A Torrent of Change:

Enhancing effective change in special education – one school's journey

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All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change (G.K Chesterton, English novelist and author, 1874 -1936).

ABSTRACT

This article is the story of a school's journey from a deficit model of special education needs programming to an inclusive model of student learning support. The heart of this journey was the identification and management of tensions and complexities surrounding educational beliefs, school values, and pedagogical practices. This article will describe the ecology of change that this school undertook during a two-year period, analyse the mechanisms of change during the same period, and evaluate critically the extent to which the change achieved its intended outcome.

Practice Paper
Keywords
Effective practices, inclusive schools, individualised education plans, parent school relationship, professional development, school effectiveness, school management, strategic planning.

INTRODUCTION

During the period July 2004 - June 2006 the school looked to shift school systems away from the traditional "special class" model to a more inclusive class-based one. This shift was one that looked to change the ecology of how the school perceived it should cater for students with needs and was one that challenged deeply-rooted beliefs. To understand this, one needs to understand the school's history in special education needs teaching. Up until the implementation of the Special Education 2000 policy (SE2000), the school contained a primary school special needs unit. This unit was viewed as a successful model of practice and for the following seven years the school continued to replicate this by funding a special education needs teacher. However, during this time the learning needs of students who fell into the moderate special education needs category became more difficult to address using this model. By 2004 the school had only three students verified with the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) compared to a growing number of students with moderate special education needs. This change in student need showed that the school needed to find another way of providing learning support. The longer this programme was retained, the more it became out of step with the education environment outside of the school.

There were two catalysts for change in the second half of 2004. Firstly, the board of trustees determined it needed to review the effectiveness of a range of school programmes because of a fiscal deficit in the preceding financial year. Secondly, the appointment of a new principal provided an opportunity to review the cost against benefits of all the above-entitlement staffing. Such scrutiny included the role of the special education needs teacher.

REVIEWING SPECIAL EDUCATION

The review process of this strategic change took nine months to complete and had three distinct phases. These phases involved redefining the values and beliefs of the stakeholders, clarifying how the school would implement the mandate defined by the National Education Goals (NEGs) and responding to a number of opportunities and threats that arose at this time. Bryson (1995), talks of the building of a series of agreements as part of initiating a strategic process. The experience at Rosebank was that this occurred throughout the entire project as different stakeholders came on board. By the end of the process the school was working with the aspirations of 12 distinct stakeholder groups.

The review process initially looked to involve all teaching staff in a consultative fashion, delegating the review authority to a team of three teachers who had some expertise in this area. This resulted in some inter-staff and inter-syndicate conflict as the make-up of the team did not allow for the representation of the sectional interests of the school's three syndicates. This consultative approach caused a strong reaction amongst some staff members in that a number of individual teachers had significant philosophical differences about how special education needs should operate. The strength of this strong reaction highlighted that there were issues that were deeply embedded in the school's culture of practice. For this reason the review approaches used from this point onwards were less formal and looked to identify strategic issues through one-on-one discussion with teachers. The information that emerged was broadly categorised into two areas: school systems and teaching practices. From this information the school looked to develop a flexible strategic approach based on Mintzberg's (1994) "ready-aim-fire-aim," approach.

TABLE 1
Identified Strategic Issues

SCHOOL SYSTEMS	TEACHING PRACTICES
Equity of resourcing across school levels.	Use of narrow assessment tools for identifying student needs.
Lack of consistent philosophy and policy across the school.	A focus on the needs of "normal" students rather than the needs of all students.
Lack of school-wide case management systems.	Teacher burn-out (special education needs teachers).
No school-wide reporting system.	Low level of teacher knowledge of teaching practices that would assist students with special education needs.
No level of linkage between the special education needs programmes and the regular class programmes.	

These issues were identified on the basis that an issue for one teacher was an issue for all teachers. The intent in identifying such issues was to resolve the tensions between systems and practice by clarifying what was a fair and reasonable role for teachers to play in this process. The document used to do this was the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) which state:

- that all schools are to deliver teaching and learning programmes that provide opportunities for all students to "achieve for success" in all areas of the curriculum
- that all schools are directed to "develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to address the needs of students" (p. 2).

