

# **Opinion piece on Labour's Education Policy 2014 and progress towards an inclusive education system**

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## **Introduction**

As well as some new initiatives, Labour's 2014 education policy has a necessarily large focus on undoing the National government's programme for undermining public education, the New Zealand Curriculum and the teaching profession. The policy begins by reminding us of Labour's 'track record' in "leading educational innovation" in years gone past, including the Tomorrow's Schools policy. Connections are made between a quality public education system and the development of responsible citizenship within a democratic society.

## **Scrapping national standards and charter schools**

The most significant actions are Labour's promise to scrap national standards and charter schools. This is good news for removing the major and immediate threats to our public education system and for protecting the rights of marginalised groups to equal access to educational opportunities. No national standards reporting will allow for a welcome return to the core work of teachers and schools. This core work involves responding to the children, young people and families in school communities, and basing teaching and learning on the New Zealand Curriculum or Te Marautanga, the curriculum for total immersion Kaupapa Maori settings, as guiding documents. Labour has also promised to re-establish adult education opportunities through schools and tertiary education providers. This is also good news for disabled people and other marginalised groups.

## **A welcome change of climate**

Labour promises to transform the climate of low trust and antagonism between the government, Ministry of Education and the education sector by "achieving change together". This includes a national summit and sector advisory committee reviewing the Tomorrow's Schools policy. They promise to halt National's punitive attacks on the professionalism of teachers. This includes scrapping government plans to author and impose a code of conduct on New Zealand teachers. Labour would also reverse National's plan to remove democratic representation from university councils and the New Zealand Teachers Council.

## **Is it what the disability and inclusive education communities are looking for?**

At the same time as the policy is a significant improvement on the current situation, it isn't transformative in its understanding of or approach to New Zealand's obligation to create an inclusive

education system. It doesn't identify or address systemic barriers or indicate pathways for improving the presence, participation and achievement of disabled students within an inclusive education system. The policy adopts a deficit-based lens and doesn't adequately include or reflect the common perspectives and priorities of disabled people, their families and inclusive education advocates. However, they do mention consulting with the "disabilities community" and education sector about the 100 new "special education teachers." This could be an indication that Labour is open to collaborating with diverse groups to develop their policy into a comprehensive plan for advancing inclusive education.

### **How does Labour/the policy understand and use the term "inclusive education"?**

Inclusive education involves valuing and responding to all of the diversity that exists among New Zealand children and families, in our communities and local education settings. Labour promises to ensure: "that disabled children are able to receive quality education in an inclusive environment is a priority for Labour" (p.26). This sounds good. However, inclusion and diversity are not just about 'special', labelled and/or disabled students. It is about the rights and needs of all children, young people and their families to have their identities and perspectives valued and included. Education is inclusive when every child is welcome, present, participating and achieving in education. Mostly inclusive education is about the attitudes, will and capability of teachers, leaders, schools and the system to value and respond to diversity.

The language and actions reflect "special education" and deficit understandings and responses to disability. The policy does nothing to challenge or transform the normal / abnormal divide. Rather than situating this policy within existing human rights and social justice frameworks, the language and direction of the policy takes the familiar route to focus on individual students and their 'special' needs, and entitlements, the pay and conditions of support staff and increasing the number of 'special education teachers'.

There is a heading and short section entitled 'An Inclusive Education System', but the policy and action statements fall short of articulating (or supporting) what inclusive education means and involves. In the discussions of 'Inclusive Education' and 'Recognising Diverse Learning Needs' only "students with special learning needs" and variations on the special theme are referred to. The policy doesn't show an understanding of inclusive education as being relevant to all students and communities, and to the entire education system. It conveys a limited view of diversity as being about one of two groups of students – those with 'special needs', and those without. **All** children, young people and families, especially those at risk of being excluded and marginalised, need to be identified, listened to and considered within an inclusive education policy. The normal-'special' divide is also maintained by having a separate section on 'supporting gifted and talented learners'. This reinforces the idea that there is a hierarchy of students/learners of which students with 'special learning needs' are at the least talented and able.

