

THE ROLE OF NEW ZEALAND SPECIAL SCHOOLS IN A CLIMATE OF INCLUSION

A Futurist Perspective:

Supporting Learners with Significant Learning Support Needs & Strengthening the Capacity of Mainstream Settings

Judith Nel

President SEPANZ

Principal, Parkside School,

Pukekohe, NZ.

Abstract

This report is the outcome of a Primary Principals' Sabbatical; a period in which to engage in a balance of professional learning and reflection. This Sabbatical focused on an inquiry of the continuing, and possible future roles of Special Schools in New Zealand. In the capacity of Principal of Parkside School and, concurrently, as President of the Special Education Principals' Association of New Zealand (SEPA^{NZ}) the writer endeavoured to investigate the possibilities for specialist educational settings in New Zealand, based on a gleaned knowledge of comparable settings in the United Kingdom. This report is a summary of impressions made as a result of visits to selected United Kingdom (UK) Special Schools, the University of Birmingham School of Education, together with discussions and interviews, with selected individuals, who advise the UK Government on Special Education issues as part of their teaching and governance role, as well as a reflection on relevant literature.

Following a career spanning Primary Teaching, Secondary Teaching (History & Social Science) and as a trained, accredited, special educationalist, the writer is fully cognizant of the highly individualised learning characteristics of Young People with significant learning challenges. Having taught Young People with significant learning challenge in all settings, experience indicates that until every school has highly trained special educationalists (teachers who really have a career focus on this sector), and every school can provide an appropriate setting to meet the highly diverse sensory, physical, emotional and learning needs of these Young People, then a humane and caring society should insist that specialised settings such as most New Zealand Special Schools provide, be available – as a viable choice for Families. Due to multiple sensory needs, placing every Young Person in a busy mainstream classroom can be abusive for some of our profoundly affected Young Folk!

Internationally, it has largely been accepted that Inclusion is NOT a place – it is a means of ensuring that every Young Person receives a tailored, appropriate programme, and is fully engaged in learning no matter what their individual challenges may be.

Inclusionary measures for those with disabilities in the public education system have become far more widespread in the last few decades. With more understanding and support at the mainstream school level and a plethora of public based programs, we have come a long way to

creating inclusion for those who don't fit the mould. For example, a new study conducted by the University of Surrey (UK) finds that mainstream schooling may reinforce negative self-image for those with autism.

Continuing to educate our society as a whole to create an accepting place for our children with significant learning challenge is essential, but we need to be very careful how we create these inclusive settings according to the study conducted by Dr. Emma Williams, entitled: *How pupils on the autism spectrum make sense of themselves in the context of their experiences in a mainstream school setting: A qualitative metasynthesis*. Dr. Williams found that how children with autism perceive themselves to be treated by others, has a profound effect on how they see themselves.

The Study takes the stance that “Inclusion only works when everyone is...inclusive.”

“Inclusionary educational situations can play out quite differently depending on the school. Just “including” a child with disabilities in the room is not enough. While those on the spectrum are sometimes seen as emotionally distant or cold, the study found that in fact children on the spectrum are very aware of how others see them and take it to heart.

As Dr Williams states in her conclusions: “Inclusive mainstream education settings may inadvertently accentuate the sense of being ‘different’ in a negative way to classmates.” If a child on the spectrum is included in a mainstream educational environment, but either the environment doesn't support them, or the structure isn't there to support them socially, it can be more damaging to their sense of self-esteem, and development. This doesn't mean that children on the spectrum should not be included, says Dr. Williams:

“We are not saying that mainstream schools are ‘bad’ for pupils with autism, as other evidence suggests they have a number of positive effects, including increasing academic performance and social skills.”

“Rather, we are suggesting that by cultivating a culture of acceptance of all and making small changes, such as creating non-distracting places to socialise, and listening to their pupils’ needs, schools can help these pupils think and feel more positively about themselves.”

