Researching social justice for students with special educational needs

Rose Symes
Arohena Primary School, New Zealand

Abstract

Following international trends, and research evidence from New Zealand, England and the USA, it is likely that there will be an exponential increase in the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) enrolling in New Zealand schools in the ensuing years. Furthermore, the face of special needs is changing such that what is meant by the term, 'special needs', appears to be highly contestable and somewhat elusive. Although international literature uses the term 'special needs' unproblematically, what is now considered to be special needs appears far more complicated. Research by Graham-Matheson (2012a), Richards (2012) and Hall (1997) shows that the term 'special needs' leads to preconceptions which often ignore contextual issues. This can exacerbate the learning difficulties of students with special educational needs because it tends to support inappropriate leadership practices, ineffective teaching techniques, and insufficient resourcing in the context of these particular students. While education is considered to be a moral enterprise, the field of special education is arguably wrought with ethical dilemmas and moral problems, especially when educators are called upon to advocate for children with disabilities who often comprise a minority group within a school community (Fiedler & VanHaren, 2009; Hallett & Hallett, 2012). This article elaborates upon these perspectives so as to highlight the seriousness of this issue and, hence, to stress the need for its implications upon socially just school leadership practices in New Zealand to be far more thoroughly explored.

Keywords: *Special needs; social justice; moral purpose; ethics; equity*

Introduction

Education of students with special educational needs (SEN) is now an established policy objective in many countries (Lindsay, 2007). Hence, New Zealand school principals are bound by the professional, ethical and legal requirements described in the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) to ensure modified learning environments provide equitable educational opportunities for students identified with SEN in their schools (Ministry of Education, 2009). However, a number of recent changes to New Zealand's special education policy have resulted in more implementation responsibility being devolved to the school. This has not only placed increased strain on principals but also resulted in severely reduced resourcing for students with SEN, the restructuring of special support agencies, and the tightening of criteria for accessing specialist support (Symes, 2014). Research findings have revealed that many of the funding issues associated with the financing of SEN appear to be located in the current New Zealand Government's neo-liberal policy (Higgins, MacArthur, & Morton, 2008).

For example, Roaf (2004) and Lashley (2007) consider the era of public accountability for educational performance of students to be an anathema for students with disabilities and calls for changes in professional practice. They argue that entrenched beliefs about special education have blamed students for the lack of success, and the social, educational, financial and emotional costs, rather than holding educators accountable for providing students with what they need to learn. Graham-Matheson (2012b) believes that such accountability exposes the fact that inappropriate teaching techniques and materials are exacerbating learning difficulties experienced by learners with SEN. This position confirms suggestions by Booth and Ainscow (2002) and Corbett (2001) that restructuring of school cultures, policies, and practices involves creating a pedagogy which relates to the

diversity of individual needs. Providing resources, which enable equitable participation for all, reduces barriers to social and curricula opportunities in local schools.

Findings from my recent research (Symes, 2014) confirm that the SEN of many students are being recognized and acknowledged, but not met. School leaders are forced to make decisions about which student programmes are to be supported and which are not, and which students are to receive intervention. These are ethical decisions which are especially difficult when funding the requirements of SEN means that other students receive reduced resources. It appears that the Ministry of Education (MOE) is, in a sense, failing to portray, accept and acknowledge in an ethical manner the needs of learners who have some kind of particular personal issue which places them in the so called 'special needs' category. Importantly, these research findings appear congruent with international findings (Mitchell, 2010).

While it is simplistic to criticize government departments for poor or inadequate resources, it is insightful to note that New Zealand's Education Review Office (ERO) suggests that funding, as a potential barrier to inclusion, is of secondary importance when compared with the influence of leadership and differentiated teaching for students with high needs (ERO, 2010). Such a view appears to emphasize a logistical, rather than a cultural approach to SEN. The literature suggests that leadership behaviours influence the culture of organizations, and that culture influences the leadership decisions that are made (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hoy, 1990; Schein, 1992). If the Education Review Office emphasizes a logistical approach, school leaders are likely to implement a similar logistical approach towards decisions associated with the SEN teaching and resourcing in their school. Such decisions will be based upon tangible and measurable factors, including costs and time, when really it should be about the nature of the school's culture and its attendance to social factors around equity, diversity and inclusion. Surely, attention to the special needs of those students who require it becomes a matter of social justice and not a managerial cost-benefit matter? Leadership for social justice examines the policies and procedures that shape schools, as well as the school culture that might lead to social inequalities and marginalization caused by a disability. Informed leadership decision-making ensures that decisions about students with special education needs are based on moral purpose and a sense of social justice, not on financial and resource prioritization.

