

Riding the Crest of the Wave: Inclusive Education in New Zealand

Barbara A. Perry

Abstract—In 1996, the New Zealand government and the Ministry of Education announced that they were setting up a "world class system of inclusive education". As a parent of a son with high and complex needs, a teacher, school Principal and Disability studies Lecturer, this author will track the changes in the journey towards inclusive education over the last 20 years. Strategies for partnering with families to ensure educational success along with insights from one of those on the crest of the wave will be presented. Using a narrative methodology the author will illuminate how far New Zealand has come towards this world class system of inclusion promised and share from personal experience some of the highlights and risks in the system. This author has challenged the old structures and been part of the setting up of new structures particularly for providing parent voice and insight; this paper provides a unique view from an insider's voice as well as a professional in the system.

Keywords—Disability studies, inclusive education, special education, working with families with children with disability.

I. BACKGROUND

IN New Zealand prior to 1989, children with special needs required written permission from the Secretary of Education (known as a Section 9 agreement) to attend their local school. This changed in 1989 with the introduction of Education Act (1989) [1] and Section 8 which stated that "people who have special educational needs (whether because of a disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at State schools as people who do not". Changes in the education system began in 1990.

This confers with Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [2] which states in Section 3 that "...assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, ...to ensure the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services ... in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development."

In 1996, the Special Education 2000 policy [3] was developed (known as SE 2000) in order to assist with implementing these changes to the education system. It stated that "the government's aim was to achieve over the next decade a world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all students" (p. 4).

The Principles of the policy were based on providing the same rights and freedoms for all children, meeting their individual learning and developmental needs, providing a fair

share of available resources, partnering with family and whanau and educational providers, taking parent choice into account when utilising resources which should be done efficiently. It also aims to take into account a child's language and culture in planning programmes and a seamless education will be accessed from the time that children's needs are identified through to post school options.

SE 2000 was administered by way of teacher aide funding to schools attached to specific children as well as a general allocation of funding attached to schools based on school numbers and decile rating. Secondly, for those children who are classified as having "high or very high needs", funding is allocated from a scheme called the Ongoing Reviewable Resource Scheme (ORRS) that provides additional teacher/specialist support for that student. The two systems effectively existed as a result of the reforms in New Zealand. One system provided institutions for students with sensory impairments, the residential special schools for students with behavioural disorders, the day schools and satellite classes for students with intellectual disabilities, units for students with physical disabilities, and special classes set up by schools [4]. The other, with the emergence of 'mainstreaming' and the changes in the system began to unsettle the traditional approach to separation and started to work toward including those with special needs. However in being described as having "special needs" [5], these students were immediately seen as different even though the aim was inclusion and providing the same educational opportunities for all.

II. IN PRACTICE

How did this work in practice for our family? Let me tell you the story of my son Joshua (now aged 25), who began school in 1997 just after the Special Education 2000 policy began. As a child with high and complex needs, commencing school at this time, he was one of the first to embrace the changes fully and effectively was at the head of the pack with mainstreaming, hence riding the crest of the wave. Joshua received 30 hours teacher aide time per week under ORRS funding as he required assistance with personal care and eating and needed a wheelchair for personal mobility and was classified as having "very high needs". He has Spastic Quadriplegia (cerebral palsy affecting four limbs) and is paralysed down his right side

When Joshua enrolled for primary school even though the law had changed prior to this time, he was still required to obtain a letter from the Secretary of Education to attend his local school. Somehow there was a time lag in the implementation of government policy as is often the case. He

Barbara A. Perry is a Senior Lecturer in Social Services at the Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand (e-mail: barbara.fogarty@op.ac.nz).

began school in a baby's pushchair as funding had been frozen on wheelchair provision for the budgetary year. As parents we felt this was inappropriate and so went to the media about it and an outrage ensued. Local MPs took a hold of the case and Joshua soon received a brand new purple wheelchair of which he was very proud.

