

Sabbatical Report:

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Focus

- Some strategies Principals are using to support teachers with autistic spectrum disorder children and other individual learners included in their classes.

Acknowledgements

I consider this a wonderful opportunity to learn and to reflect on successes and disappointments in the Principal role.

I acknowledge support and foresight from many sources including:

- The Ministry of Education
- The Board and Staff of Chaucer School.
- APPA Special Education Working Action Group.
- Avondale RTLB team.
- NZEI, NZPF, STA.
- Local Principals
- Autism New Zealand Inc. Auckland.
- Oaklynn Special School staff members.
- Individual staff members of CYFS and GSE.
- Principal and Staff of Annie Holgate School Nottingham England
- Inclusion Support Service Nottingham County Council England
- Several teachers and support workers working with ASD and AS children in UK, Canada and USA.
- Families of ASD and AS children who have shared thoughts with me.
- my family.

Executive Summary

- Current strategies are limited and very difficult to sustain at a quality level.
- Principals, teachers and families are frustrated with this situation.
- The right of children with high behavioural and learning needs to be included in state schools and classrooms is not universal, nor even common, outside New Zealand.
- While this may have a strong base in educational theory and philosophy, and is seen as equitable, it brings with it responsibilities to the school and the child which are often not met.
- The teacher bears the brunt of this inclusion. They must be supported.
- Principals are frustrated by the difficulties in providing sustained skilled and funded inclass support for these teachers and children.
- Our knowledge and awareness of the prevalence and nature of Aspergers Syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and similar individualising conditions has increased our obligation to provide appropriate in school support;
- With the right of inclusion must go the responsibility of policy and practice to provide appropriate and sustained support for this inclusion for the child, the teacher, the family, and the school.

- This support should include ready access to these:
 1. Initial and ongoing support for the family;
 2. Trained consistent learning support for the child to manage inclusion transition, and to give ongoing support;
 3. Specific induction training and ongoing support for the teacher, SENCO, and Principal, in their roles;
 4. Preservice: a requirement that Special Education is a thorough inclusion in teacher training courses. That Support Staff also have quality induction training;
 5. Inservice contracts are in place and accessible to all teachers and support staff before inclusion proceeds;
 6. Application of existing and new knowledge to policy to change systems and practice;
 7. Obligation to fund and sustain support for all significantly individual learners in conventional classes;
 8. Support for working in these contexts with diversity/grief/cross cultural attitudes/ anger and violence/ ESOL/ and families needing support.

Purpose

Leading a very diverse Decile 4, U4 school in Auckland for twelve years has brought much satisfaction in the success of individual teachers and children. The recurring disappointment and frustration has been in developing and sustaining appropriate quality support for teachers who have ASD and AS children included in their classes. Involvement with various local and regional educational groups has given me an awareness that others shared this frustration. The purpose of the Sabbatical was for me to take a fresh look at these issues, to have time to research other approaches, and to refresh and reflect.

Background

- New Zealand families have a right to have their child attend their local State school;
- Government Policy and practice in regard to Special Schools and Support Programmes, has reduced the opportunity for higher needs children to be included in withdrawal classes or special schools;
- Special Education 2000 achieved a lot for children, however there are significant issues with how relevant it is to meet today's needs;
- Literature and reports indicate that the needs of ASD and AS pupils, their families, and their teachers, are not currently being met in many of our schools.
- There is a growing worldwide understanding of these children, and the adults they become. There may be better models to learn from overseas.

Methodology

- Initial experience of attempting to manage the current support for specific children in our school.
- Networking with RTLB and GSE support professionals, locally and regionally, to find a better way.

- Networking with local and regional Principals and Teachers to look for models.
- Extensive reading on ASD and AS.
- Review of MOE “Evidence based guidelines for ASD” document.
- Further discussion with colleagues and professionals.
- Professional development for myself and staff on ASD and AS.
- Attendance at Autism NZ Auckland Conference.
- Building up a literature collection .
- Regular link with “Parenting Aspergers Information online” UK
- WWW research to locate articles, groups and programmes supporting schools which include these children.
- Contact online with US and UK groups and schools.
- Contact with Annie Holgate School Nottingham to discuss local support model.
- Visits to UK school and “Inclusion support service” Nottingham to discuss the programme and to view it in action.
- Discussion of local provisions and support with colleagues in UK, Wales, Nova Scotia, Pennsylvania, and Oregon.
- Reflection, discussion and sharing with local colleagues.
- Review of next step recommendations to improve on what we do.

Findings

There is general agreement locally that successful inclusion of ASD, and especially AS children, in a conventional class requires a teacher with specific skills and training. These children have very individual learning styles and needs. These needs do not go away. Any change to routines and personnel is stressful for the child. Transition to the class, from class to class, and from school to school, are major stress points. Trained support staff should be in place to support induction to the class and school and to sustain learning support for the child. These children do not, by definition and the experience of schools, work in groups. They are rarely independent workers. They require specific support to make and maintain progress in their learning. They do not group with other children with similar conditions . Successful inclusion processes, for the class teacher, and therefore for the child require a set of quality support measures:

- Professional diagnoses of the condition prior to inclusion, usually from GSE;
- Thorough support for the family during induction, from GSE and RTLB, and from the school;
- Careful selection of placement of the child, in relation to the skills and style of the teacher, the needs of other children, and consistency and predictability of routines;
- Professional Development and thorough backgrounding for the teacher, the Principal and SENCO;
- A skilled and pre trained support staff aide who can develop a working relationship with the child and teacher, and who can be guaranteed employment for at least a year at a time;
- Ongoing teacher and family support, and further Professional Development for the Teacher and Teacher Aide.