To this end, this article reports on a small study that explored the responses from a number of urban Waikato primary school principals to the inherent issues in providing viable and equitable learning opportunities for students with special needs. This qualitative research examined how these principals reconciled theories of ethics, social justice and morality around inclusive education, with current practice. Key to this investigation was exploring whether their own leadership decisions concerning equitable learning opportunities were influenced by consideration of equality and social justice or ethical, moral and legal guidelines. It also brought into question the influence that organizational structure and leadership behaviour had on developing the cultural dynamics and ethos of their school as an inclusive community.

Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility for this inquiry. They allowed for a rich scrutiny of the leadership behaviour and relationships of six principals within their own situational context, and offered an opportunity for communication about the myriad challenges he or she faced as a school leader when endeavouring to meet the multiple learning requirements of students with special educational needs.

The face of special needs – a broad spectrum of learners
An important responsibility of a school leader is to become conversant with the multi-facets of special education, since the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) (2000) has identified the fact that students with SEN potentially occupy a broad spectrum of learners and learning needs. This includes those students simply experiencing learning difficulties; students with communication, intellectual, emotional, behavioural, or physical impairment; and students presenting with a combination of these characteristics.

Moreover, it is noted that this MOE understanding of special needs also includes those students who have been identified as gifted and talented. However, Hanson et al. (1998), Villa and Colker (2006) and Winter and O'Raw (2010) argue that the types of children requiring additional support goes beyond those traditionally thought of as having SEN. These authors also include immigrants for whom English is a second language, as well as other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups identified by the Education Review Office as priority learners. These groups include Māori, Pasifika, special needs and students from low income families who are not achieving at or above National Standards (ERO, 2012).

Rather than simply categorising the types of SEN students, Carpenter (2010a), the National Director of the Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (CLDD) research project, adds compelling insight into the possible characteristics of some of these students. He proposes that a new group of learners are entering schools and presenting complex learning difficulties and disabilities. These learners present with multiple and profound learning difficulties and extreme behaviour patterns which have originated from medical or social phenomena such as assisted conception, premature birth, maternal drug/alcohol abuse during pregnancy, or medical/genetic advances. These students will constitute a significant part of the 21st Century frontier for education and place even further strain on school leaders, school staff, and the existing scant resources for special education (Carpenter, 2010b). Indeed, Carpenter (2000a, 2000b) further warns that even the teachers most skilled in modifying and adapting curriculum for SEN students may be unable to address the complex learning needs of these particular students because the latter are most likely to become cognitively disenfranchised, socially dysfunctional and emotionally disengaged. The findings which follow illustrate the complexities and challenges associated in leading for social justice with regard to learners with special needs.

Limited resourcing requires focused decision making
Arguably, one of the difficulties in estimating the number of students who require SEN funding, but do not get it, is that many school leaders give up trying to get funding after having an application rejected. Data gained from Statistics New Zealand (2006) reveals that five percent of children aged 0-14 years have special needs, while Davison (2012) reports that three percent of New Zealand's school aged students in 2012 are recorded as having severe learning difficulties. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education's Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) only provides funding for one percent of the school population who have the highest need for special education. This leaves thousands of students with relatively high SEN who fail to reach the ORRS threshold with no other option than to compete for highly contested additional funding (MOE, 2004).

