

"Who's Special in Special Education?", 22 August, 2009, pp. C4-C5.

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The Government is looking into what it gets for the \$450 million it spends on special needs education. But it's also faced with growing demand as more 'special' children join the line to get an education. PHILIP MATTHEWS investigates. ----- How many different ways can you slice \$450 million? The cake isn't getting much bigger and people are sick of missing out. It's the usual story about public money.

ACT list MP Heather Roy is the Associate Minister of Education, which means that she has been handed the portfolio for special education. It has required her to get up to speed with the competing levels of need, to think about how resources and services can stretch further, to even evaluate opposing schools of thought about how children with special needs should be educated. Which is why, after eight months in the job, she has launched a review of special education in New Zealand.

"We spend \$450m on special education every year and I want an assurance that that money is being wisely spent," Roy says.

Yes, there are some big questions ahead. Off the top of her head, questions like the following: some kids get dedicated funding and some don't, so is the criteria right? Is the funding adequate? Is the funding model we have the right one?

Since the Special Education 2000 programme was launched in the 1990s, we have covered off high and very high needs with funding from the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS), but that gets to only 1 per cent of special needs children. Supplementary Learning Support (SLS) gets to some of the others but not enough. So how do we get money to those kids with moderate needs? And is the Special Education Grant (SEG) working as it should?

From the forest of Ministry of Education acronyms, let's go over the last one as a test of whether things are broken and need to be fixed. At present, all schools get SEG. The money is bulk-funded, parcelled out to schools based on roll size and decile rating. But not based on special needs levels. In other words, a school could have five kids with special needs or 25 and their SEG funding would stay the same. And unlike the ORRS funding which is attached to a child, SEG is attached to a school.

It sounds unfair on paper. Especially when schools start to develop a word-of-mouth reputation for being good with moderate needs kids, such as those with autism. Success brings greater numbers but the money stays static. Meanwhile, the school down the road might have more SEG money than it needs, possibly because it has been subtly or even overtly discouraging special needs kids from enrolling and pointing them instead towards school A.

Indeed, reports from the Education Review Office have found that some SEG money has gone nowhere near disabled children. "I would question the systems of accountability that we presently have," says Alison Kearney, head of the School of Curriculum and Pedagogy at Massey University's College of Education. "For some of these important issues, schools are asked to do a self-review checklist."

This issue has long been an irritant to groups such as the Inclusive Education Action Group, which advocates for the full mainstreaming of special needs kids. Without wanting to make what she calls "wild guesses" about the findings of her review, Roy is open to rethinking the SEG problem.

"It needs to be allocated according to need, not to schools," Roy agrees. "That money has historically been given to schools rather than attached to children based on need."

Part one of the review will deal with funding issues such as these, as well as access to education. It will also cover the best way to spend the \$51m of extra ORRS funding that the Government has allocated for the next four years. Professional development and training will be features of part two, to follow next year. But it will ultimately be about doing more with what we already have: the terms of the review state very clearly that "options for special education must assume no new money".

Somehow that static figure must satisfy growing demand. Kearney: "We know that we are seeing more and more kids with disabilities in our schools and that's not just because we, like the rest of the world, are moving towards a more inclusive education system. It's because we have the ability to keep disabled babies alive, we identify more disabilities, we've got names for more things now. But we know it's growing."

Heather Roy's review is timely. Exactly 20 years have passed since the 1989 Education Act committed New Zealand to inclusive education or mainstreaming. It guaranteed that those with special educational needs would have the same rights to enrol and receive education at state schools as those without.

This is the clause that parents of special needs kids still cite in New Zealand every time they struggle to enrol children at their local school, along with similar clauses in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

But some education researchers have pointed out that the high aspirations of that clause came within a wider context that was actually anti-inclusion. Broader education policy was about devolving power and decision-making to school level. In the 1990s, education became competitive and the minor reforms of Special Education 2000 became about individual need, one child within a system, not reforms of the system itself.

This means that the battle for inclusion has been fought at ground level, almost beneath the radar of the Ministry of Education.

Christchurch education researchers Liz Gordon and Missy Morton wrote last year that "as structured in New Zealand, inclusion has to be won classroom by classroom, school by school. Once won, it can be lost again, if a dedicated teacher leaves or other circumstances change". Parents recognise that a pro-active principal can change a school's culture and everyone has their list of principals who have re-invented schools.