### **Special education focus with a bit of tinkering**

A lot of the language and content of the policy communicates a view of disability as being about special needs and deficits. There are repeated references to "special education", "special education

teachers”, “special learning needs”, and “support.” The main actions are 100 more “special education teachers” and improvements to the pay and conditions of ‘support staff’ (not defined) in primary and secondary schools. What and who these “special education teachers” are, and would do, is not explained. They could turn out to be really useful and will probably be gratefully received by the small number of schools who stand to benefit. But why call them “special education” teachers? And will their roles support or create barriers to inclusive education for disabled students?

Increased “support for the effective implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for disabled students” is mentioned but not explained. There will be problems for school administration workloads and easy access to funding if IEP documentation is required within an individualised funding allocation system. Further actions are improving the salaries of school support staff “over time and as resources allow”, possible increases to the funding for students with “special learning needs” and continuing provision of special residential schools.

These initiatives won’t cost much. They are politically safe and will lead to no noticeable changes for most disabled students and their families. The status quo is maintained with small improvements to the typical system of learning support and special education for disabled students in schools. Plans to centralise salary payments for school learning support staff will be a welcome and well received improvement to the current system (references to Nova Pay aside!).

### **Early Childhood Education**

A positive change for early childhood centres and some disabled children and families will be Labour’s commitment to fund five year olds enrolled in early childhood centres up until they are six. Labour promises to reinstate improved qualification requirements for early childhood education services. This is good news for the quality of care and early childhood education, early childhood teachers and the profession.

Labour plans to develop a network of “high quality centre-based early intervention programmes”. They say that these will address the needs of “vulnerable children in the most deprived areas”. How does that sit with the aim of a universal, publically funded, quality, inclusive early childhood education for **all** New Zealand children and families? Early intervention provision in New Zealand has been government policy and ‘business as usual’ for a number of decades. New Zealand (special education) early intervention services have become more and more run down and short staffed over a long period of time. This promise is not nearly as extensive as it could be.

The early intervention policy also doesn’t refer to or address the problems with how early intervention is conceived, funded and implemented in ECE. Centres and families experience long delays in responses to their immediate needs. Sometimes the support offered is not of good quality, doesn’t provide what is needed and/or runs counter to accepted approaches in early childhood education. The employment and use of Education Support Workers (ESWs) by early intervention agencies is problematic. It creates confusion about who is responsible for ESWs, who guides their work and what their roles are within the early childhood centre. There are also on-going tensions between the philosophy and practices of early childhood teachers and some early intervention professional’s thinking and approaches.

## **Initial teacher education and professional development to support inclusive education**

The policy is very quiet on professional development and initial teacher education in regard to supporting inclusive education. The section on 'Raising the Standards of Entry into Teaching' is under developed. The status and plans for the current one year, 'post graduate' teacher qualification isn't mentioned. It could be assumed that this qualification involves 'raising standards' within the teaching profession, but it does the opposite. The qualification, which can be completed through distance learning in one year, is on top of (any) university degree. One university year of teacher education with two periods of supervised classroom experience and teaching practice is inadequate preparation for becoming an inclusive early childhood, primary or secondary school teacher. Inclusive philosophies and approaches take time to learn and embed in teacher thinking and practice. Hopefully the need to find 2,000 more teachers over the next three years will elicit a more creative and authentic response than the current ascendancy of one year versus three and four year teacher education programmes.

Support for developing and sustaining inclusive cultures and practices in the early childhood education and school sectors is lean. The nearest the policy gets is promising to:

“...ensure that teachers and support staff receive training and professional development and information on inclusive education and disability awareness to ensure the active participation and learning of all children.”

While potentially useful for those who receive it, professional development for teachers and support staff is not a sufficient basis for transforming our education system so that all disabled students and their families feel the changes in our local schools and early childhood education settings. Whole centre/school professional development and mentoring, and a much greater emphasis on inclusive theories and practices in initial teacher education are critical.

## **Review of “the entire system of special needs support”**

A review may or may not be useful, but I can feel the stress and frustration levels rising at the thought of yet another one potentially coming our way. One thing that disabled people and their advocates have become over many decades is articulate about our rights and what we want and need. We don't need reviews, we need to be listened to and acknowledged as experts and leaders.

The intention of the review and what it would cover isn't explained. One thing they do talk about is reviewing how funding is allocated to disabled-labelled students. They want funding allocation decisions to be based on individual students and their needs rather than on whether the child or young person's profile fits predetermined, external criteria. Depending on whether it has the intended effect, this could be a welcome improvement for schools and students who might gain access to funding and resources that weren't previously offered. It would need careful planning and implementation to avoid or remove common problems within the current funding system such as students having support and resourcing withdrawn when their learning and engagement has improved with that support.