In the first 18 months of school he had four different teachers and eight teacher aides. One of these teacher aides was physically abusing Joshua, another lasted two days arriving in beach attire and very high heels (which were both dangerous and inappropriate for the physical transfers required), and as parents we began to wonder whether the school was actually inducting these staff into the job at all!! It emerged at this time that Joshua did not appear to be making progress with his reading, as he had no books coming home and seemed to be developing few skills in this area. As an educator myself, I went into the school to discuss this situation and to work with the school to plan to make this happen. On the home front I was reading Joshua and his younger sister three to four bedtime stories every night. Staff transience and a lack of training for those working with children like Joshua definitely seemed to be an issue, as whilst the legislation had changed, as parents we wondered if this was just a surface change and nothing more had transpired. Due to his reading difficulties, Joshua began to spend more time out of the classroom with the school reading specialist who put Joshua on a special reading programme of taped stories, and this seemed to help him considerably. Later on with computers becoming more common, we used visual books on the computer and these also worked really well for him, as he had difficulty turning pages. Over his primary schooling years we had numerous meetings with the school, bringing to their attention areas of concern and it seemed that unless we raised these issues, nothing would happen.

Joshua had two fabulous teachers over this time with who he became close to, both teachers were fairly new to the profession and viewed him as a child like any other and got to know him as an individual examining his strengths and weaknesses and tapping into his interests and passions. Instead of him moving out of the classroom to work with the teacher aide or being in the back corner as one commonly notices with children with disabilities in schools, Joshua was at the front of the classroom and the teacher would work with him and his group regularly. The teacher aide was then utilised to work with other groups in the class rather than being velcroed to Joshua's side all the time, which he protested about, especially during break times. The way these teachers worked reflected the Reliable Alliance model [6], which provides a new model for working to include children and their families in schools.

In 2002 at the age of 11, we moved to the South Island of New Zealand and Joshua moved back to be closer to extended family which resulted in a change in schools. At the time I was lecturing at Otago University in Inclusive Education, and in conjunction with the Ministry of Education in our region worked to develop a parent reference group to enable parents to have a voice around issues concerning their children's schooling for children with special needs. Focus groups

researching families to see what they wanted were held, and one of the main areas identified as needing change was the level of resourcing to schools. Also identified was the need for making these children and their families to feel welcome at the school, and the notion of "putting out the welcome mat" emerged. A Child Advocate was funded in this region to sit alongside families and assist them when issues arose with schools. This model seemed to work very well in supporting families that were often isolated.

Joshua's journey continued on. There was reluctance on the part of the high school we had chosen to enrol him and to accept him into the school; however, when we mentioned complaining to the Human Rights Commission, they quickly signed him up! After two years, he left this school and as a family we moved. I had a new job as school Principal in a more rural area and Joshua enrolled in the Area High school and ended up having a most fabulous four years where he was "just one of the boys".

The town was fairly small and the community was very connected and this worked in his favour. His hours of support were cut to 19 hours per week by the Ministry of Education (which was ludicrous considering the fact that he seemed to take twice as long as his peers to do his work as he needed a Reader Writer). However, he worked very hard to keep up with his peers doing an additional two hours of schoolwork per day after school, and with regular meetings with the school and the support of a fabulous teacher aid, he managed to pass his exams. As well as this, he completed Outdoor Pursuits, which for a student in an electric wheelchair was an incredible feat.

At the end of high school, Joshua wanted to go on to Tertiary Education like his friends. This meant we needed to move again, as while we loved living in this town, there were no tertiary facilities and no real opportunities for Joshua's further education. Heading to a bigger city, Joshua was enrolled in a Diploma in Business and Marketing taking advantage of the fact that he is a great social networker and very outgoing. Numerous meetings ensued with the Disability Support Centre who seemed very traditional and inflexible in the assistance they would offer. My husband and I ended up paying for much of his support ourselves, and at times, my husband would often be called in to stand in if the Reader writer was sick or unavailable. By taking his time and cutting down the number of papers he studied per semester Joshua succeeded in his studies.

In 2014, Joshua graduated with a Diploma in Marketing. This was a fabulous day for him and us. He was so proud of all of the effort he had put in and we were so proud of him. He is now working as a Marketing Manager for an organisation that works with people with a history of violence and who have recently been in prison. He is also standing for parliament in the next election as Disability Spokesperson of one of the smaller political parties.