My research findings raise questions about the possibility of perceived improbity in the duplicit role of the MOE as both adviser and arbitrator in the issue of SEN funding (Symes, 2014). The data showed that, on the one hand, the school leaders' decisions concerning student eligibility for special educational programming were informed by MOE special education policies (MOE, 2009, 2013a). On the other hand, the MOE allocates and distributes the funding and staffing for special education initiatives (MOE, 2004, 2013a). While additional funding to support students with moderate levels of difficulty (learning, behaviour and/or social communication, vision, hearing, mobility or communication) is provided by the Special Education Grant (SEG), based on school roll and decile rating, all of the school leader participants indicated that this level of funding was grossly inadequate (MOE, 2004; 2013a). Moreover, the data showed that the criteria for targeted funding had been tightened thereby reducing the level of funding and forcing many special needs students into mainstream classrooms with little or no support. Chapman (1988) warns that mainstreaming of students with disabilities, if not resourced adequately, will deteriorate into 'main dumping' and will severely impact on the learning of students with special needs.

Indeed, the school leaders in my research perceived the current SEN education policy as reflecting a political viewpoint which emphasizes economic viability and growth of schools, reduced resourcing, and the devolution of responsibility for special education to school leaders. This view is widely acknowledged

in the literature as a common contemporary limitation upon equitable and adequate SEN funding (Apple, 2004; Armstrong, 2005; Dyson, 2005; Dyson, Gallanaugh, & Millward, 2009; Mitchell, 2000; Olssen & Matthews, 1997; Thompson, 2012).

Of serious concern is that existing data shows that the MOE acknowledges a funding shortfall but offers a simplistic solution by suggesting that the provision for these students can be made within the regular school system with minimal adjustment (MOE, 2013a). Again, my research findings illustrated that this could not be further from the truth. Here, the respondents confirmed that leadership decisions concerning allocation of funding were severely impacted by the changes to special education policy in New Zealand's schools, and the requirement of mainstream schools to do more to support students with SEN. This places increased strain on school leaders and teachers in accessing, resourcing and providing alternative schooling facilities (Davison, 2012; MOE, 2013a). These respondents were unanimous in their concern about an inept government regime, which had restructured special education resulting in reduced resourcing for children with special needs. They confirmed that these changes had coincided with the restructuring of the Supplementary Learning and Support service (MOE, 2012) designed to support children with significant learning difficulties. The pending closure of not only special needs units in mainstream schools but also that of two specialized schools had added further pressure on respondents to meet students' complex learning needs in school.

In alignment with the views of Winter and O'Raw (2010) and Strike (2007), all respondents in my study reported being severely challenged to manage and implement education systems which would provide cost effective and equitable distribution of scarce resources. To enable equitable learning opportunities for students with diverse needs, each principal reported the need to devise ways for allocating a substantial amount of the school funds to support additional intervention programmes and resourcing. Most indicated that their school was reliant on fundraising and school levies to minimize the impact of this decision upon the learning requirements of the other students.

An international perspective

Data from my research showed that leadership decisions appeared to be guided by international education policies such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (1997) and No Child Left Behind (2001). Thus, school leaders generally strive to ensure students with SEN receive free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, and that any inequities are addressed. To this end, such legislative guidelines as those promoted by the MOE (2013b) and Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) govern many of their funding decisions. However, my respondents reported that reduced government funding, and increased costs of resourcing, meant that their ideal funding decisions were unable to be realised so that their schools were unable to commit to fully realising the potential of every student. These respondents faced the dilemma of ensuring equitable educational opportunity for students with SEN, as well as issues of fairness and justice as students compete for scarce resources. A particular challenge for respondents was the ethical decisions required, where funding the requirements of SEN students meant other students received reduced resourcing. They agreed with Strike (2007) that this could be construed as reverse discrimination. These principals were being forced to make decisions that deliberately disadvantaged certain categories of students as a result of a closed funding system whereby higher expenditure in one area requires a lower expenditure in another.

Nevertheless, these research respondents considered this way of making decisions often reflected the complex nature of an inclusive school in which all were deemed equal, even though they were different in many respects. These respondents concluded that the aim of inclusion was to give each child a fair chance to succeed, as recommended by the MOE (2013b).