"It's something the school has to take on as an ethos," says Allister Smith, who introduced inclusive education to Central Normal School in Palmerston North.

Morton, an inclusive education specialist who lectures at the University of Canterbury, thinks that New Zealand simply wasn't as radical as it could have been. Morton says we should have done what the Italians did.

Italy changed its Education Act in the 1970s and remade its system overnight. No more special schools, no more special units. All disabled children in mainstream classes. But any classroom with a disabled child in it must have no more than 20 students and must have two teachers. And no more than two disabled children per class. Morton explains this kind of inclusiveness is based on the concept of family: you wouldn't kick someone out of your family for being disabled.

In New Zealand, many people have worked very hard over 20 years but without the results we would want. Morton thinks the Ministry of Education has tried to maintain goodwill with those who don't support inclusion but mostly the problem is that our version of inclusion has kept the system as it is and just tinkered around the edges, looking for ways to fit disabled children in.

Morton and others, such as Dunedin-based researcher Jude MacArthur, also wonder about the political willingness to keep moving towards full inclusion.

If the goal of inclusiveness is to ultimately evolve beyond special schools and special units, then doesn't it seem retrograde to have Education Minister Anne Tolley diverting all questions about special needs to her associate minister, Heather Roy? The segregation between regular kids and special needs kids even seems to be entrenched in their job descriptions.

Twenty years on, does Roy think we have reached our destination? It depends on how you define inclusion, she says. Does it mean being able to enrol your child at a local school as the Education Act stipulated? Or does it mean children being welcomed in any school?

"If you define it as being welcomed into any school then I'd say, no we haven't," Roy says.

"The question then arises: is that what we're aiming for? Or are we trying to provide with a limited resource the best opportunities? You mightn't be able to go to the school that's just around the corner."

No matter that the Education Act says so? A school principal might imply your disabled child would be better off in another school and "if I was a parent and I confronted that situation, I would say that clearly this school is not the best for my child and look elsewhere," Roy says. But there is no guarantee that there is somewhere suitable nearby, especially in rural areas. In many cases, kids who are being kept from their local schools are marginalised and excluded, Kearney points out. Which is entirely against the spirit of the Education Act.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the problem is widespread, but how bad is it? Hard to say.

Kearney's doctoral thesis, *Barriers to school inclusion: An investigation into the exclusion of disabled students from and within New Zealand schools*, described the nature of the problem but not the extent of it. No-one seems to have done the numbers, she says.

But you hear similar stories from all over the country. Stories about what really happens when you want inclusive education. An IHC conference in Wellington in 2006 heard about a family who wanted an inclusive education for their teenage son.

Only one of seven public secondary schools in the Wellington area was suitable. Of the other six, one was a special school, three had special units, one was seen as hostile and one had no experience in inclusion.

At the broadest philosophical level, Roy and Tolley are at odds with inclusive education advocates, including IHC, and at odds with the majority of thinking in the sector. This difference of opinion is enshrined in the terms of the review that Roy has launched: "Families and whanau should have choices". Under the banner of choice, Roy is committed to keeping special schools open for the foreseeable future. These are the schools that IHC and others more readily describe as segregated.

Inclusive education advocates see this new emphasis on choice as fitting the "neo-liberal policy context" in which schools compete for customers.

In 2006, National MP Bill English talked of wanting to wind the clock back on inclusive education so that more children could be educated in special schools. That advance warning means that the likes of MacArthur are disappointed but not necessarily surprised about what they are hearing from Roy and Tolley.

Is the choice that Roy enshrines always a genuine one?

"I know of parents who have put their children into segregated settings even though they haven't wanted to," MacArthur says. "They've done that because they've felt that their local school perhaps isn't yet up to the mark or is not welcoming of their son or daughter. And in those situations you can't blame parents for wanting their kids to go where teachers want them."

That sounds like the negative side of choice, especially as local and international research that MacArthur studied for her recent, IHC-commissioned publication *Learning Better Together* seems to argue very persuasively that mainstream settings are better for disabled kids than segregated settings. Better academically, better socially and, as an unexpected but

happy side-effect, better for the non-disabled kids.

MacArthur's response to the parental choice argument is this: parental rights are one thing, but if inclusive education can be shown as better, shouldn't the children's rights also be recognised?

