

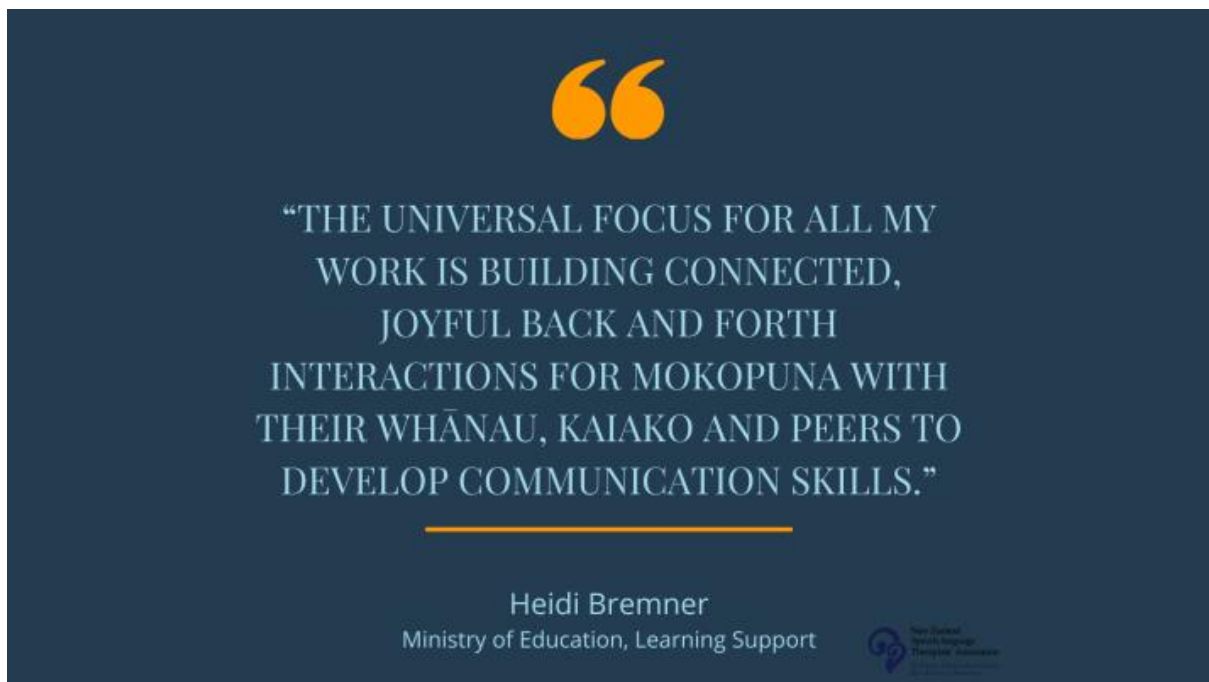
A Day in the Life - Heidi Bremner

Heidi is a speech-language therapist for the Ministry of Education in Tāmaki Makaurau. Heidi is passionate about partnering with whānau & kaiako to empower them to support communication skills for tamariki mokopuna.

Heidi, how do you talk about the SLT role in Learning Support, Ministry of Education (MoE)?

Learning Support SLTs facilitate collaborative planning conversations and empower team members to further their skills and knowledge around children’s speech, language and communication needs. Supporting functional communication skills within natural learning environments is specialty work. A common misconception is that working at the MoE is a generalist role. Equity & Excellence is the overarching kaupapa across MoE with particular consideration to priority ākonga Māori, Pacific and learners with additional needs.

The whakataukī “He waka eke noa” / “We're all in this together in the same waka”, speaks to the importance of teamwork. I am part of many different teams for my work with the education sector, and within my Learning Support, MoE team - it’s what I love best about my job!



What does a typical work day look like for you?

Every day is different due to the variety of environments we work in. It’s great to get out and about, visiting homes, education settings (Early Learning Centres & Schools) and other community settings, increasing awareness of oral language being a critical foundation for literacy and learning. The universal focus for all my work is building connected, joyful back and forth interactions for mokopuna with their whānau, kaiako and peers to develop communication skills. We work together to get successful outcomes to positively impact children’s wellbeing & participation in the learning environment for educational achievement.

Back in the office, there's a variety of work too: SLT peer support for reflective practice case discussions, planning next steps when co-working with fellow Learning Support practitioners (Early Intervention Teachers, Psychologists, Kaitakawaenga, Service Manager, Advisors on Deaf Children), documentation & applications, workshop planning for families and educators. My office is a supportive place to collaborate and share with likeminded professionals.

You mentioned your passion for partnering with whānau and kaiako. Learning Support SLTs work to empower the key people who spend every day with mokopuna to support communication development. How do you approach these collaborations in your role?

Effective collaboration to achieve meaningful outcomes is not easy. What makes our job challenging also brings great satisfaction. It's exciting when the adults make those connections and can demonstrate new strategies to develop communication further.

This African proverb resonates with me when thinking about collaborative practice; "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." SLTs could quickly assess, plan, and implement ideas if they work in isolation. It takes more time and specialist skills to build whānau and kaiako competence and confidence for achieving meaningful, sustainable outcomes for children's communication.

He Pikorua practice principles guide our collaboration:

- Taking time at the initial contact to share our SLT Learning Support Service Model: a team, strength-based approach with whānau & kaiako, working within natural learning environments. SLT involvement finishes when parents and teachers feel good about what they're doing and confident with next steps to work on the things that they've chosen.
- The Routine Based Model supports active listening to build a trusting working relationship and to acknowledge and value the experiences and knowledge of adult learners.
- Seeking to understand the wider system and culture teachers work in. Implementation of strategies happens when an individual sees a need for change and is motivated and when the system around them is supportive and allows for a safe space for this to happen.
- Use of best practice adult learning approaches and coaching models, including video coaching for developing communication skills for mokopuna.