The study targeted three main areas that those on the spectrum struggle with and that contributed to their well-being – and thus perceiving themselves as – different from mainstream students in a negative way.

1)Accessibility to the school environment: many students on the spectrum have sensory processing disorder that causes them to have issues with mainstream school environments on the whole.

2)Interpersonal relationships, especially with peers: many Young People with such characteristics struggle with social skills, and this is an area that they need help and support with both in the school and at home. It was found that those children who did develop supportive friendships and felt accepted by classmates had less anxiety and generally had a more successful school experience. *However, it is also true that these Young People have*

profoundly differently wired brains, they cannot sustain long-term meaningful friendships because the cognitive differences are too extreme (and many do not comprehend what it means to be a “friend” in a reciprocal, meaningful manner).

In the writer’s experience it is also true that they are more likely to find real and meaningful friendships within a specialist setting because of the commonalities between peers. An example of this occurred within the writer’s own school – a Young Person with Down’s Syndrome, aged 13, enrolled in the special school. Previously they had attended a mainstream school in the country. Upon meeting peers who would be in the same classroom, the Young Person exclaimed: “Same! Same – me – I am person!” She had never met another Child with Down’s Syndrome before and was absolutely delighted to know she was not alone!

3)Difficulties linked to ASD (and arguably with many other disabling conditions): naturally some of the feelings of being “different” are because of the different behaviours and challenges related to autism (and many other conditions for example such as named by the Deaf and Blind communities). The more accepting the culture is at the school and in the class, the easier it will become for those on the spectrum to deal with those challenges without the added stress of being labelled as “different”.

- *More research is needed to insure a truly inclusionary environment for those with ASD – much less the many other Syndromes and Learning challenges exhibited within schools. The articulate Deaf and Blind communities have long stated their preference for association within their “own communities” – therefore why deny others the same opportunities?*

Dr. Williams says in her final statement: *“With over 100,000 children in the UK diagnosed with autism, it is important that we get this right to ensure that pupils with autism get the education they deserve and leave school feeling accepted, loved and valued, rather than with additional mental health issues.”*

We, in special education want this outcome achieved for every Child!

One of the most important elements impacting positive learning outcomes for these Young People is the professional expertise of Teachers. The writer was keen to observe the impact that the training of teachers within specialist schools in the UK was having upon the opportunities for learners with profound challenges.

In New Zealand, it is a very rare occasion that Student Teachers are given an opportunity to have a training placement within a specialist school. Consequently, NZ suffers from a dearth of adequately trained Teachers. The Induction process for new Teachers to the writer’s school, Parkside, is rigorous – necessitated by the fact that teachers new to specialist schools do not have the baseline underpinnings to be immediately successful. Significant and highly structured additional training is required.

Whilst in the UK several days were spent with Fosse Way and Mendip Schools understanding the impact of the Student-Teacher placement programme. Principals and leaders interviewed,

reported highly positive outcomes – Teachers could, early in their careers, identify a special education pathway which gave impetus to better outcomes for all concerned. In addition, UK schools involved always had a ready pool of experienced, newly graduated Teachers keen to work within the special education sector. Finding suitable Teachers for our NZ Schools is highly problematic – as none are adequately trained for our settings!

Obviously an additional positive for the UK is that a regular cohort of trained Teachers enters the work-force with experience and knowledge of how best to teach Young People with significant challenges. This would be highly advantageous within the context of New Zealand. *Inclusion is NOT a place it is a means of teaching a Young Person in such a way that they are fully engaged with the adventure of learning!* Well trained and experienced, competent, confident, happy Teachers are highly significant in achieving this.

The writer has a long-term professional relationship with UK based Academics with a focus on Specialist Education. An important aspect of the Sabbatical was participation in an international symposium on ASD (Autism) held at Birmingham University and subsequent face-to-face discussions with three of the presenting Professors (one of whom had visited Parkside School and provided workshops in New Zealand).

