



The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme: Policy and Outcomes Mismatch?

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INTRODUCTION

Our success will and must be measured in the happiness and welfare of our children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures ... There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.

Nelson Mandela

I have worked with passion and idealism in the compulsory education sector for twenty years. I have enjoyed a variety of roles, the most recent being in special education as a teacher and therapist-advocate. I have continually experienced and intervened in situations of major frustration where students with exceptional needs have been refused education funding. The reasons for this remain unclear. Families are understandably devastated. The consequence is unacceptably limited educational progress.

We fail as a nation to provide adequate support for our students with exceptional needs by 'paying lip service' to inclusion. In my experience as a teacher and psychologist I have found that adequate resources are simply not available for these students. I believe that some of the reasons behind the lack of resourcing can be linked to the political shifts to neo-liberalism, globalisation and the marketisation of education since the 1980s.

I have seen teachers challenged by increasing diversity in their classrooms since the New Zealand Government made a commitment post-1989 to increase the presence, participation and learning of all students in regular schools. One of the greatest challenges and responsibilities we all face as educators is providing 'sound education and appropriate educational support' for those students with the highest need (Education Review Office, 2005, p.2). My article provides damning evidence that some students will succeed while others will tragically 'fall through the cracks'. What are we doing for them?

BACKGROUND

The advent of *Administering for Excellence: Effective Administration in New Zealand* (The Picot Report; Picot, 1988) and the Government document *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988) led to reforms in education that paved the way for the policy of *inclusion*:

People who have special educational needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education in state schools as people who do not.

The Education Act (1989): 8.1

The policy reflected changes in human rights awareness and an increased acknowledgement of the views of parents and disability services.

A major feature of the reforms was the substantial Government policy and practice document, *Special Education 2000*, which outlined principles for achieving a 'world class inclusive education system that would provide learning opportunities of equal quality to all children and school students' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.5). Following on from the publication of the document, a national strategy, *The Ongoing and Transitional Resourcing Scheme (OTRS)* (Ministry of Education, 1998), promised additional resources for at-risk students, many of whom would need support throughout their years at school. The initiative was later renamed *The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS)* (Ministry of Education, 2004). Categories for eligibility included nine areas of difficulty concerned with learning, hearing, vision, mobility, language use and social communication and moderate to high difficulties in learning combined with any two of the above. The Resourcing Scheme provided some teacher aide support and specialist input and programmes. Although these categories are comprehensive, I have had first-hand experience that many children are miss out.

WHAT IS WORKING

The Education Review Office (ERO) conducted a major review of ORRS in 2004/05 and found that 69 percent of the 96 schools studied were using and managing the Resource effectively to improve the quality of educational outcomes for 169 students. Successful schools were characterised by the ability to implement quality inclusive teaching environments for their students. Most had positive ERO reporting histories (Education Review Office, 2007, p.1) and had well-developed consultative practices with parents and high expectations for all students. I concur with these conclusions. In fact, my experience working in schools has shown me that most educators go well beyond what is required in their efforts to obtain the best resources for their students.

WHAT IS NOT WORKING

One of the main features of the Government reforms in special education was the decentralisation of resources and more accountability in how these were used by schools and their communities. I see schools continually competing for resources that are never going to be sufficient for those students with high and very high needs. My job, and that of special education teachers and other specialists, is now one of advocating for needy 'magnet' schools and juggling the limited resources that are provided only in the short-term but are needed for students with long-term difficulties who do not qualify for ORRS or behaviour funding. For example, I have worked with many students with Asperger's Syndrome who exhibit severe and challenging behaviour. I see these students

as one of the most disadvantaged populations under this system as ORRS funding does not cover students with behavioural and social-emotional issues and, in many cases, the results are decidedly tragic. The focus on the economics of education has taken us away from our core work and we are often 'shot' by schools and parents 'as the harbingers and providers of inadequate resourcing'. We are all victims of this system and we all are responsible for the solutions.

THE ISSUES

Criteria and budgets

The ORRS guidelines describe each criterion in detail including descriptions of students who have been successfully funded.

Appropriate applications are invited for those children and students with the highest special education needs who are: transitioning to primary school, 5-6 years of age with no pre-school experience, identified with a significant increase in their needs or recent immigrants to New Zealand.

Ministry of Education (2004, p.3)

In my experience the students that I work with most often present with issues which are not going to attract funding support; for example, limited social-emotional development, and poor social communication. All these children require intervention from specialists to access the curriculum. Many deserving cases are turned down resulting in students being pushed from 'pillar to post' in order to meet their needs. The situation is damaging and has long-term negative consequences for students' educational progress.

How the ORRS process supports the deficit model

We have been told as educators, specialists and parents to adopt a negative deficit or 'problem-in-child' perspective when writing the ORRS application as this approach is supposed to increase the chance that the funding will be granted (i.e., the verification process). I find the use of the deficit viewpoint in direct contradiction to the proactive ecological or 'systems around the child' perspective I was trained in and which is still in vogue. In my experience every child's application is unique, complex and time-consuming even when good assessment data is available so there tends to be an over-reliance on specialists to guide the process. We need better guidelines for schools so that they can write successful applications more independently based on a 'positive' perspective of each child.

The application process: 'Second guessing the system'

I have been faced with uncertainty in terms of constantly 'shifting goalposts' regarding who gets funded. At one time I was told that the only autistic students who were verified seemed to be those who were non-verbal. It is common knowledge around schools and special education services that students with serious medical conditions are more likely to be verified than students with severe social-emotional issues or students who are attending school and who already have limited numeracy and literacy skills. For me as a specialist the funding allocation process is beyond comprehension so one can only wonder what schools and parents make of it.

How assessments inform the application

There is variability in the quality of authentic assessment data collected by schools to identify student need and inform ORRS applications. ERO reported that 29 percent of schools were inefficient in this regard. Some had an over-reliance on one type of assessment, and in other cases, there were misrepresentations of student ability and need (Education Review Office, 2005, p.10). In my view this is not the fault of schools but the result of a process lacking transparency for all of us.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- 1) More transparency is needed in the application process so as to increase the number of successful applications.
- 2) The percentage of students eligible for funding should be increased to include those who currently 'fall through the cracks'; for example, students with severe behavioural issues.
- 3) The funding needs to be available to students for as long as they require it.
- 4) The deficit model should be replaced with a strengths-based approach.
- 5) Assessment results should be realistically linked to learning programmes and take account of a student's needs, interests and aspirations.
- 6) School management and governance should provide greater education, support and resources for teachers catering for these students (see Education Review Office, 2005, p.23).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

ORRS is the only system we have for supporting students with very high needs, their teachers and their families. However, currently I see it failing in its objective to support students and improve their outcomes by providing a funding process that is deliberately limited, unfair and unclear. It is heart-breaking for all concerned and morally repugnant. Instead, we should be looking at the social rather than the economic costs of the current system. Things will not improve until we do.

*By three methods we may learn wisdom
First, by reflection which is the noblest
Second, by imitation which is easiest
And third by experience, which is the bitterest.*

Confucius (551 BC)

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