

The Inclusive Education Action Group

**Submission on the Review of Initial Teacher
Education Policy**

Becoming a Teacher in the 21st Century

1 November 2007

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The Inclusive Education Action Group (IEAG) is a group of people committed to ensuring that all disabled children, young people and adults participate fully in their local, regular educational setting. IEAG is significant because it is estimated that one in five New Zealanders have a disability.

The IEAG membership includes parents, teachers, principals, academics, education sector officials, education professionals, religious leaders and representatives from Non-Government Organisations working in fields of education and disability.

The group was launched this year because, despite government promises of a “world-class inclusive education system” (Ministry of Education, 1996), and an explicit government objective to “improve education so that all (students) will have equal opportunities to learn and develop in their local, regular, educational centres” (Ministry of Health, 2001), disabled people are still regularly being excluded from participation in education.

The Inclusive Education Action Group has been established by an initial group of parents of disabled children; advocates and service providers working with disabled children and their families; members of disability organisations; teachers; teacher educators; and education researchers. This group shares a concern that disabled children and their families continue to experience discrimination and a ‘second rate’ education at school. Indicative of this, is the fact that some disabled children are moving back to more segregated settings because of ineffective ‘mainstream’ educational practices that do not meet the challenges of inclusion. However, segregated settings limit opportunities for children’s learning and social development, and are fundamentally contradictory to the New Zealand Disability Strategy’s goal of an inclusive society. We are also aware that regular school teachers, who do include and teach disabled children, are often poorly supported by the wider education system.

IEAG is working to raise awareness of the complex and wide-ranging issues that contribute to these negative experiences, and to promote knowledge, attitudes, education policies and practices that facilitate inclusive education so that all children, youth and adults (including those with disabilities) have equal opportunities to learn and flourish in their local, regular, educational setting.

The IEAG endorses the following vision outlined by CCS Disability Action:

We will know we are doing a good job in teacher education and professional learning when ALL children:

- are welcomed in their local school;
- are present, participating and actively engaged in learning with their same age peers or typical classroom arrangements (e.g. whanau grouping);
- have friendships that endure beyond the school gate; and
- have families' whose expertise is valued.

The IEAG welcomes the *Initial Teacher Education Policy Review*. We believe that the competencies and attitudes of teachers and their mentors are critical to the successful inclusion of disabled children in the New Zealand education system. IEAG is concerned by the large numbers of disabled children and their families seeking advocacy and support in New Zealand because of negative school experiences. We are aware that recent New Zealand research shows that many teachers believe that they are not trained

to teach disabled children (Morton & Gordon, 2006a; Morton & Gordon, 2006b; MacArthur, Gaffney, Kelly & Sharp, 2007). Disabled children feel different in ways that have a negative impact on their development and wellbeing, and they associate their impairment with negative experiences at school. Teachers often do not understand about impairment and disability and the effects of these on children's life and learning at school (MacArthur, Sharp, Gaffney & Kelly, 2007). We view this lack of knowledge and poor understanding by teachers in relation to disability and inclusion as highly problematic. It is also vitally important that teachers learn about these issues at the outset of their career. Our submission therefore argues that a movement towards inclusion in education must begin with critical reforms in initial teacher education.

It is IEAG's experience that while there is some evidence of schools engaging in good inclusive practice, there are marked variations in disabled children's school experiences. Some teachers include, teach and take responsibility for all children in their classrooms. Other teachers exclude by ignoring disabled children and failing to respond to the needs of all children. There are also variations in school culture, often as a consequence of different understandings by school principals about who belongs in their school and who does not.

While some schools explicitly adopt a position that their school is for every child in the local area, others discriminate and convey messages to some children and their families that they are not wanted. It is therefore essential that the propositions for work going forward from the *Initial Teacher Education Policy Review* explicitly acknowledge and address the current weaknesses in the education system, which fails to support teachers to include and teach disabled children. We therefore argue below that this needs to change, and that Teacher Education needs to reflect this emphasis on inclusive education, which is based on social justice for all children. This must be a core value and integral component of Teacher Education in New Zealand.

Initial Teacher Education needs to equip teachers to critically understand:

- (a) what inclusive education and social justice is about;
- (b) what it means in terms of classroom and school practice and culture; and
- (c) why it is necessary.

Teachers also need to be supported by an education system and school environments that encourage them to be inclusive, and IEAG continues to work towards policy developments in New Zealand education that provide a context in which this can happen.

Inclusive Education in the policy context

The research literature on inclusive education both internationally and in New Zealand has consistently advocated for clearly stated inclusive policy positions, and improvements to internal school dynamics (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Higgins, MacArthur, & Rietveld 2006). Policy marks out what is significant in education, and establishes boundaries and the framework in which schools and teachers undertake their work.