The Ministry of Education response

Education today has entered an achievement–oriented phase which requires a whole school approach to the professional responsibility of basing intervention on the analysis of students' performance data (Benjamin, 2002). The Ministry of Education review of special education in 2010, *Success for All*, set a target that, by 2014, 80% of schools would be doing a good job and none would be doing a poor job of including students with special needs (ERO, 2010). However, this report coincided with a government restructure of special education in New Zealand schools in which all responsibility for students with special needs was devolved to schools (Anderson, Bush, & Wise, 2001; MOE, 2012; 2013b).

A report by the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO, 2010) identified a gap in knowledge concerning leadership practice which informs inclusive learning communities. Here it is stated that, "Approximately half of the 229 schools reviewed demonstrated mostly inclusive practice", while a "further 30% of schools" were found to demonstrate "pockets of inclusiveness" leading to less consistent inclusion for students with high needs (ERO, 2010, p.1). The remaining "20% of schools were found to have few inclusive practices" leading to "significant forms of exclusion" for students with high needs (ERO, 2010, p. 26). ERO's findings confirm a report by Lloyd (2006) that the disparity between policy rhetoric and practice contributed significantly to the failure to ensure genuine access to education for students with special needs and, in fact, increased exclusionary practice.

In addition, Evans and Lunt (2002) point out that inclusion is challenged by other political agendas that engender competing ideologies. On the one hand, a politically motivated standards based agenda focuses on league tables and standardized academic attainment while, on the other, a humanistic and socially motivated agenda focuses on individualized education programmes which are tailored to meet specific needs. In keeping with the research views presented by Anderson and colleagues (2001), as well as Lashley (2007), the principals in my study expressed unanimous dissatisfaction at the inflexibility of New Zealand's National Standards processes in fairly assessing the progress of students with special needs. Furthermore, Cornwall (2012) warns that a bureaucratic and inflexible education system, which has been created by competitive dictatorial frameworks in an effort to drive up standards, has made little or no difference to the results of students with special needs.

The inclusionary process

A commitment to an inclusionary policy for the education of students with special educational needs is now an established policy objective in many countries (Lindsay, 2007). According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1994), "regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving an education for all" (p.ix). Similarly, Hanson et al. (1998) and Villa and Colker (2006) agree that the diverse environments of inclusive classrooms provide all children with a setting in which to grow. However, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) are wary of the term inclusion and believe such a term warrants further investigation before it can be fully accepted.

The term 'inclusion' evokes powerful emotive reactions among school leaders. For every staunch supporter of blending special and general education, Ballard (1993) and Bargerhuff (2001) believe there will be an educator, parent, or politician equally opposed to the practice. Graham-Matheson (2012a, 2012b) suggests that, in the 21st century, the right to inclusive education for students with special educational needs has not only become an ethical assumption, but a legal requirement. In Ireland, the National Council for Special Education (2013) offers strong educational, social and moral grounds for lifting the level and quality of inclusion within the mainstream, by educating children with SEN with their peers while still providing specialist provision for those who need it. Moreover, authors such as Winter and O'Raw (2010),

Lipsky and Gartner (1997), and Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2007) posit that children should only be removed from regular educational environments when the severity of their disability is such that education in regular classes cannot be achieved. However, Place (2011) reports that some educators resist including all students in regular classrooms, believing that separation of students with SEN from the mainstream is in the best interests of all.

