

Whakarongo mai, Listening in - stories from the inside

Beyond Inclusive Education: How to Get There and Why It Matters

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I am eighteen years old and while I was born in France, I will always think of Auckland New Zealand as home.



As a student with a disability I experimented with all support models in education and never found one that worked - the experience was a real battlefield. Contributing to this book has been a real privilege and I hope that it serves as a tool to open dialogue on tough issues because I don't think that real change will happen without contributions from everyone.

This chapter marks the beginning of my journey to see collaborative education become a reality.

“ *It was assumed, wrongly, that if my support services worked I would automatically feel I belonged* ”

Writing from a student's perspective about special education does not come without controversy. In fact, personal experience has made me believe that it is one of the most contentious issues I could put forward for discussion. I was a student in the New Zealand education system for the last thirteen years. When the opportunity to reflect on this came to pass, I immediately knew where I wanted to provide fresh ideas. Put simply, I want students with disabilities to have a voice in education.

There were several interesting aspects of my schooling experience I could have highlighted, but my struggle to be empowered in my school community mattered most.

Struggle to be empowered

“ *My support needs, not my ambitions, became the most important thing about me.* ”

Whenever my voice was heard and respected when making decisions about my support, I was happy. I felt capable of getting involved in my school community and in a variety of leadership positions. I felt respected. My peers didn't alienate me because of my disability.

But usually my voice went unheard. It was assumed, wrongly, that if my support services worked I would automatically feel I

“ *Injustice is more prevalent, more insidious and more profound than many of us are prepared to acknowledge.* ”

belonged. But support services alone do not create a sense of inclusion or belonging. So after staff had put in place a support system they thought worked for me, I was expected to create a sense of belonging or ‘inclusion’ for myself. ‘Inclusiveness’ was seen as the responsibility, not of the school, but of each individual student.

Instead of building relationships with my peers, I created relationships with my teachers and teacher aides. I was surrounded by adults. My support needs, not my ambitions, became the most important thing about me.

I felt excluded from the debate about my needs. Too often, my teachers assumed control over decisions for me, and this had consequences for my sense of belonging. Bernadette MacCartney’s (2009) research corroborates my experience:

“The power that teachers have to influence what is happening in an educational environment - without their knowledge base or assumptions necessarily being questioned or challenged - has significant consequences for a child’s identity, learning or participation.” (MacCartney, 2009, p25)

Current debates around educational practice revolve, not around whether students feel they belong, but around resource constraints. (Disley, 2009, p68).

“ *Discourse around creating inclusive schools began some years ago, before I was born in fact.* ”

I believe that if we place the student at the centre of what happens in schools, then support services will not have such an ostracizing impact. Instead we will have a culture where the student is actively engaged in decision making and peer engagement is organic.

Discourse around creating inclusive schools began some years ago, before I was born in fact. The introduction of the 1989 Education Act saw inclusion become part of New Zealand’s policy framework (Kuin Sinclair, Naidoo, Naidoo & Robinson, 2003, p40).

Now my schooling journey has ended and inclusive education is mentioned almost in passing, with an air of wistfulness about it.

Inclusive education suggests that diverse learners are being made to 'fit' into an inflexible learning environment.

It could be different.

Collaborative learning

To achieve my purpose of looking forward, I will refer to ideas of inclusion as 'collaborative learning'.

“*By opening dialogue between and within schools, collaborative education can flow through diverse learning communities.*”

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p 34) encourages this practice by referring to the development of a “*learning community*” a place where “*learning conversations and learning partnerships are encouraged.*” According to Disley (2009, p 70), former Deputy Secretary (Special Education) of the Ministry of Education, inclusive education “*has the potential to become collaborative. However current practice has led to learning environments that are fragmented and lacking in accountability.*” By opening dialogue between and within schools, collaborative education can flow through diverse learning communities.

“*Imposing a resource focus on a diverse student body has been identified as a significant barrier to implementing a collaborative model*”

In an Australian case study, known as Cotton Tree State High School, references to 'inclusion' were abandoned. Instead people talked about the development of a school 'family' or community where everyone is equally respected (Carrington and Holm, 2005, p158). This case study saw a wide variety of students sharing their ideas around policy and practice within the school (p 157).

