



Let Me Fly

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Storied Experience

Keywords

Family involvement, parent child relations, parent choice, parent school relationship, residential special schools, special education

The plane doors shut behind me with the sound of a suction pump, and as I shuffled my way sideways down the aisle like a crab, I realised something was missing. It was the dreaded panicky feeling of being trapped which, strangely, was not clutching my chest. After my three busy days, I sank down into my seat with the heaviness of satisfied tiredness, instead of the former weight of paralysing anxiety as I anticipated crossing Cook Strait in a “flying pencil”.

I waved vigorously through the misty port-hole to the teacher and two students from Salisbury School, a residential special school for girls, who had brought me to Nelson airport after my once-a-term school visit. Anna¹, one of the students, was jumping up and down on the balcony, waving wildly as if trying to bring the metal beast back as it gathered speed.

As I settled for the half hour flight, I thought about the positive changes I had seen in Anna during the two years visiting Salisbury School. Anna has Down syndrome and the relentless day-by-day stress for family and staff, of coping with her disability prior to her placement, had contributed over the years to family problems and discouragement of staff in her local school. Staff were also dealing with challenging behaviour on a daily basis, and despite prolonged efforts, had exhausted their resources. There was no special school in their area, and Anna’s parents needed to devote some quality time to their two other teenage children who were exhibiting some emotional and behaviour difficulties. Her parents were also working with a counsellor on their own relationship. With the best will in the world, it is not always possible to create the ideal learning environment for a young person in their home community. Conversely, a boarding situation is not necessarily the best alternative. On the rare occasion when Salisbury School was not a good “fit” for a student, attendance was discontinued and the young person returned home.

As a parent myself, I had expected my children’s educational needs to be met in the local community school, and would never have considered a boarding school option. I had developed stereotypes of boarding schools from literature and the media which had never been tested in reality. As a special education employee I embraced the mainstream inclusion philosophy wholeheartedly – and still do – but this experience, while admittedly a controversial one in educational circles, had taught me to remain open to alternative provisions.

What was causing the significant positive turn-around in behaviour that I witnessed in Anna each term I visited Salisbury School? As I saw it, possibly it was a combination of factors, difficult to reproduce in any other setting: small class numbers and a high adult to student ratio; 24-hour consistency of management between school and “cottage”; shared care and team work amongst staff (director, principal, teacher, teacher aide, social workers and residential manager); and regular on-site counselling input. Nelson Special Education staff also visited the school to offer behavioural support. Salisbury offered a safe learning environment for students where safety may have been compromised at home. There were also senior student flattening and community work experience programmes for older students, well supervised extra-curricular activities seven days a week, outdoor education trips – and quality time with rested families in the holidays. Regular contact with families was maintained during the school term by phone calls, emails, letters and the occasional exciting parcel!

Sometimes I met Anna and her family at the home end. Most of my work was off-site. I met parents at the local airport at the beginning and end of each term, and witnessed the gradual restoration of families assisted in part through students’ attendance at the state-funded special education facility. In my area I facilitated, for six months, students’ re-inclusion to home communities at the end of their two-year placement. This involved family support and ongoing education/training for the students. Thus I was, in part, facilitating the lifelong learning process and meaningful participation of individuals in their local communities, which was a key part of Ministry of Education goals.

¹ Names and circumstances have been altered in this story to protect identities.

As I perceived it, many of these students had left home as children with a range of needs and returned two years later as young adults who had increased self-control, improved self-esteem, and who demonstrated positive learning outcomes, as testified to by their immediate and wider families, present and former staff. As a result of my experience in this position I had to rethink my understanding of inclusion and consider the issue of family/whānau choice in a different way, while still respecting those who have a different perspective. I had learned that special education provision is not black or white, but may include colours of the spectrum. Factors such as flexibility, quality relationships, individualised learning programmes, managed transitions and communities of support, could be crucial.

Anna had one term left of her placement at Salisbury School. Most of the anti-social behaviours had been eliminated. She had gained self-care skills, developed some basic learning skills and had stopped running away. Sitting in on daily morning staff meetings I heard her teacher describe how incidents of spitting had reduced from several times daily on admission to once a term on average. She had also improved her reading level from 2 to 3, and her oral communication. At Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, her social worker described how the daily battle over showering and putting on clean clothes had disappeared, and Anna now enjoyed the regular routine and was taking a pride in her hair. Gone also were the upturned plates in the dining room when she took a dislike to something.

At Salisbury School she had been nurtured by caring, respectful teachers and teacher aides, dedicated social workers, counsellors and psychologists, and her self-confidence had blossomed. Her family was deeply grateful for the unique educational opportunity which combined caring and commitment of professionals dedicated to delivering quality service. With support from regular IEP teleconferencing, her parents were able to collaborate with staff about strategies for management and share progress and milestones. This gave them more confidence when she returned home for holidays. Anna had been offered a new start, and her head was held high.

The intercom interrupted my thoughts. We were coming in to land in Wellington. I hadn't even registered the odd bump in transit, and prepared for the usual dreaded approach to the airport with scarcely a flutter. With a huge sense of achievement I realised that I had defeated my fear of flying by facing and doing it often, as part of my work. If Anna and my other students at Salisbury could fight their dragons and overcome some of them, so could I.

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