Hence, it is not surprising that although there is a raft of international policies on inclusive education, Winter and O'Raw (2010) reveal that many countries are struggling with the management and implementation of education systems which cater for learning needs of a diverse group of students. Various researchers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Strike, 2007) suggest that effective principal leadership and teacher attitudes are crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive education. They suggest that leaders contribute to student learning indirectly through their influence on the professional learning culture within the school. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) and Villa and Colker, (2006) recommend educators should be fully conversant with the overall aim of intervention, in which deliberate strategies are designed to alleviate or remediate the 'at risk' factors. This implies that the school leader needs to be actively involved in the professional learning of the teachers and the school community if it is to suitably and effectively implement a truly inclusive learning environment for SEN students. Indeed, there is more required of a school wishing to implement a truly inclusive learning environment than that described by an official policy. For example, the SEN code of practice (English Department for Education and Skills, 2001) only stipulates a requirement for access to a broad, balanced, and relevant education, flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of learning styles and pace within a mainstream school setting. Yet Bricker (1995) and Cullen (1999) highlight the importance of developing a suitably pastoral learning environment for SEN students when positing that social acceptance of students with SEN into mainstream settings is not enough to create meaningful learning opportunities. Programmes should actively engage children in collaborative, rather than simply social, interaction which yields further learning opportunities (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001; Valentine, 2013). A truly inclusive learning environment for SEN students not only caters for their educational needs but also encourages the other students to accept these students as collaborators or contributors to their learning, too.

Moreover, Whitehead, Boschee, and Decker (2013) describe links between students' feelings of belonging and motivational, attitudinal, and behavioural factors. Close and continual monitoring of the SEN student's academic and personal qualities is an essential aspect of an inclusive learning environment. My research respondents agree with Kaufman (1992) regarding the necessity for structured systems for monitoring and tracking student progress and the careful analysis of needs assessment. Furthermore, many authors (Carpenter, 2010a, 2010b; Carpenter, Cockbill, Egerton, & English, 2010; Fergusson & Carpenter, 2010) concur that collaborating with families, and working with a multidisciplinary team of specialists, helps principals and teachers learn about their students and deepens understanding of their learning styles. A review of the child's profile, patterns of engagement and knowledge of their successful learning pathways, enables teachers to match each strand of learning need and so design a personalized wrap around curriculum which will meaningfully engage them in their learning programme. Students with complex learning difficulties and disabilities require curriculum delivery to be sharp, focused, meaningful, purposeful and balanced (Carpenter, 2010b; Carpenter, Ashdown, & Bovair, 2002; Goswami, 2008; Hargreaves, 2006; Limbrick & Jirankowa-Limbrick, 2009; Wolke, 2009).

Moral purpose and social justice as key drivers in SEN
In order to meet the multi-faceted requirements of students with SEN, it is crucial that leaders have a working knowledge of relevant ethical standards and professional codes of ethics (Fiedler & VanHaren, 2009). Hallett

and Hallett (2012) encourage leaders to promote reflection and engagement in ethical research-led practice, rather than imposing their own knowledge and practice upon staff. The moral nature of transformative leadership links intellectual activities that take place in schools to a broader social and cultural context such as disability and the need for special education (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Place, 2011).

Leadership for social justice examines policies and procedures that shape schools and school culture that lead to social inequalities, and marginalization due to disability. It confronts the status quo, embraces difference, and challenges traditional leadership roles and stances. Marshall and Oliva (2006), Place (2011), and Sergiovanni (1992) believe that it is important to move educators from passive involvement in education to conscious, deliberate and proactive educational practices that produce socially just outcomes for all children. This can create a caring society that is accepting of risk, rather than one that blames children and families for situations that place them at risk.

Commonalities in the behaviour of principals who participated in my research reveal a close relationship between their sense of effectiveness in their leadership decision-making and the allocation of highly contested funding, time and personnel resources. All respondents sought to achieve maximum benefit for students and the school in relation to money spent. Furthermore, a special focus was placed on the strategic allocation of funds which supported the academic learning, social growth, and independent functioning of students with SEN.

Due to scarce funding, these respondents were forced to decide which student programmes were to be supported over others, and which students were to receive intervention. Data showed that this often demanded decisions about a student's learning capacity to make accelerated progress through individualized intervention such as reading recovery. The respondents agreed that in some circumstances this was construed as a poor financial investment for the school. These school leaders also referred to isolated incidents in which they based decisions on a student's level of functioning given their current life circumstances. Data showed that, at times, investing resources elsewhere had the biggest impact on a greater number of students. For example, small group intervention using a Group Education Plan, and the allocation of resources to students with similar needs, allowed the school to address behavioural issues and speech and communication, numeracy, and literacy needs more effectively.

