

Primary Principals Sabbatical Leave Scheme

Sabbatical Report

Inclusive Education Practices in Schools

Alan Straker
Principal
Whitney Street School
Blenheim

Term 1 2015

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Background Information

Sabbatical Activity & Findings

Developments

Conclusion

References

Acknowledgements

- Thank you to the Board of Trustees of Whitney Street School who were fully supportive in allowing the time for this sabbatical.
- To the senior leadership team especially Lisa Lissaman (DP) for stepping up to the plate in my absence
- To Jill Ford, local Service Manager for MOE Special Education for her time and support not just for this project but over many years for the students of Marlborough
- To the principals of the 14 schools I visited to interview about their understanding of, and school practices around inclusive education

Introduction

1. To investigate the resources (people and paper) available for schools to support them in creating an effective inclusive learning environment
2. To visit local Marlborough Schools and interview principals about inclusive practices in their schools, what they have found useful in terms of resources and what they see as barriers in the quest for "Success for All".

Background Information

I have a keen interest in ensuring that all students at Whitney Street can reach their potential and access the curriculum. For identified special needs students this involves working hard to remove or reduce barriers that may prevent this from happening.

Whitney Street has had a number of ORS students during my time as principal and at times has been something of a magnet school for special needs students. The school was once the base for an Assessment Class catering for students from throughout the Blenheim district. This class was closed along with similar units around the country during special education reforms a number of years ago.

One of the concerns I often hear from school is around a perceived lack of resourcing and access to special education services. Is this the reality for most schools? How effective are schools in our area around inclusive practices?

Sabbatical Activity & Findings

During my sabbatical I visited 14 Marlborough Schools covering a range of U2 –U6 with rolls from 50 to over 400 students and interviewed the principal. I had a set of 7 questions which the principals were asked to respond to. Following the interview principals were e-mailed the notes which they could edit if they wished. I also read each schools latest ERO report to gain another viewpoint of how their school was creating an inclusive environment.

The questions were:

1. What is your understanding of the concept of inclusive education?
2. What practices does your school have that contributes to inclusiveness?
3. Is Inclusive Education part of your charter or strategic plan?
4. What resources have you found useful in forming school practice and procedures?
5. What does your school do to ensure that Special Needs students access and progress in the curriculum?
6. How does your school get supported by MOE Special Education? How effective is that support?
7. How would you describe staff capability in meeting the needs of special education students?

What is your understanding of the concept of inclusive education?

Responses from principals were very consistent. While procedures and processes are a vital component, inclusiveness is very much about the culture of a school and ensuring the school respects the rights of all learners to participate in education to their potential. This became apparent during my interviews that we were not just talking about ORS students or those with high needs. Schools are taking deliberate actions to ensure they have or get the resources to meet students' needs.

Other key points made were:

- The importance of the partnership between school, parents and whanau to 'wrap around the student' and give them every opportunity to succeed.
- Other students need to be empathetic towards those with special needs and several schools have processes aiming to achieve this.
- Having high expectations of all learners and avoiding a deficit thinking model.

What practices does your school have that contributes to inclusiveness?

There were an incredible number of practices being employed by school to encourage inclusiveness. Some of these were consistent across all schools while others were individual actions of a specific school.

