appropriate skills enhances RTL practice. However, creating and sustaining change is no easy task. It takes genuine engagement with one’s own practice and incremental shifts over time to change practice (Argyris, 1991; Robinson et al., 2014; Watts & Lawson, 2009). Enacting new learnings requires the unlearning of deeply held beliefs (Robinson et al., 2021; Schön, 1991). The nature of the PLD focused on RTLs’ own practice in this study was aligned with previous research noting the limited effectiveness of PLD that is not linked to one’s own practice (Timperley et al., 2014). Further, analysing evidence of their own behaviour was a powerful tool to challenge beliefs and practices (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Bergman, 2015; Patuawa et al., 2022). RTL noted the limited awareness of their practice and appeared surprised by what they heard in the recordings.

Third, this research provides a detailed analysis of four language aspects: avoiding assumptions, open questioning, strengths-based language, and external problem attributions. Each aspect is deemed important to increase RTL effectiveness in inclusive practice, especially in initial meetings, as a clear, accurate understanding of the nature of the problem is pivotal to the subsequent development of interventions (e.g., Graesser et al., 2018; Gutkin & Curtis, 2009). As Giangreco et al. (2002) point out, the use of open questions guards against the discussion becoming waylaid by assumption or inference. Open questions enable more thoughts, feelings, and perspectives to be uncovered (Lee et al., 2012), whereas closed questioning decreases the level of satisfaction reported by the teachers during a consultation (Hughes & DeForest, 1993).

Skilled RTL use of open questions can therefore enable greater effectiveness in clarifying the problem situation, and RTL reflections in this research have evidenced this effect. External problem attribution — that is, locating the problem as an interaction between the student and their environment — enables a more thorough investigation of the contributing factors and therefore a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem situation (e.g., Annan et al., 2006). However, there is little research into specific language aspects and less in the context of RTL or educator use of language. Although this

study adds to this field, future research could focus more closely on one of these language aspects and their nuances, such as improving the nature and quality of questions asked. The evidence suggests that RTLB became aware that they would often allow insufficient time for a response. After analysing their own transcripts, they made a conscious effort to ask more open questions and pause to allow the teachers to respond. As Schein (2013) suggests, ‘questioning is both a science and an art’ (p. 18).

Researchers may be interested in investigating whether improving the skills relevant to describing and inquiring into the nature of a problem lessens the amount of time needed for the consultation. Although not a primary focus of this research, anecdotal RTLB comments, for example, ‘When I had a clearer idea of what I needed to do, the meeting didn’t seem to take as long’, and data showing shorter overall transcript lengths do appear to support this statement. Anecdotal comments from the RTLB provide some clues as to why this may have been the case. Several RTLB suggested that they felt they were more purposeful and focused in their approach. One RTLB also noted that they listened more actively and did not interrupt as often. In addition, RTLB asked more open questions, which had the potential of eliciting fuller responses and therefore reducing the overall number of questions asked.

Finally, although this research provides evidence of a shift in RTLB language following role-specific PLD, the results are constrained by the small sample size and specific focus on RTLB practice during the initial meeting. We do not yet know the extent to which the changes are embedded in their practice or whether they will revert to using their ‘old’ language. We did not explore ways in which the improvements could be sustained. More research is also needed to examine the impact of the shift on RTLB–teacher relationships, teacher practice, and ultimately on student outcomes. Our study is limited by its focus on RTLB language: further investigation into the ways in which *teachers* talk about and perceive student difficulties is also needed. Some researchers, such as Patuawa et al. (2022) and Sinnema et al. (2021), have highlighted the positive impacts of consultant challenge to teacher beliefs on teacher practice and student outcomes. This study shows that language practice can be changed, and a useful next step would be to investigate how these changes can lead to improvements in student outcomes.

## Conclusion

The ways in which RTLB talk with teachers in initial meetings can have powerful consequences for the students they serve. This study has shown, in a small sample of RTLB, that language use in such meetings is not always as inclusive or strengths based as espoused by RTLB. This study has also shown that language use can be shifted through focused and ongoing PLD that uses evidence from RTLB–teacher conversations as a basis for analysis and reflection. This approach is more time and cost intensive than one-off PLD workshops, but has been shown to be more effective in shifting beliefs and behaviours (e.g., Marcy & Mumford, 2010; Robinson et al., 2014; Sundqvist, 2019). The study demonstrates that more intensive opportunities to analyse their RTLB conversations with teachers can result in the use of communication practices that are likely to enhance effective practice.

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