Although most discussion was centred on meeting the requirements of students with special needs, some respondents suggested resources should be made available for investment in Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programmes that allow for high achieving students to flourish. This resonates with Collins' (2001) recommendation to "put your best people on your biggest opportunity, not your biggest problem" (p. 58). Findings suggested that investing in gifted and talented students could potentially produce citizens who would make the greater economic contribution to their nation, a view which aligns with the Government's neo-liberal economic policy. However, most participants in my study questioned the ethics of investing in extension opportunities while other students were in severe need of help to address behaviour management issues, increase their self-sufficiency, and to develop relationships and personal dignity. These participants appeared to agree that while investment in gifted and talented students was a worthy goal, the immediate intervention for students with severe need would benefit the whole community more in the long term, rather than being seen as a drain on resources.

Responses from these participants aligned with the work of Strike (2007) whereby the systematic tracking of student progress and engagement in regular dialogue with their Special Education Need Coordinators (SENCOs) triggered the allocation of resources according to programme quality and effectiveness. Data was silent on how leaders measured the long term effects of intervention, and at what point they would gauge resource expenditure as imposing an unreasonable burden on the school or on those students who received less so another could receive more. All participants were adamant, however, that the

politics of schools must not detract from ensuring that school resourcing was consistent with student need, a view shared by Hattie (2009). Nevertheless, respondents confirmed that students with SEN required a disproportionately high level of resourcing to produce adequate educational gains as measured against the National Standards.

Participants identified overcrowding as another potential barrier to creating a safe, inclusive and socially just learning environment. All respondents were committed to allocating school funds to employ additional personnel over and above staffing entitlement to reduce class numbers. In addition, these principals were unanimous in their advocacy for early intervention, which resulted in positive effects for both students and schools with respect to long term resource allocation. Nonetheless, these school leaders all reported that school funded intervention came at a financial cost to the school, given the school's finite budget and personnel, and limited access to resources.

Moral authority as a basis of leadership

While contending perspectives about inclusive education have never been resolved, multiple authors (Branson, Bezzina, & Burford, 2011; Davis, Darling-Hammond, La Pointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Fullan, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Rice, 2010; Sergiovanni, 1992; Strike, 2007) identify commonalities of authentic leadership, beliefs and values, and the establishment of moral purpose, as key to providing an inclusive educational programme which is ethically sound and socially and morally 'just'. This is a view supported by my research respondents, all of whom recognized the influence that ethical leadership had on the equitable allocation of highly contested funding, time and personnel resources for the academic learning, social growth and independent functioning of students with SEN. There is no clearly right or wrong answer as to where to expend such limited school resources – towards the benefit of the majority or towards the support of the disadvantaged few. Examination of this inherent leadership dualism and the ensuing values contestation enables school leaders to consider the practices associated with successful inclusive education in relation to their own context.

Any leader can learn a set of skills, but not all possess the vision, attitudes and values which will inform their leadership practice and become the basis of leadership strategies and actions (Branson, 2009; Whitehead et al., 2013). Writers such as these confirm that leadership takes many forms and although leaders should always lead, different circumstances require different approaches. Decisive leaders successfully manipulate events and people so that a vision becomes the reality, whereas a form of stewardship provides morally based leadership which touches people differently, tapping emotion, appealing to values, and responding to connections with other people (Fullan, 2003; Strike, 2007). Although Branson (2009) suggests a lack of moral literacy exists for guiding educational leaders, he considers leaders need to commit to moral purpose and a belief in social justice. By committing to authentic leadership, and a system of beliefs and values, Branson (2009) believes principals can develop strategies which increase personal effectiveness, allowing them to become the best they can be.

Rather than being motivated by bureaucratic mandates or directives, some authors (for example, see Branson et al., 2011; Greenfield, 1991; Johnson, 1990) agree that school leaders should be motivated by a moral commitment to students, an awareness of their needs, and a belief about the significance of their role as leader in each student's life. By communicating high expectations of classroom teachers as leaders, principals can create a commitment to values which will emerge from a groundswell of moral authority (intuition). By so doing, Sergiovanni (1992) predicted that schools will transform into organizations which inspire commitment, devotion and service to students with special educational needs. Although commonly recognized as best practice amongst school leaders, moral authority has yet to gain full support within an academic concept of leadership.