These reference points reiterated that meeting the needs of all students was a mandatory part of every teacher's job.

The third stage of review occurred when the school envisaged what good practice looked like. Through discussion with staff from Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) we developed a set of success criteria:

- students being taught within their classroom environment
- classroom teachers taking responsibility for the learning progress of their students
- greater involvement of parents through the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs)
- the systematic monitoring of student achievement
- children being able to move in and out of the programme as their needs changed
- a focus on giving students the support so they would be successful in a regular class
- the elimination of the term "special education needs" as a stigma, replacing it with a neutral term
- the use of a delivery model that matched all areas of learning support.

At this point of the process the school had no concept of how change could take place, only an understanding that some change needed to begin. The opportunity to participate in the Ministry of Education's Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EEPiSE) project provided an impetus for change. This was done by resourcing for staffing and time to plan a change management strategy. Any strategic programme would seek practical solutions to resolve the identified strategic issues.

REFORMING SPECIAL EDUCATION

The strategic reform needed to be tested first with a small group of students. Having seen the increase in the number of students with moderate special education needs, the school decided to focus on students who were not achieving at an age-appropriate level. These students would have their reading achievement assessed before and after an intervention programme in order to ascertain whether the intervention would improve their reading achievement. At the same time the teachers would be involved in a professional development programme that looked to develop a greater knowledge and use of IEPS. Part of this project was to develop the ability of teachers to successfully case-manage and individualise student learning. Behind this was the need to model new practices referenced to appropriate pedagogical and ethical beliefs. The hope was that the teachers would adopt new practices because it was both the best model to use and the right thing to do. To move the school forward the reform was based on four steps.

1. The school, based on the principles of self-management, would engage in the project on their terms.
2. The school would bring parents and teachers together to develop shared goals and actions to support student learning.
3. The school would add to the knowledge and skills of the teachers.
4. The school would identify a range of successful strategies rather than the "one correct" model.

The strategic issues highlighted a need to develop effective school-wide systems. In terms of successful implementation the school cited Sarason's (1991) opinion that piecemeal reforms inevitably failed. For the school to be successful it had to redefine the relationships between all the stakeholders for the benefit of students with special education needs. As a result of this definition it could articulate the following vision:

- to make a difference for children whose experience of school has been less than successful by the following actions:
  - to stop seeing children as "special needs" and to start seeing them as unique and valuable individuals
  - to define for the school, the language and terms of support for these students, for example, taking away the labelling of students
- to build success on what students can do rather than what they cannot do
- to create quality choices for these students now and in their future.

The success of the programme was to be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively using:

- the improved level of success these students achieved after an intervention programme

- the effectiveness of the relationship between home and school

- the improved level of individual self-esteem experienced by students after participating in the project.

The weaving of this mix of beliefs, expectations and outcomes into an action plan showed that the school saw a need for a broad based implementation plan. This plan is detailed below:

TABLE 2

Action Plan

ACTION PHASES	TEACHER TASK	IN-SERVICE TRAINING	PROJECT MONITORING
1. Preparation for introduction – building a momentum and capacity for change to be introduced.	For each classroom, except new entrants, two children were to be provided with extra support.	Lead teacher model (Special education needs coordinator (SENCO)/Principal/ GSE Facilitator).	
2. Introduction of IEPs as a tool to individualise and adapt curriculum.	One criteria of selection was that the intervention would lead to the children succeeding at their cohort's expected level.	Whole school and management development • three staff meetings • observations in three other schools (reported back to staff).	Two students in each class working in the project were identified.
3. Review of school practice.	The selected children were to have an identified learning issue.	Parallel programmes – trial of individualised programmes using some children identified as requiring IEPs and some from the regular class programme. This allowed a number of teachers an opportunity to experience and experiment with adaptive curriculum.	Nominations with evidence were received from syndicates for individualised programmes for children with identified talents and abilities (working on systems with a control group).
4. First meeting with parents.	Each child would have two IEPs; one at mid-year and one at the end of year.		IEPs held within the designated timeframe.
5. Professional development delivered.			
6. Parallel programming.			Parallel programmes implemented.
7. Final meeting with parents.			Final IEPs held with reporting back against individualised goals.