There's no one 'magic' professional development event you can do around the above. Rather it is compounding reciprocal learning, implementation and reflection to 'fine tune' the 'SLT collaboration muscle'. I am fortunate to observe some amazing role models in the education sector, SLT peers, other Learning Support Practitioners and service managers, who implement adult learning approaches - and in turn support my learning. Working in the community, travelling from place-to-place further benefits reflection time after visits: 'what reflective questions made an impact with that parent or educator?', 'what could I try differently next time?', 'I might try that approach used by my colleague'.

What's a current 'big topic', issue, or challenge that you and your colleagues face in your area of SLT in 2024? Do you have any thoughts to share about this topic?

Continued professional practice guidance and support when these roles have been reduced across Aotearoa. We need professional cohesion based on research and evidence for equitable and excellent service delivery, especially when navigating challenges from a small number of whānau, kaiako and fellow professionals in education who resist the natural learning environments approach. SLT practice continues to include a mix of practice models and beliefs around neurodiversity, which can lead to confusion for the sector. It's hard work for SLTs and other practitioners to explain and provide rationale for the approach in Education when there are so many mixed messages.

I am a Pākēhā SLT and I am on a journey of exploring what 'Equity & Excellence' means to me in my role working with a culturally diverse population across socio-economic areas. I believe that continuing my learning and development around culturally responsive practice strengthens and supports all areas of my work. I am lucky to get to work with Kaitakawaenga who highlighted that taking time to listen to whānau to build connection and trust is a key part of whakawhanaungatanga. Our He Pikorua practice principles are informed by Te Ao Māori so it's exciting to connect the dots. In my Te Reo Māori learning journey I get to experience first-hand the communication strategies that support me as a learner and the frustration of wanting to express more than I have the language skills for. This is added to the challenge of focussing on correcting my ingrained pronunciation mistakes when there is limited time for my response in a very simple routine conversation. A humbling reminder about what our role is all about for supporting ease of communication.

Is there an experience with a client/patient/student that shaped how you work as an SLT? If so, how did it change your perspective?

It's really exciting when individualised work has ripple effects for others, e.g. when supporting a child and family using a core board (one of the tools to help achieve IP goals). The parent felt empowered to share a video of her successfully using a core board with her child, following their lead for a fun, back and forth interaction. Other parents at a community playgroup became interested to try too. Furthermore, the kindergarten teachers were then inspired to use themselves to support other children with communication needs. The teachers then supported and encouraged other families to grow communication skills of their children with a core board. The kindergarten core board use also developed confidence for other children with EAL.

Our individual casework can influence more than we realise, so it's good to think about potential ways to capitalise on this, e.g. at school we can support teachers to think how ideas for individual children can be helpful for other students in their class. The other side of this support in schools could be that we support a busy teacher (perhaps in a state overwhelm) with some universal or targeted communication supports. The aim to build foundation interaction strategies that will in turn benefit students with more complex communication needs.

Do you have any strategies for staying up-to-date on current research, professional development and issues in your area of SLT? How do you connect with other SLTs?

I appreciate the many forums that support my ongoing reflective practice and professional development offered through my workplace. It's not easy applying SLT skill and knowledge to meet the unique individual communication needs of mokopuna and the people supporting them at home and in educational settings. The most impactful connection for me is the informal peer support in the

office environment, unplanned at the desk, printer or corridor. So many lightbulb moments, little and often.

Of course, regular formal planned peer supervision is essential. There is always something to discuss: what has evoked emotion in my work since last session.

Other excellent connects for me are fortnightly team meetings (including other colleagues), termly office SLT meetings, participation in SIG/Learning Groups (internal & external), Social Media updates (e.g. NZSTA, Talking Matters, Talklink, Talking Trouble, Hanen, Makaton, Meaningful Speech for Gestalt language).

Engaging in professional development workshops that have a clear, immediate application to my work (these may be offered internally or externally). My most recent is Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN), which I highly recommend regardless of the context of your SLT work! SLTs naturally have excellent communication skills to build rapport with a wide range of people. FAN helped me understanding how to hone this skill and best attune to the situation and have more conscious competence around my coaching skills: how to 'match' to the parent or teacher and how to manage 'mismatch'.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in this profession?

You get to meet and share experiences with wonderful people every day. It's a privilege to have adults allow you into their homes, workplaces, and be open to sharing some vulnerable moments with you. No matter how long you have been working in our profession, there is always something new to learn from each interaction. We are ALL on a continuing learning journey to improve our service delivery.

Prioritise supervision! If it's not working for you, consider the Supervision Framework you engage with and who's best to be your supervisor / peers. We're fortunate to have some choices around frameworks / practitioners / groups that helps us learn best.

Everyone needs a supportive environment where you feel like you can ask questions. What goes around comes around: every SLT was a newbie once and one day you will have the opportunity to support new SLTs.

Just like we do for mokopuna, have your own achievable PLD goals and strategies to achieve. We often ask the people that we are working with – 'what would like your child to be doing in 6-12 months' time?' The same is true for our own development. I often don't notice my incremental development over each term so it's so satisfying ticking off progress at the end of the year and having a plan for what I'd like to achieve professionally within a year. The CPD log is a great way to evaluate your PLD progress each year and help plan your next focus.

Thank you for your thoughtful responses Heidi. You are a wonderful advocate for partnership with whānau and kaiako, as well as the SLT role within the Ministry of Education Learning Support.