At a deeper level, MacArthur and others point to comments by the likes of Vernor Munoz, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, who has said that separate special education systems reinforce prejudice and discrimination towards the disabled.

MacArthur also sees that as current policy has us sitting between two stools, all sorts of inequities are maintained. While she welcomes the Government's new ORRS spending, it doesn't seem fair to her that some parents pay out of their own pocket for teacher aides to support children with moderate needs, while the Government pours another \$9m into property for special schools for the 2800 special-needs children whose parents choose to keep them segregated. That \$9m would have paid for a lot of ORRS.

What if we were to close those schools overnight? It wasn't just the Italians who did that.

Other places have too, such as New Brunswick, Canada. Their institutions, their special schools, went in one fell swoop. The rest of the system had to gear itself up to cope.

"In Canada, they worked for a long time with families to encourage them it was the right way to go," MacArthur says. "We know that it can happen and the outcome when it's done well is positive. Why can't we do that in New Zealand?"

The chief reason we can't do that is sitting in Wellington, fielding questions from The Press. Yes, Heather Roy has read Jude MacArthur's report.

Was she convinced that it is best to mainstream?

"There's some evidence that shows that, but anecdotally I'm hearing that that's not necessarily the case," she says.

Research is all well and good, but when Roy gets out to specialist centres in her role as associate education minister, she picks up talk from parents who feel that their child wouldn't cope in a mainstream setting. So parental choice is the mantra.

But is it choice or is it fear? Are parents the best judges of what their children are capable of? They can often be surprised by what their children achieve in mainstream schools. You might also detect a small contradiction: Roy gives a privileged status to the parental view of what a child can deal with, but thinks schools can and often should overhaul their perceptions of what they can manage.

Go back to the problem of schools barring special-needs children. Roy says the Secretary of Education, Karen Sewell, wrote to every school and school board at the start of this year reminding them of their legal obligation to enrol every child in their zone who wants to be enrolled.

"Having said that, what do you do about it?" Roy says. "Do you beat the school around the head with a big stick or do you work with them to rectify what the real issue is? I think the real issue is one of fear. I think many teachers and schools do not know what to do and have not been trained adequately to cope with all of the students they are expected to cater for."

She believes the problem starts at teachers' college level, where trainees get little if any instruction in special education and nothing in practical placement unless they are placed in a class that has special-needs children.

"We're setting these teachers up for failure when we take them from that setting and expect them to cater to any child who walks or is wheeled through the door," Roy says. "We have a big job to do in improving training. We need to give professional development in the special education area a huge boost."

There are issues of culture and resourcing: teachers need to be able to take the days off

needed for professional development. The attitude issue is also reinforced by inclusive education advocates. On the DVD that accompanies IHC's Learning Better Together publication, Denis Slowley, principal of Dunedin's Bayfield High School, argues that "the biggest resource is attitude".

His school was singled out by IHC as one that has done inclusion well. Another is Palmerston North's Central Normal School. When Allister Smith started as principal there about 20 years ago, it was in the early days of inclusive education. He didn't know a lot about it, but had a gut feeling the school could do better.

"For me, the critical factor was that all children would be able to learn to the very best of their abilities," Smith says.

The special education unit had 10 or 15 children in it. He closed it down and got the two special-education teachers working as support staff.

There were children on the autistic spectrum, children with Down syndrome, various intellectual disabilities and learning delays. There were some with physical disabilities. All were brought into the mainstream.

"Teachers should know these children. Communities should know these children," Smith says. "Their peers should know them and be involved with them."

That was a success story, a school remade by an act of will. The University of Canterbury's Missy Morton talks enthusiastically about work she has recently been doing for the Ministry of Education. It's called curriculum exemplars for learners with special education needs. How do we support teachers to understand that the curriculum they are used to teaching is relevant to all students?

Her previous research had shown that when teachers learn the curriculum, they don't always make the connection for children "who don't speak or don't move". So when they meet those kids, they aren't sure what to do with them.

"If you can't see somebody's learning, it can be very hard to feel confident in yourself as a teacher," Morton says.

"In some ways, we've done it to ourselves. Our history of teaching in this area is that you need specialist skills to teach these kids. So teachers would come out and say: 'I'm not trained'."

But this new work is about supporting teachers to use what they already know. Pointing out that there are basic strategies that work for all kids. That we can talk about difference, but we should also be talking about similarity.

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