NEW ZEALAND

Effective Transitions from School to Employment for Young People with Intellectual Disabilities in New Zealand

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Introduction

This report begins with an outline of the New Zealand school system and its provision for students with Intellectual disabilities. The current status of young people with intellectual disabilities in regards to their employment is then canvassed. An overview is provided of current educational activities which appear to enhance the likelihood of employment outcomes for this group. Issues and challenges that require further attention are highlighted in the context of transition from school for young people with Intellectual Disabilities.

The New Zealand School System

The population of New Zealand is around four million, twenty percent of whom are indigenous Maori who arrived about 1000 years ago. The Treaty of Waitangi is regarded as the current founding document of New Zealand which was signed by Maori chiefs and England in 1840. New Zealand became a fully independent member of the Commonwealth in 1947.

Government goals for education are to equip New Zealanders with 21st century skills and to reduce systematic under-achievement. While average student achievement by age 15 is well above the OECD average, the spread of achievement between the highest and lowest achieving students is wider than for many other countries. "Raising achievement and reducing disparity" has therefore become the guiding mission of the Ministry of Education.

The New Zealand School system is largely comprised of state day schools at which attendance is free. There are a total of 2,300 schools (765,000 students) of which 28 are special schools for students with disabilities (2,145 students). All children are able to start school on their fifth birthday, although they do not have to enrol until the day they turn six. All students may leave school when they turn 16, but can stay until the end of the year in which they turn 18. Students with severe disabilities however, may remain at school until the end of the year in which they turn 21.

The last two decades have seen significant reviews and reforms of education involving governance, resourcing and curriculum. A major theme of these reforms has been the devolving of management responsibilities to school boards of trustees elected by parents of students attending each school, although schools are still required to comply with national regulations and guidelines.

Students with special education needs have had the same rights to enrol and receive education at state schools since 1989. Placement in a special school is through a statutory process and requires the agreement of the Secretary of Education. The majority of students with intellectual disabilities are supported through what is known as the Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS). This scheme has been designed to provide a range of educational supports for approximately 1% of students nationally with the highest needs (approximately 7000 students). Access to this

support is not via traditional diagnosis or psychometric test scores, but through descriptions of the extent to which learning tasks require adaptation and specialised assistance. The vast majority of students described as having "severe disabilities" are catered for in this way, including those students with intellectual disabilities.

Students in the ORRS scheme have ongoing access (throughout their school life) to teacher aide support, additional (specialist) teacher input and to a range of specialists including psychologists, speech-language therapists, physiotherapists and others. The resources that comprise the ORRS scheme are portable and follow the student wherever they may move in the school system. In addition, schools receiving new first time enrolments under ORRS are able to access resources for property and building modifications to accommodate the new student. Students in the ORRS scheme also attract higher ongoing levels of property funding for those schools at which they are enrolled.

Of the 7,000 students nationally in the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme approximately 73% are attending regular schools with the balance in special schools. Almost 60% of regular schools have students in the ORRS scheme (this includes regular classroom placement and units or special classes). The extent to which regular schools welcome the enrolment of students with special needs varies and it is clear that some parents still have strong preferences for choosing a special school.

As with any targeted resourcing scheme there are a number of students who do not meet the criteria for the ORRS scheme, but who nevertheless can have quite complex needs. This group would include those students traditionally described as having "mild" and "moderate" levels of intellectual disability and those who have labels such as Aspergers. These students are supported by schools through a range of provisions: every school in New Zealand receives a Special Education Grant (SEG) based on total roll numbers; A Supplementary Learning Support scheme (SLS) provides additional teacher support to those students who are viewed as "just missing out" on eligibility for ORRS; and an Enhanced Programme Fund (EPF) is available to schools which have disproportionate numbers of students described as having "moderate special needs."

Increasingly a non-categorical, inclusive approach to special education is taking hold in New Zealand implying that every school should develop in ways that enable it to respond appropriately to the full range of diversity in the community it serves. The New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference (2001) has provided a major impetus for such an approach as the Government has required all Ministries and Departments to report annually on the progress being made to meet the objectives outlined in the strategy. The Disability Strategy has a specific objective for education:

"To provide the best education for disabled people" (objective 3). There are three associated actions that have particular relevance for special education:

i) Ensure that no child is denied access to their local regular school because of their impairment (3.1)
ii) Improve schools' responsiveness to and accountability for the needs of disabled students (3.6)

iii) Promote appropriate and inclusive educational settings that will meet individual educational needs (3.7)

The Disability Strategy is explicitly aimed at achieving a more inclusive society and is informed by an understanding of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than something that exists inside a disabled person. As a consequence disability is viewed not as something that people have, but as something that happens to people: a process that happens when one group of people create barriers for others in terms of access to places, activities and opportunities usually taken for granted.

The New Zealand Disability Strategy has begun to have a significant influence on how the Ministry of Education (through its Special Education division) defines the outcomes it is seeking to achieve for special education in New Zealand. Intermediate outcomes have been defined as presence, participation and quality learning which are seen as leading to achievement, community participation and, significantly, workforce participation for young people with special needs.

Employment and Young People with Intellectual Disabilities

Participation in the paid workforce by people with intellectual disability is at minimal levels, possibly below 20% of an estimated 13,000 adults with intellectual disability in New Zealand. This does not include the approximately 8,000 adults participating in sheltered employment and other community day support programmes. Accurately assessing workforce participation levels for this group is difficult because there is little available data which has a specific focus on intellectual disability and there are also inherent difficulties and wide variations in prevalence studies (Bray, 2003).