Moral compass

The ethics of accountability are a reality in the lives of all school leaders. Strike (2007) defines the fundamental task of the school leader as creating competent, caring, collegial, and ethical learning communities, which provide good education and responsible accountability. To this end, Coster (1998) posits that effective leaders are guided by an ethical imperative that promotes individual and organizational respect for dignity, justice and fairness in dealing with all people, and using authority to maintain what is right.

In a sense, such an ethical imperative can be seen as a leader's moral compass. Indeed, Strike (2007) describes the use of a moral compass which guides contemporary leaders in maintaining perspective when faced with the complex and conflicting moral demands of creating an effective and deliberative learning community. It provides a guide for ethical decision making and offers a clear understanding of one's own role and authority. Rather than avoiding the moral demands of leadership or imposing their own moral values, leaders balance the situational context of their learning organization with their role as moral leader (Thompson, 2011).

While moral principles govern interaction within learning organizations, ethics is concerned with moral obligation, responsibility and social justice. It defines school practice and rules and informs responsible behaviour and decision making (April, Peters, Locke, & Miambo, 2011; Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005; Strike, 2007). Ethics is not only about morality and what is right and what is wrong, how social resources are to be justly distributed and how decisions are fairly made; it is also central to the establishment of a good educational community (Strike, 2007).

Although educational policy promotes a culture of fair cooperation, freedom, equality and democracy, school leaders remain challenged by issues related to social justice in the education of students with disabilities. School leaders, in particular, are required to pay special attention to the performance of students with special educational needs, as well as to issues of resource inequities in schools (Cherry-Holmes, 1988; Skrtic, 1991; Strike, 2007).

Conclusion

By coming to an understanding of the complexities of special educational needs, and the impact that morally and ethically based leadership decisions have on the development of school culture and ethos, school leaders may be able to better understand the significance and essence of inclusivity.

To this end, my research findings suggest that inclusive education does not demand that all instruction take place in the student's home classroom and that there are times when it is more appropriate to provide support services in settings other than the classroom. Differentiated learning programmes should meet individual student needs. In addition to these findings, literature substantiates the unanimity of my research respondents as to the value and functionality of intervention early in the first year of a student's schooling.

Moreover, this research inquiry revealed that changes to the structure of New Zealand's special education policy, and the resulting devolution of responsibility to schools, not only severely reduced resourcing for children with special needs but also brought about an unhelpful restructuring of special support agencies and a tightening of criteria for accessing specialist support. All of which has placed increased strain on principals, teachers and educators. Rather than fulfilling the promise of a truly inclusive education that benefits the learning of each and every student, such changes have hindered rather than enhanced the New Zealand educational environment. More attention is required to this important and serious educational issue. SEN cannot be seen simply as just another academic consideration. Rather, a socially just commitment to SEN requires a holistic approach not only to the particular learning and growth needs of the student but also by those involved in support of the student's learning including the principal, teachers, fellow students, and parents. A high degree of collaboration and consultation is needed to create flexibility in school systems that allows for maximization of limited resources in order to maximize student outcomes.

In conclusion, it is likely that any changes to leadership practices that impact on SEN students' learning outcomes rely on the construction of a framework for improved academic, social and independent functioning of students with special needs. This leadership must be supported with a change in government policy which addresses issues of inadequate funding and support for students with special educational needs.

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Author

Rose Symes is principal of Arohena Primary School in South Waikato. Her experience in education spans more than thirty years and her practical experience has been enriched by sound theoretical knowledge and deep understanding of up-to-date legislative framework. Rose has recently completed her Masters of Educational Leadership (First Class Honours) in which she explored ways in which Waikato primary school principals meet the multiple learning requirements of students with special needs. Rose is a member of the New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society which allows her to keep connected with the latest leadership issues, and in particular, Leadership for Social Justice.

Email: rose@farmside.co.nz