Simply through a commitment to engage with students, the school discovered different solutions that reflected their learning community and created a new understanding of inclusion for all stakeholders (p 168).

In this new environment, all teachers worked collaboratively to meet the learning objectives of each student. Specialist teachers shared their professional experience with other teachers more openly, facilitating a better understanding of student needs (p 167).

“ *Successful collaborative models move away from financially draining resources¹ concentrating on human interaction,* ”

In New Zealand, imposing a resource focus on a diverse student body has been identified as a significant barrier to implementing a collaborative model (Disley, 2009, p70). Other research argues that shifts towards school wide practice are imperative to avoid system collapse. “*The equitable distribution of resources has been a particularly troubling issue... excessive reliance on resource intensive individualized education as the key strategy for dealing with students with disabilities is unsustainable.*” (Jenkins 2002, p 56).

Successful collaborative models move away from financially draining resources concentrating on human interaction, specifically refocusing resources to prepare teachers and those who support them (p62).

There are better solutions

There were many barriers to my own participation at school. These arose because services were made available only at certain times or in a fixed manner.

I faced a continual struggle to find suitable times for physiotherapy, for example. While physiotherapy sessions are, for some students, one of the most important aspects of specialised services, this was not the case for me. The sessions were certainly a crucial part of my well-being; but my ambition was to go to university. My studies needed to be my first priority, and physiotherapy needed to fit in around this. For several years at school though, I was expected to take fewer subjects than my peers. I was not to take part in mainstream Physical Education in order to “make room” for physiotherapy.

“ *My studies needed to be my first priority, and physiotherapy needed to fit in around this* ”

As I approached the end of my time at school, it was made possible for me to have physiotherapy before the school day started. However these sessions were shorter and less focused. The physiotherapists would be trying to meet the needs of three or four students and administrative obligations at the same time. Inevitably, I was forced to make a trade-off between my physical well-being and academic achievements.

It is possible to see a variety of solutions to this scheduling issue, especially if we shift away from a fixed resource focus.

“ *Inevitably, I was forced to make a trade-off between my physical well-being and academic achievements* ”

One solution could be for physiotherapists to work alongside Physical Education teachers so that goals can be attained for disabled and non-disabled students alike. Disabled students could still take part in mainstream physical education in ways that target their needs, perhaps by participating in class once a week. This could be complemented by alternating with a more focused physiotherapy session to complete a balanced programme. Teachers and students could review this regularly to ensure that the programme is successful and well-resourced for all parties.

Another solution might be to have days where physiotherapists were available at different hours to accommodate students with demanding classroom schedules.

The way teacher aid support was delivered in the classroom also posed several social barriers. Common practice was to have the teacher aid sit beside me throughout the lesson to justify the role. My experience at school was that when the teacher aid was absent, I was able to interact well with my peers. But when the aid was present, right beside me, to provide what was believed to be ‘the best support possible’, I was ostracized and cut off from my classmates.

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In many of my subjects the only resource I required from my teacher aid was a set of notes by the end of the lesson. A more efficient way to provide this assistance might be to provide students with a dictaphone, which an aid could subsequently type up.

In subjects where a more direct role was needed by support staff, a positive step might be to have the teacher aid available in the classroom - though not sitting next to the student throughout the lesson. Instead they could be looking ahead at upcoming lessons and suggesting ways that the teacher may need to alter their teaching to suit the learning needs of diverse students. A lack of resources for teachers has been identified as a major obstacle in seeing tangible changes for diverse learners in education. Teacher aides can build stronger relationships with teachers, rather than students, so that the tools diverse learners to master a subject are readily available.

The collaborative learning model plays a strong role here given that a teacher aid's primary role is to assist teachers in achieving learning outcomes for diverse learners.

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A third isolating aspect of my schooling experience was being forced to sit at the back of the assembly hall with other disabled students away from my classmates. The main reasons given for this were so that staff “knew where I was.” I think it is important to explore different options so that students with disabilities can be routinely integrated with their peers, and those who want to sit elsewhere are able to do so. Why not reshuffle benches so that students in wheelchairs can sit on the end of rows with their classmates?

When I was in Year 11 I had a group of friends who took it in turns to sit with me in assembly so I didn't feel so cut off. But on occasion they were told off and had to move because the area was 'reserved for disabled students'.