III. CHALLENGES

How has the mainstream education system worked in this case? While significant funding has been invested in order for

Joshua and others like him to access mainstream schooling, at times, accessing timely and appropriate support has been a challenge. If Joshua was in a special school situation he would have weekly access to occupational speech and physiotherapy. In a mainstream school, particularly in his secondary school years, he received no physiotherapy, no speech therapy and occupational therapy only when some equipment needed installation or modification.

His teachers received no specialist training in how to work with students with special needs, and at times, the teacher aid provision has been woefully inadequate [7]. Teacher aides often have no job security as they can be attached to individuals like Joshua, and they also have low status in schools and do not receive holiday pay. They often work with students with the most complex needs, and yet they themselves, often are untrained. Parents need a legislative change in New Zealand to be able to enforce the enrolment of their child at the school of their choice and they need to be made to feel welcome.

Another review of special education has just occurred in New Zealand, in 2016, this being the fourth review we have seen over the last 20 years, each one tweaking the previous government policy.

IV. BENEFITS

The benefits of inclusion and going to his local primary and high school are immeasurable for someone like Joshua. His ability to make friends has been enhanced by this experience. Due to his outgoing personality he has made some really good friends over time and is able to text, Facebook and email to keep in touch with these friends' years later. Moving schools does not seem to have impeded this process in his case but only enhanced it. He has been a regular attendee at out of school weekend parties from the age of 16 onwards and because of his personal care needs, he had Carers calling in at times, but preferred to stay independently and text for support when required. On several nights each weekend, as he has become older, he will be out socializing in town and meeting up with friends.

In terms of self-image, he does not see himself as disabled but just like everyone else. Ironically, it took him some time to become friends with others of his same disability because he had lived his life in the mainstream and so did not see the need to join any disabled groups or attend special events. He had flatted with another guy with Cerebral palsy for a year at one stage; however, they did not appear to be terribly compatible and had vastly different approaches to their disability. Mentally he is generally very upbeat and purposeful in what he wants to achieve, mapping out his next step strategically, and this has meant he is a positive person with clear goals.

His educational achievements have not been limited at all because of his disability. He has studied and achieved like others in his class and with his cohort until the end of high school, which again has contributed to his sense of self-esteem. His completion of qualifications in the education system to a tertiary level, while taking longer to complete than others, have contributed to his self-esteem and sense of

achievement, as well as his overall well-being. These have also increased his career opportunities in the workplace and social networks making many friends with other students.

The modelling of appropriate standards of behaviour and commitment to study and educational success has been another advantage of being situated in a mainstream setting for Joshua. Having high expectations for both educational achievement and behavioural standards from school and home has provided a culture of success for Joshua which will assist him in the future. He has developed a strong sense of intuition to read those around him and to pick up on the nuances in others which have been finely honed in this environment.

Physically, the mainstream environment has been a challenge for Joshua. Most schools were built before mainstreaming occurred and were not designed for electric wheelchairs. Ramps were not installed and if they were, often he would have to take the "long way round" away from his friends to classes and so would often arrive in late, which can be disruptive for the class. For many schools, having someone in an electric wheelchair and who is seen as "severely disabled", can provide a range of other challenges too. Table heights, undercover areas for morning tea and lunch, disabled toilets and changing places are all required and needed to be installed to accommodate Joshua.

Other physical needs such as regular physiotherapy, speech and occupational therapy were either provided for very spasmodically or not at all, depending on the location of the school and his age. As he got older, these needs did not seem to matter at all, despite the fact that his bones had begun to stiffen in his legs and at times he suffered back pain. In the mainstream this was simply not a priority, and for many parents, they are left with no real choice at all and by default, retreat to a special school where these needs will be attended to.

V. CONCLUSION

Riding at the crest of the wave can be an experience that is risky and fraught with danger. Travelling into unknown territory always has its challenges and being at the beginning of those heading into the system changes in mainstream education in New Zealand has definitely proved challenging. Working with untrained teacher aides, teachers and Principals who can be resistant to having your child in their space and others who are willing but do not know what to do is an exhausting and wearying experience for parents after a while. Maintaining high expectations for your child and challenging those in the system who do not share these expectations can require much time and energy.