RESULTS

Twenty-two students or six percent of the school roll participated in the project. Fourteen percent of these students left before the completion of the project and 42 IEPs were held during the six-month implementation period. The measure used was a comparison of reading achievement before and after the project. It was assumed that each student should increase their reading achievement by six months during the project. For this reason any improvement over six months could be seen as an indication of successful intervention. The results for the period June 2005 - January 2006 showed that seventy percent of these students increased their reading level by an average of 9.5 months. One student increased their reading performance by 2.2 years during their time of participation.

Fifty-nine percent of the parents surveyed responded, with seventy percent stating that the relationship between the school and the home had been beneficial and ninety percent believing that their child had a high or very high level of self-esteem after participating in the project. On these data the project could be described as successful. In addition the parents surveyed also presented two broad messages through this process:

1. Parents wanted the new style programmes to continue because they found they better matched their children's learning needs.

2. Parents believed that if the relationship that they and their child had with their teacher was positive, then it was beneficial to their child's academic achievement and self-esteem.

Throughout the implementation process, feedback from teachers and parents helped modify aspects of school practice. The school found it had to be flexible enough to change small practices but focused enough to continue to move the project forward to completion. The EEPiSE project changed the initial focus on the effectiveness of the school's special education needs expenditure to an in-depth review of philosophy and practice. However, at the end of the project, it was still problematic to prove the programme's effectiveness. The evaluation of the project led to the identification of the following key learnings:

1. School-wide systems needed to be established so that teachers focused on providing the appropriate programme for each student. The role of systems was firstly to demonstrate accountability for student achievement to class teachers, and secondly to allow teachers to seek innovative methods to address learning needs. The biggest motivator behind change of practices was teachers seeing innovative programmes succeeding and discussing these with their peers.

2. The empowerment of students and parents as part of the programme made for a strong home-school alliance. This working together provided a positive role model for the students and created support for the new-style programmes that were run. The power of positive parent discussion about individualised support for their children has created an expectation and the school now has to consider how this will be delivered.

3. Change such as this must be sponsored from the school management. Leadership in change requires school managers to be aware of the ethical role they need to play in ensuring that students receive appropriate programmes. Partly this is reflecting and analysing current practice. Partly it is developing a vision that a critical mass of staff members support.

CONCLUSION

The EEPiSE project delivered a new style of special education needs programming within the school. The results from the project were encouraging enough for the school to sustain it beyond the conclusion of the study. The results suggest that a more individualised and inclusive approach now needs to be extended across the school. With this comes the issue of managing those tensions identified as strategic issues. Firstly, the school needs to look closely at how it ensures that all teachers have the pedagogical knowledge and classroom management to successfully individualise programmes for students with moderate special education needs. This is an issue of successful systems and also of professional development. Secondly, the school needs to look carefully at how best it can assess the effectiveness of its programmes. Anecdotally the perceptions of the teachers and the parents were that the project was very successful. The next stage is to develop a model of measurement that allows the impact of special education needs programmes to be evaluated. Thirdly, the school needs to find appropriate funding mechanisms to ensure the individualised programmes are sustained. The level of resourcing appears to be a major determinant of success. The existence of a special education needs teacher creates an environment where the coordination of student information can take place, meaning less duplication of effort and the ability to better manage teacher workload. Finally, the project brought about a strategic capacity in school management. The need to plan and manage the change meant that school leaders became more adept at understanding the cycle of change and the processes of consultation and decision-making. School mangers are now more comfortable at handling differences of philosophy and working through the resolution of such differences.

The journey through EEPiSE ultimately clarified the beliefs that the school had about special education needs programmmes. The process of confronting and reconciling tensions and complexities ultimately led to the school determining what it believed in terms of philosophy, pedagogy and practices.

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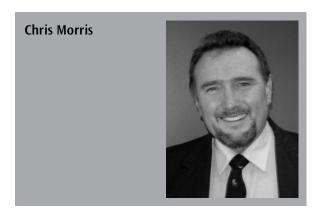
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