At other times I would bring my crutches to make it possible for me to access the front of the hall and sit with others, but this wasn't always possible if I was too tired and felt unsafe on crutches.

“ *Students need to be recognised as a key resource when making decisions about support practices.* ”

A solution for some students might be to have a buddy system where a friend agrees to sit with their disabled peer and assist them if needed. The students could communicate with staff about where they were planning to sit, removing the fear surrounding an emergency.

Respecting students and families

Students need to be recognized as a key resource when making decisions about support practices. Students who cannot take such an active solution-focused role in their education are still entitled to participate in decisions made about them, even if that means simply creating a space for them to share ideas with other students. Parents or other advocates need to be respected as experts in this decision-making process, with equal - if not more - understanding of their child's needs than specialist teachers or support staff. Even then, this does not negate a student's

entitlement to participate. ALL students have things to share about school on different levels.

“*Parents or other advocates need to be respected as experts in this decision-making process*”

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are described as “[A] tool for collaborative planning between the school, the parents/caregivers, the student (where appropriate) and other agencies as necessary.” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p1) While the framework of an IEP should allow this, experiences of IEPs do not align to this vision.

My own experience in an IEP setting was intimidating. My contributions were considered tokenistic. A win-lose dynamic prevails in an IEP set up: “*within the disciplines of education and disability, some people... enjoy privilege and expert status earned through qualifications.*” (Morton, 2006, p9). A parent I spoke to mirrored these ideas, saying, “*We have no weight when we make requests to have needs met.*” For these reasons it is important to review and implement successful accountability mechanisms in a collaborative environment.

Creating an accessible and easy complaints process for students and their parents is a vital step in achieving accountability. My experience has taught me that having a member of staff to discuss issues surrounding support and participation in the classroom was very important. Crucially, this staff member was independent from the ‘special unit’ from which I accessed resources.

“*A win-lose dynamic prevails in an IEP set up*”

Opening a flexible complaints process can result in the collapse of the power structure present in the current model. And having this kind of transparency can encourage a wider base of input when exploring solutions.

Conclusion

The vision I put forward above will be recognized as a learning community when students with disabilities are valued equally alongside their peers.

Students - or their best advocates - can be recognized as a resource when exploring support options.

“ *Having this kind of transparency can encourage a wider base of input when exploring solutions.* ”

Schools can move away from competing for the academically brilliant student. Instead, they can strive to be an inclusion-focused or community school.

The benefits from this collaborative approach can continue to reap benefits for all members of the school community - disabled or not - as they continue to be lifelong learners. People who feel a sense of belonging in their learning environment are more likely to emerge as citizens who are creative and can demonstrate initiative when interacting with their diverse peer group. A student using technology to communicate, for example, wouldn't be feared by students who hadn't seen this before. Instead, the situation could be recognized as a learning - therefore relationship building - opportunity between two students.

All students are more likely to become solution-focused problem solvers. They can begin to feel confident interacting with people in different or previously unknown settings. In the event that a student's communication device is broken, rather than seeing this as an insurmountable barrier, someone who had achieved the outcomes of a collaborative learning community could recognise and provide an alternative way for that student to participate with their peers without being isolated.

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The process that facilitates a successful collaborative model might mean that all learners - students and staff - can demonstrate capabilities in leadership and teamwork as expected by the key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum, (Ministry of Education, 2007, p7) and learn to apply them in “[a] range of learning areas and in increasingly complex and unfamiliar situations.” (p38).

Disabilities have benefits for all members of society. These benefits need to be recognized by shifting away from the deficit focus which the current schooling culture facilitates.

Educational communities can refocus priorities away from a resource intensive model to a more collaborative education model. Students can be given status in decision-making. Specialized teachers can share more openly with other staff to highlight diversity in the classroom and empower mainstream teachers. Increasing accountability mechanisms in specialized

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services is a crucial step forward. By doing this, power dynamics that are prevalent today will be removed and a culture of learning, sharing and growing will replace it for all members of learning communities.

The danger of leaving specialized education services in their current position is that the student body misses out on many potential learning opportunities. The result is that many disabled students do not develop a positive sense of self or feel they belong in their learning communities.

The new culture I put forward can encourage life-long learning for all learners no matter where they are on the continuum.

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