- Clear management strategies to recognise and manage issues such as ESOL, grief, teacher change, anger and aggression, and failure to learn in the situation.
- The needs of the other children must also be recognised.
- Change for the child must be anticipated and planned for. Consistency of the Teacher aide person is very desirable to support any transition.
- Review processes must be in place in the school to consider whether the inclusion is working for the child, the teacher and the school;
- The family must be kept informed and considered in any actions. They are vital to the success of inclusion.
- The Primary school “home class” is the best situation for these children. Changes of teacher during the day and week, and changes to bigger schools with specialist teachers is in practice, and by definition, a stress time for these children and inhibits learning.

It is very difficult for Principals to develop and to sustain many of these support processes in our current Special Education systems, and with current funding, staffing and pre service training procedures.

I could not identify a national programme which was a great improvement on the New Zealand system. I did however find a localised model for inclusion support in Nottingham, England, and examples of other support, which, in a localised way, indicate some directions for us.

1. The Inclusion Support Team, Nottingham.

I found this service through a colleague at a Nottingham School which I had visited several years ago. He has aspergers and autistic children included in his school, and it was clear from discussion with him, that the support he was receiving was more than what we can access. Observation of a Teacher Assistant attached specifically to an aspergers child to support inclusion confirmed this. I visited the Nottinghamshire County Council Inclusion Support Team with him. They confirmed that they were part of the Special Needs Team. Children with significant ASD and AS behaviour who were at some risk of exclusion from a conventional class and school were referred to them. It was expected that these children would already have had referrals to an Educational Psychologist, or similar support service. The team was multi disciplinary and on being contacted would provide immediate contact from a consultant teacher. An experienced Teacher Assistant would be put into the school to advise and support the child and teacher. The situation is reviewed on site two or three times a week. Training is offered to the teacher and the teacher assistant provided for the child. There is guidance on call from the team. The emphasis is on providing support to avoid exclusion, and to enhance learning. There is some opportunity for these children to be placed in special schools, however they are not well received outside the state system. They are a difficulty for schools under the English national testing regime. Support literature is readily available to schools. Pre teaching service training does not include a quality level of special education training.

2. In Wales there was some evidence of schools, especially above Primary level, developing learning support programmes for AS and ASD children with a specific

home room base and teacher for these children to see as a secure base for inclusion.

3. Discussion with several Special education support workers and families in North America gave a very mixed picture. There are generally more special schools than we have retained, with a range of funding sources. In class support is generally at a higher level. The range of funding options and the generally poorly funded lower decile schools, means that families without significant means have few choices for their AS and ASD children. The specific programmes we read about are generally local and expensive.

Implications

1. To support teachers who have included children in their class, we need to develop a more successful holistic approach to supporting the child.
2. Preservice and inservice education and training for Teachers, SENCO, and Teacher Aides needs to be required at a quality level, prior to registration or employment in a role.
3. The role of Special Schools to provide expertise, training, support, and withdrawal unit support for these children should be enhanced.
4. RTLB should all be required to reach a high level of skills and understanding to work directly with these children and their families, and to support teachers, support staff and especially transitions.
5. The pending review of Special Education in New Zealand should examine the systemic structures and funding issues which inhibit appropriate support for teachers and children. This is particularly relevant in Auckland.
 - The skilled staff to operate an Auckland Regional Inclusion Support Team are in the system. The district structures make this difficult to manage.
 - The term by term funding process for teacher aide support for each of these children is in direct conflict with the literature on how their needs should be met. This funding should be at least on an annual basis to ensure continuing employment for a consistent, trained support person who has developed a working relationship with the child.
6. The RTLB service should be developed as a stronger support for teachers Based on local Principal Cluster governance. A local Team meeting local needs.
7. The ability of schools to increase and sustain Support Staff roles needs to Be developed.
8. The current NZ Autism Spectrum Disorder Guidelines, and the National Special Education policy, once it is reviewed, should underpin support we give to each teacher who works with such included children.

Conclusions

- The best support a Principal can give a teacher is to manage transition effectively. An inclusion support team approach would ensure this.
- Ensurance that the Teacher has appropriate professional development prior to the inclusion is vital.
- Trained consistent support staff are essential for success, and for learning to proceed. The current system makes this very difficult.

- A trained SENCO or support teacher is needed in the school with the staffing provision to support both teachers and children in the inclusion situation.
- Understanding that ASD and AS children have individual needs, socialisation issues, and that these conditions are ongoing is important.
- Close support from trained and skilled RTLB and GSE staff is essential.
- Working with the family to coordinate a consistent approach is very supportive for the teacher.
- Developing a seamless educational pathway for these children with minimal changes of teacher, class and school is indicated to enhance their success.

If we are to retain the willingness of our teachers to include these children, and the goodwill of parents to accept that inclusion is best for their child, then we must improve understanding, skills, knowledge, systems, and the quality of on going support. This is a real staffing retention issue for Principals.

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