The information presented was in line with current publications and generally New Zealand is up to the mark with the knowledge base. When specifically considering appropriate teaching programmes for Young People with ASD however, mainstream Teachers are often unable to provide the necessary learning environment whether they understand how to address the learning needs or not. This is apparent world-wide within generalist mainstream classroom practice. For example, the basic principles of S.P.E.L.L. (Structure, Positive practice, Low Arousal, and Links to Family, and other support structures and to other best practice), must be implemented. One of the most problematic areas being Low Arousal – generally a busy mainstream classroom is highly distracting and exhausting for many Young People with ASD. And likewise for many of our other Young People with special needs.

New Zealand MOE had recently published (2016) a resource regarding Positive Behaviour Support Strategies. This programme has been taught to all Staff and implemented at Parkside School for the last 18 years! The NZ resource is based on well researched programmes generally developed in the U.S.A. If every NZ Teacher understood and implemented the basic principles of this programme many of the frustrations of our Young People within the mainstream might be alleviated. However, for those with the most profound learning characteristics, a busy mainstream classroom is problematic (indeed sometimes unintentionally abusive) no matter how well a mainstream Teacher implements P.B.S.

Important discussions were had with Professor Barry Carpenter (recently given “a Chair” at Oxford University), and his fellow research colleagues concerning the Engagement for Learning project. The writer has since 2009, initiated and implemented the EFL project in New Zealand in collaboration with Professor Carpenter. The immediate 2017 excitement in the UK was that the process had recently been identified by Dame Diana Rochford, in her report to the

UK Government, as a replacement process for the P Scales (a tool in vogue for about 20 years used to identify a Students' level of achievement).

The P Scales are usually used as a means of "placing a peg in the ground" about what skills a Child can perform at a fixed time, and resulted in "Teachers teaching to the test". It does not describe a Students' progress and does not identify how to encourage appropriate future learning. The EFL process by comparison, assists Teachers and Specialists to identify how a Student engages with learning (what rings their learning bells) and therefore provides a means of encouraging new and enhanced learning. Parkside School, being a pilot for the EFL process in NZ has implemented the EFL process for eight years and has a close and ongoing, connection with the UK research.

During the discussions with Professor Carpenter, the writer invited him to discuss the EFL process with the Ministry of Education in Wellington, and with other Specialist Providers in New Zealand (Upon the writer's return to NZ a date was set for May, 2018).

An important element of the research sabbatical was to understand and to gather information concerning education models entailing close collaboration between mainstream and specialist schools/providers and related Teacher Training within the UK, with a special education focus. One of the significant contributors to this information was Dr. David Gregory, to whom the writer is indebted. A video presentation of David's interview is submitted, as part of this summary report, and extrapolates some of the current UK special education systems, which include significant, and effective, collaboration between mainstream and special schools.

Conclusion:

The sabbatical report concludes that special schools of the future are seen as:

... A Valuable resource for the development of inclusive schools

... Special schools can also serve as training and resource centres for staff in regular schools

... Special schools and their satellite classes may continue to provide the most suitable education for the relatively small number of learners with learning support needs who cannot be adequately served in regular classrooms or schools.

Special schools will be expected to offer a two-fold service. The first will be to offer quality education provision to learners with a disability enrolled with them...The second function of the school will be to offer select services to learners with a disability but who are in the mainstream.

In this way, the special schools as we know them today will develop into resource centres as well as service providers, with an added role of impacting professional learning for pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers in their capacity as Teaching Schools. Teaching schools, in the UK, are outstanding schools that work with others to provide high-quality teacher training and development to new and experienced school staff. They are part of the UK government's

plan to give schools a central role in raising standards by developing a self-improving and sustainable school-led system.

New Zealand already has many of the above elements in place unfortunately we also have tensions that exist between mainstream protagonists / inclusionists, and families who simply want a safe, effective and supportive school for their Child. There was not an obvious “inclusion lobby” in the UK. Rather people had “moved on” and were discussing individualised programmes delivered in the most appropriate settings to meet highly individualised needs.