- Transition programmes were well embedded in school practices. Principals spoke of making connections with families and pre-schools prior to enrolment. For students with special needs having a teacher observe the student in their pre-school environment and meeting with current educators allows for a much smoother transition to primary school.
- Most schools make effective use of support networks. GSE, RTLB, RTLiT, Public Health, CAMHs, PB4L, RDA, ACC, van Asch, Youth Aid, Blenz (visual ed support), Incredible Years Teacher programme are among the range of services that schools employ to aid in meeting student needs.
- A key aspect of inclusive education in all the schools I visited was the importance of high quality Teacher Aide support. Without exception every principal spoke of having a group of highly skilled TAs used to support learners. Several spoke about specific PD for this group being essential to maintain a focus on high quality support.
- Another common 'essential ingredient' is the role of SENCO (Special Education Needs co-ordinator). In some of the bigger schools there were often two teachers in this role. Often these teachers have 'grown into the role' with no specific training and several principals mentioned the need to some SENCO specific training to aid them in their role. Recently this has been addressed to some extent by a SENCO group being created in Marlborough as a PLG. This is providing opportunities to share experiences and to organise speakers with relevance to the SENCO role. Most schools have attached a management unit (or 2) to support this role.
- Schools are also making use of other support structures in the community to foster inclusiveness. Some examples are:
 - Kiwi Can a values based programme currently operating in 4 Marlborough Schools
 - Reading Together (MOE initiative for decile 1 & 2 schools)
 - Grandparent readers
 - Funding support from the likes of Salvation Army, Oasis Church, Pub Charities are accessed to support programmes

- Schools are also working hard to avoid withdrawing students from the classroom environment while providing support to encourage inclusiveness. While some programmes such as reading recovery are an exception the schools I visited have either a written procedure or a practice that encourages classroom based interventions.
- There is a move away from having a 'Special Needs Team' and 'Special Needs ' policy to having an 'Inclusive Education Team' and policy.

Is Inclusive Education a part of your charter /strategic plan?

Nearly all the schools visited have either a specific Inclusiveness goal (12 schools) or meeting the needs of all learners is reflected throughout their documents. All principals report to their BOT on a termly or 6 month basis on how the school is meeting the needs of identified learners. Three schools have had a specific PD focus around inclusiveness over a year and another school is planning something at present for 2016.

What resources has your school found useful in forming school practice and procedures?

Several schools reported the ERO report booklets that are produced from time to time have been valuable (e.g. 'Well Being in Schools'). Schools use the indicators to help self-review and teacher appraisal.

Other good resources in no particular order that are utilized are:

- TKI site
- Well Being @ School project. Three schools did the full review available on line and then used the subsequent report to identify gaps in their practice.
- Mutukaroa programme (MOE funded)
- Restorative Justice programme
- Inclusive Education Handbook
- Cultural Responsiveness publication
- Using Teaching as Inquiry to improve effectiveness
- Teachers Council website –indicators
- Interlead Appraisal Connector –reflective journal

What does your school do to ensure that Special Needs students access and progress in the curriculum?

In my initial meeting with Jill Ford the local service leader (MOE) she talked about the importance of learning because 'that's what all children are at school for'.

It's not just a matter of a child being happy (which is important of course) and saying we are meeting their needs because they are 'at school'. We need to know they have the opportunity to access and progress in the curriculum to the best of their ability.

What is apparent in the schools I visited is that increasingly schools are relying on reliable data to make decisions about learning programmes and setting appropriate targets for learners. A number of schools reported this as being a big driver over the last 5 years and that it is making a difference for learners. The focus is on the teacher tailoring the programme to meet the child's needs.

A range of other practices were reported:

- A team approach to learning not just the child's teacher
- Regular monitoring of target students
- Involving families and whanau whenever possible
- Including an inclusive education section at staff and team meetings
- Specific goals in teacher planning
- Regular use of IEPs (in one large school they actually have an IEP for every student!)
- One school had a three tiered plan where extra resources were allocated for the learners not achieving or at risk

While none of these are new ideas, schools were able to show me a range of documents and records that showed these points are being implemented. As one principal said 'we are walking the walk'.

How does your school get supported by MOE –Special Education? How effective is that support?

The majority of the schools I visited reported having a good working relationship with Special Ed. Principals were able to recite many accounts of where their input had be both valuable and vital in meeting student needs.

A lot of principals commented on the heavy workload of local GSE staff and wondered if this compromised the service at times. Many of the principals spoke of frustration at the time taken to respond to some requests especially around behaviour referrals as often by the time it has got to this level the school has exhausted their own resources and ideas. Several schools mentioned about changes in personnel slowing response times down (I think this comment related to speech and language support).