Many disabled people, families and advocates are tired of reviews of 'special education' that don't deliver disabled students and families what they are entitled to. The last review that formed the

basis of National's current *Success for All* policy (Ministry of Education, 2010) didn't even put inclusive education on the table as an option to consult about! Disabled people, their families and the education sector don't want to be 'consulted' if there are few resulting positive changes to the system. Any future reviews must listen to the voices of disabled people and families, and research evidence about existing barriers, good practice, what disabled people want and how to get there.

### **Labour priorities: Their technology initiative**

Teachers and leaders learning about social-cultural and rights-based views of disability, and developing knowledge and skills to use inclusive approaches to teaching (such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Narrative Assessment and Teaching as Inquiry), should have come before or alongside Labour's proposed spending on its technology initiative. Ensuring that disabled students and other marginalised groups enjoy their basic rights to access the New Zealand Curriculum and succeed in education should be a higher priority than every student having the use of a computer at home and at school.

### **Summing up**

There is plenty of good and welcome news in Labour's 2014 education policy. This includes scrapping National Standards and charter schools and stopping plans for further privatisation, and attacks on public education and the teaching profession. The promise to continue public provision of education and properly support the New Zealand Curriculum in the school sector is a relief. 2,000 new teachers over the next few years would also help to relieve some pressure on the system. A commitment to government working with, rather than against schools, teachers and communities is promising. The policy falls short of reassuring disabled students, their families and advocates that things are going to significantly change for the better sometime soon if Labour is elected to govern in September. Reviews of Tomorrow's Schools, and "the entire system of special needs support" could have positive and/or negative outcomes for the education system, and the presence, participation and achievement of labelled-disabled students. It really depends on whether the leadership, aspirations and rights of disabled people, families and inclusive education advocates are respected throughout the process.

### **What do we want?**

Disabled people, families, research evidence, local laws and strategies, and international human rights conventions support developing an inclusive education system. A central aim of inclusive education is its potential role in transforming New Zealand from a disabling to an inclusive society. Steps towards upholding the rights of disabled citizens to equal participation in quality education include:

- Ensuring the representation and leadership of students, families, disabled people and other marginalised groups from the beginning in planning, decision making and implementation

- Developing a national inclusive education policy and timeline for implementation and action in partnership with disabled people and other groups
- Embedding inclusive attitudes and teaching practices within initial teacher education programmes and teacher professional development
- Recruiting and supporting more disabled people to qualify and work as teachers, leaders and researchers in education
- Addressing inclusive education rights and needs throughout the lifespan – ECE, compulsory schooling and post-school/ tertiary education
- Using Disability Studies in Education (DSE) research, disabled people’s lived experiences and perspectives and an evidence-based framework for inclusive education
- Funding sustained whole centre/school/institution professional support and development for growing and maintaining inclusive cultures and practices
- Funding on-going research, resource development and activities that collect and create stories and examples of good inclusive practices in ECE, schools, tertiary and teacher education institutions/programmes
- Actively supporting leadership for inclusive attitudes, cultures and practices in early childhood centres, schools, tertiary institutions and the education sector
- Developing robust government mechanisms for gathering demographic and qualitative data about the experiences of and outcomes for disabled students and other groups at risk of being marginalised in education and society
- Funding an independent process for listening, responding to and resolving complaints from students and families regarding discrimination in education,
- Embedding processes for partnership with disabled people and families, responsiveness and continual improvement at every level of the system
- Establishing an enforceable right to inclusive education through creating robust mechanisms for government, Ministry of Education, and sector accountability to uphold the rights of every student to be valued, present, participating and succeeding in education.

Since the Education Act in 1989, successive New Zealand governments have had a legal obligation to create an inclusive education system that values and responds positively to the identities and realities of disabled students, and other individuals and groups at risk of being marginalised. All children, young people and adults have a right to be present, participating and succeeding in education. These rights have always been and continue to be open to dispute and interference for disabled students and their families. This is unjust and unfair. First and foremost, to make good progress, the knowledge, perspectives and aspirations of disabled people, students and families must be central to articulating and guiding progress towards systemic, long term, transformative changes in education and society.