It is easy to assume that if a child takes longer to complete a task, needs it to be more scaffolded or broken down into parts for completion, that a child is incompetent or not up to standard; however, this is not the case. With perseverance, suitable support and time most people with disability can achieve as well as others.

Parents should not have to constantly challenge others in the system to provide the best for their child, they should be free to be parents whether their child has a disability or not.

The challenge in New Zealand is that while on paper we appear to have a great system, in reality, for ourselves as parents of a child with special needs and for many others, it has fallen short.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In examining the way forward in inclusive education in New Zealand, it is time the government developed a legislative framework for parents to be able to challenge schools who attempt to exclude children with special needs from enrolment. For many parents from the time they enter the schoolyard with their child with special needs, one battle exists after another and in the end they give up challenging the system. This should not be the case. As noted when referring to changes in Ireland, many years ago:

“One of the real dangers in the current period of development is that while the surface structures are changed, the existing deep structures will remain in place. Moreover, if the deep structures of special education - those issues that underlie relations of power, control, dominance and subordination - are not identified and transformed, exclusion and marginalization will be reproduced even more under the most well-intentioned and most well-supported of programmes” [8, p. 2].

This author wonders whether this is the case in New Zealand currently. When will the deeper issues of power and control in schools begin to be addressed? At present in New Zealand, due to independent Boards of Trustees comprising parents and staff representatives, schools operate autonomously. This means school Boards have the power to make decisions independently of government policy as there is effectively no intervention from the Ministry of Education if the school makes it difficult for a child with special needs to enrol. Excuses around environmental or personnel constraints can easily be offered to the family, who if not aware of the policy and the way schools are funded, can easily feel this is not the place for their child as they are not welcomed.

Thus, the school position of reluctance to enrol those with special needs becomes entrenched and issues of marginalization and subordination become more firmly cemented into place in the education system. Schools which are open and welcoming can become “magnet schools” and are quickly inundated with students with special needs. These schools can then suffer, as resources which are funded for those with moderate needs is on the basis of the school socio-economic level, not numbers of students with special needs, can be placed under severe pressure. This in turn can cause a decline in enrolments due to parental perception of an overbalance of children with special needs and a general strain on school infrastructure can result.

In order to transform the educational system to avoid further marginalization, it is the belief of this author that the New Zealand government must work to change this and begin to cater for the needs of teachers and teacher aides for training at both pre-service and in-service levels, and insist that children with disabilities are able to enrol in their local schools and made welcome via a change in legislative process.

This change in legislative process needs to be developed so that parents can obtain correct information around resourcing prior to enrolment of their child at school. By having the backing of legislation they will then feel confident to be able to enrol their child in the school of their choice, and thus beginning to shift the balance of power away from a school.

Adequate resourcing and ongoing work, as well as investment into personnel in schools via training, needs to occur. Finally, ongoing education of school staff needs further investment to ensure that those with diverse needs in schools are welcomed, and this can only occur through an educated workforce and Board members.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Many thanks to Joshua who gave permission to use his story and for the lessons he has taught us over the years.

REFERENCES

- [1] Education Act 1989. Retrieved from <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/DLM175959.html>.
- [2] UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.
- [3] Ministry of Education (1996). *Special Education 2000*. Wellington: Author.
- [4] Mitchell, D. & Mitchell, J. (1985). *Out of the shadows: A chronology of significant events in the development of services for exceptional children and young persons in New Zealand: 1850 - 1983*. Wellington: Department of Education.
- [5] Ballard, K. (2004). Children with Disability: Special or Included. *Waikato Journal of Education*. 10. 315-326.
- [6] Turnbull, A. & Turnbull, R. (2001) *Families, Professionals and Exceptionality: Collaborating for Empowerment* (4th ed.) New Jersey: Merrill.
- [7] Wills, R. & Perry, B. (2005). *What Works For Us: The Parents' Voice*. Retrieved from http://www.isec2005.org.uk/isec/abstracts/papers_w/wills_r_1.shtml.
- [8] MacDonnell, P. (2003). Developments in special education in Ireland: deep structures and policy making. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 73. 259 - 269.