Access to IRF was mentioned by a number of the principals and there were good comments around the timeliness and value of this resource.

Schools are realistic and realize that the solution to a lot of their issues needs to be generated from within the school. They do value however the input and modelling from an 'expert'.

With only a few exceptions it was felt that transition of special needs students from early childhood to school was done very well. When there was a good lead in time and opportunity for liaison between GSE, the school and the Early Childhood centre there was a pretty seamless transition into the school system. Making good connections with family and whanau was also a result of good lead in time and communication.

The increased communication between GSE and RTLB is seen as a real positive.

The TIPS for Autism and Incredible Years Parent and IY Teacher programmes are highly valued.

Several school would like to see more modelling of practice by GSE staff and specific training provided for SENCOS.

How would you describe staff capability in meeting the needs of SNs students?

Principals report that along with better use of data teachers are meeting the needs of students far more effectively. A lot of this is down to the school leadership actively promoting an inclusive culture in their school and ensuring that resources are accessed in a timely manner.

A common thread with responses to this question was around viewing these students as 'our kids' and the whole school having a responsibility for their education and well-being (not just the teacher for a particular year).

Reflective practices, regular monitoring and encouraging other students to have empathy and be aware of special needs students also came through in discussions.

Most principals stated their staff capability was evidenced by their daily practice, working as part of a high trust team and through a specific focus as part of their appraisal.

Overall Marlborough Schools are staffed by high quality teachers and support staff.

A cause of concern for a number of schools were students with severe behavioural needs and the disruption they can cause to their own learning and that of others as well as the stress on teachers and support staff. Principals of smaller schools in particular reported that often the enrolment of one child can completely change the tone of a school in a very short time. Often these children turn up 'out of the blue' from another area and there is not a lot of information about them.

At a local level students with behaviour issues transferring schools don't cause the same level of stress because generally there is good communication between the schools and the protocol around placing these students seems to be working well.

ERO reports

As part of my research I viewed the schools most recent ERO report with a focus on how they saw the school meeting the needs of special needs students and how inclusive the school environment was. Without exception there was strong correlation between what the principal had told me and what the ERO reports were saying. The strengths of practices and processes were a major part of a lot of the reports commented favourably on by the ERO.

Developments

While not part of my sabbatical study there a couple of developments that will influence inclusive practices in schools in Marlborough over the next few years.

Special Education Review

A series of meetings are being held around the country contributing to a review of special education provision in NZ. This is likely to have a significant impact (positive hopefully) on schools and learners in NZ.

Blenheim Community of Schools project

This project although still in the early stages will make a significant contribution to inclusive learning practices across Blenheim Schools (23 are currently involved in the project).

Key outcomes envisaged for this project are:

- Children reaching their individual potential
- On-going cross sector and inter-agency collaboration to strengthen common understandings and best practice.
- Improvement in well-being indicators
- Improvement in attendance data
- Improvement in retention data
- Schools working collaboratively to support families, whanau individually and through parent education
- Increased engagement of parents in the life of the school.

Conclusion

Strong inclusive practices are alive and well in Marlborough Schools! The dedication of school leaders, teaching and support staff was very evident throughout the province. Parents of Marlborough students can be well satisfied that schools are working extremely hard to meet the needs of diverse learners. Schools are constantly refining and enhancing their practice through self-review and reflection.

References

1. ERO booklets -Including Students with High Needs 2010
 - Wellbeing for Children's Success at Primary School 2015
 - Inclusive Practices for students with special needs in schools 2015
2. MOE resources – Effective Governance Building Inclusive Schools 2013
 - Success for All –various papers and pamphlets
3. Inclusive Education Capability Building project –discussion with Jill Ford a member of the working party

4. WellBeing@School project. Website and related resources

5. TKI website resources

6. My 14 Marlborough Principal colleagues who hosted me in their schools and provided a wealth of information and sometimes even a chocolate biscuit or two!