The writer believes that New Zealand could easily “move on” to the next step as well. Working collaboratively – Whanau/Families, Ministry of Education and Schools - should ensure that a transparent, easily understood and appropriate, learning opportunity is available for every Child. We know the level of resourcing required to meet highly individual learning characteristics, we know what an appropriate learning environment looks like and we understand what staffing levels pertain to which condition – our duty is to provide the above in a cost effective manner. All doable when all parties involved commit to a solution-based process.

The writer believes that we can achieve a “perfect marriage” in New Zealand. Rather than continue the wasteful and unnecessary debate that has become the face of inclusion, our focus should be to provide an outstanding, world-leading, educationally appropriate range of settings that meet the highly individual learning requirements for every Young Person!

UK Interface with Dr. David Gregory CBE- Chief Executive Officer of the Partnership Trust

- (The Partnership Trust is a multi-academy trust consisting of Fosse Way School, Hayesdown First School, The Mendip School, Nunney First School, Moorlands Infant School, Moorlands Junior School, Farmborough Church Primary School and Marksbury Primary School. Through Fosse Way School the Trust is designated as a National Support School, a Teaching School and a Sponsor School. These designations enable the Trust to provide high quality professional development and support to more than 100 schools across the region.
- **Formerly:** Head Teacher of Fosse Way Special School
- (Interviewed by the writer, Judith Nel, *President, SEPA^{NZ}, Principal, Parkside School, Pukekohe, New Zealand.* October 2017, at Fosse Way School, United Kingdom)

A Synopsis of the Video Presentation

A. The Introduction of Academy Schools in the UK

- Working Collaboratively with Mainstream Schools
- Ensuring High Standards in Own Special School

- Teaching Schools
- Fosse Way as a Magnet School
 - An Inclusive Environment
 - High Expectations
- Multi-Academy Trust

B. The Fosse Way Story!

- Dynamic Growth phase
- How we got where we are!
- Promote the Status of the Special School

C. Shared Ethos

- Core Values:
 - Child centred;
 - Equality;
 - Respect;
 - Collaboration
- The Partnership Trust: Our Family of Schools
- Students Learn, Progress & Increase Confidence in a Changing World
- Vision:
 - A strong and supportive partnership between schools
 - Celebrate the diversity of partner schools
 - Working with, and learning from, each other
- Aims:
 - Achieving excellent outcomes for all learners
 - Promote outstanding teaching and learning
 - An engaging and inclusive curriculum
 - Effective & supportive transitions to ongoing learning
 - Opportunities for staff to share their expertise and learn together within, and across, schools
 - Provide professional and career development, within the context of the Teaching School
 - Provide high quality support to schools
 - Increasing capacity
 - Provide strong governance at all levels
- Organisational Structures, Roles & Responsibilities
 - Trustees
 - Local Governing Body
 - Executive Leadership Team
 - Trust Business Team
- Multi-Academy Trust Governance Structure
 - Board of Trustees
- Trust Leadership Team
 - CEO and Executive Principal
 - Business Director

- Directors of Learning (3)
- Business Team (Finance; HR; IT; Premises; Clerk to Trust Board)
- School Improvement
 - Within a culture of shared challenge and support
- The Bath & Mendip Partnership Teaching School
 - Teacher training; Professional development; Teaching & learning
- The Purpose of our Trust is the Education of our Children!

D. Learning Outcome Measurements

E. Implications for Communities of Learning (CoL)

- Profile and Status of Special Schools
- Credibility of Approaches (Evidence-based Practices)
- Adaptability into Mainstream Schools
- Working Alongside Colleagues in Mainstream Schools
- Demonstrating Professionalism

F. Outreach Services

G. Future of the Special School

- Teaching Schools
- Schools Direct
- Selection of Student Teachers
 - The “Right People”

H. Question re: Assessment