In a recent report into Initial Teacher Education it was found that knowledge and understanding of what 'inclusion' means for the purposes of ITE courses, and professional development for beginning teachers, was inconsistent and problematic. The sector was 'rife with differing definitions and meanings ... (There were) highly uneven definitions of what inclusion means in teacher education...and resistant discourses at the level of the school. It is therefore not surprising that the emerging teacher may not always have a clear view on what inclusion means in NZ schools" (Morton & Gordon, 2006b)

In New Zealand, there is no single clear policy about the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools, although there is a policy on “special education” that aims to improve learning outcomes for all children and young people with special education needs “... at their local school, early childhood centre, or wherever they are educated” (Ministry of Education, 1996). This statement implies that at a policy level, segregated settings such as special units, classes and schools are viable options for disabled children’s education.

This position is at odds with the Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2007 – 2012, which states the following:

The Ministry is committed to implementing the New Zealand Disability Strategy to ensure that people with impairments can say they live in “a society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation”. The incorporation of the New Zealand Disability Strategy throughout the education system is necessary to achieve this vision (p38).

Policy that identifies disabled children as different, ‘special’, and separate from their non-disabled peers ignores the fact that the children, themselves, ask to be included as part of the group of all children (MacArthur et al., 2007). Also, it encourages regular teachers to ‘opt out’ of teaching all their students because they do not have the ‘specialist’ knowledge to teach these ‘special’ children.

It is important that initial teacher education programmes provide their students with contexts in which the historical and policy foundations of exclusion and inclusion can be critically analysed and discussed. Equally, initial teacher education programmes need to explore ideas emerging out of disability studies; the sociology of childhood; the sociocultural foundations of teaching and learning; and inclusive pedagogies that allow teachers to understand how inclusion is translated into school culture and classroom practice.

IEAG believes there is an urgent need for initial teacher education to focus on inclusive education, which is consistent with curriculum documents, the *Disability Strategy* and the MOE’s *Statement of Intent (2007-2012)*. Also, teacher education needs to be based in recognitive social justice, which allows disabled children to exercise their capabilities and agency, and to have their diversity and identity as ‘disabled’ affirmed (Gale, 2000; Higgins, MacArthur & Kelly, in press). Such an approach will support teachers to include and teach all children.

All teachers need to be equipped to resist discriminatory interactions and to develop a peer culture in the classroom that supports the learning of diverse groups of children and each class member (Alton-Lee, 2003; Etheredge, 2004). These ideas are central to discussions about teaching and learning, and should be part of the foundation for inclusive pre-service teacher education and professional development programmes.

Recommendations

In summary, changes in initial teacher education in New Zealand are needed if New Zealand is to move towards an inclusive education system as advocated by the Ministry of Education and the *Disability Strategy*. These changes are also necessary if disabled children are to have their rights as children addressed. IEAG therefore submits the following recommendations to this *Review of Initial Teacher Education Policy: Becoming a Teacher in the 21st Century*.

1. A commitment to inclusion at policy level is needed that:

- delivers high quality education to all children
- supports teachers to work within inclusive education frameworks based on social justice
- encourages teachers to view disabled children as part of the group of all children
- gives schools access to flexible and relevant resources, supports and professional development opportunities
- gives a clear, specific and separate statement (separate from dispositions for Graduating Teachers) about the requirements for mentoring teachers which should explicitly outline the right for ALL students to education.

2. Initial Teacher Education must equip teachers to:

- understand impairment and disability, and their effects, and take these seriously in their planning and teaching
- have high expectations for disabled students and give them opportunities to fully participate and demonstrate their capability and agency at school
- improve their knowledge of curriculum and teaching and learning to meet the needs of diverse groups of students
- develop a nurturing, socially supportive classroom and wider school environment
- explain, acknowledge, and allow for difference in positive ways so that disabled children can include impairment as a positive aspect of their self identity.

3. Initial teacher education programmes need to ensure that :

- student teachers understand that the skills they acquire will equip them to teach all children
- student teachers understand from their first day of training that their task is to teach **all** children, including disabled children
- there are opportunities to learn about inclusive education through the support of inclusive mentor teachers
- they reflect an understanding that disabled children belong in the regular classroom, and that this is the best place for them to learn.
- inclusion is understood as fundamental across all courses in ITE. This means raising the profile of disabled children in examples within curriculum studies, and in the study of pedagogies. Ideas about segregation at school and 'special education' need to be critically analysed within this broader context of inclusion. It also means that teacher educators themselves must receive professional development that enhances their own understanding about inclusive education and disability issues.

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