There are around 1500-2000 adults with intellectual disability in paid employment through supported employment programmes and other job placement activities. Most employment is part time. It is likely that a substantial number of these individuals are younger adults because of a continuing focus on transition from school to work which has been gathering momentum for at least the past 5 years.

There are a range of Government assisted programmes that support disabled people into paid employment and other post-school options, including young people with intellectual disabilities. A range of vocational, employment and community services are purchased by Government. These include supported employment, job placement, sheltered work and community or “day” support programmes.

Currently sheltered workshops are exempt under legislation from having to pay the minimum wage. Also, in situations where it is perceived that a person’s productivity is below what is expected for the market wage an “under rate workers permit” can be secured by the employer which allows the person to be paid below the minimum wage. Both these situations are under review with calls for the legislation to be repealed. This would mean that all disabled people would have to be paid at least the minimum wage, including those currently employed by sheltered workshops. People with intellectual disabilities are a significant group of participants in sheltered workshops and in situations where under rate work permits apply.

Sheltered workshops and congregate community support or “day” programmes are the main post-school options currently utilised by young people with intellectual disabilities. However there is continuing growth of supported employment, job placement and more individualised approaches to supported community participation and community living.

An increasingly inclusive educational experience and a focus on transition activities by secondary schools that assume a more inclusive post-school experience are leading to a corresponding increase in demand for a wider range of more individualised and inclusive post school options – including paid employment. Evidence of these developments include a growing array of collaborations between secondary schools and post school providers, and the decision by an increasing number of sheltered workshops and community day support services to “convert” programmes (in anticipation of legislative changes) to supported employment, job placement and more individualised approaches to supported community participation.

Some of these developments are being supported by Government through a significant number of transition pilot programmes as part of its “Pathways to Inclusion” strategy (Department of Labour, 2001). The focus of “Pathways to Inclusion” is to align the current array of vocational services so that outcomes being achieved are consistent with the objectives of the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

The intent of the transition pilot programmes is to gain a better understanding of what programmes and strategies are effective in this context. In the mean time there is a chronic shortage of post-school support services that respond to the increasing demand for more inclusive and individualised options, including paid employment. A coherent funding and purchasing strategy along with effective service coordination mechanisms are urgent requirements if emerging best practice is to be reinforced and sustained.

Supported employment is clearly emerging as the model most likely to achieve positive employment outcomes for young people with intellectual disabilities (Bennie, 1996; Bray 2003; Mirfin-Veitch, 2003). This is because the supported employment approach is highly individualised, inclusive and assumes the possibility of ongoing support being provided. Not surprisingly, secondary schools that have well developed partnerships with local supported employment providers are achieving the most promising employment outcomes.

The current environment holds some exciting possibilities for new service developments and also some very real challenges: young people with intellectual disabilities are not only making the transition from school to adulthood, but also the transition from one service system to another, and at a time when the policies and services designed to provide support following school are themselves in transition.

Current Educational Activities that Enhance Effective Transition to Employment

There are a wide range of activities undertaken in educational settings in New Zealand that have been found to increase the possibility of young people with intellectual disabilities transitioning from school into paid employment. Transition from school has long been a recognised speciality within the broader context of service provision. As a result, what constitutes best practice has been described comprehensively in the literature for some time (Haugh, 1993; Wehman,1993). Mirfin-Veitch (2003) has provided a more recent overview of developments in New Zealand and those directly involved in providing transition services in this country have developed resources that guide practitioners (Career Moves, 2005). Based on this collective work we are able to identify a number of key activities and practices that enhance the likelihood of successful transition from school to employment.

Transition planning that begins around the age of 14

This appears to establish a critical platform from which to develop goals and learning experiences that prepare the young person for the world of paid work. While more active transition planning may be a feature in the last two years of school it is this early start that provides the opportunity for genuine goals and aspirations to develop that include the possibility of employment. It is important to recognise that the values, attitudes and behaviours that lead us to the world of work evolve throughout childhood and young adulthood, not just in the year before we leave school. Young people with intellectual disabilities must also benefit from experiences that evolve over time as apposed to having these compressed into a one or two year "transition programme."

Parents as integral members of the "team."

For parents the transition from school can be a daunting time when the normal anxieties around parenting teenagers are complicated by the vulnerabilities and barriers that young people with intellectual disabilities may experience. In addition there is a whole new world of post-school service providers, new funding systems to grapple with and the possibility that there may be multiple providers involved in different support roles – each wanting to ensure parent involvement. Many parents report that in such a context they often become the default (unpaid) service coordinator.

Including parents as active and contributing members of the transition planning team from the beginning is essential. Again, this can be problematic if transition planning is compressed into the last year or two of school. There may be anxieties and issues that need time to work through and options that need exploring. In addition the range of post-school options, including employment support, is constantly evolving and changing. The pattern of post-school support services that emerges as the point of transition approaches can also lead to significant lifestyle decisions for parents in terms of their support roles.

An inclusive school experience with access to a functional age appropriate curriculum

A school curriculum that potentially views the whole community as the classroom is critical to successful transition. Curriculum content that is focused on the skills, knowledge and supports that will be necessary in those settings the student will be in upon leaving school greatly enhance the possibilities of workforce participation. Age appropriate and functional curriculum content has long been cited as an important prerequisite to successful workforce and wider community participation (Brown et al, 1979). In this context access to and friendships with age group peers are essential for the development of normative expectations and aspirations that include paid work along with personal networks that are essential for life in the community at large. Age group peers are also potential employers!

A functional curriculum assumes that educators are able to successfully adapt and modify content and context. There is considerable activity in New Zealand at present around developing approaches and resources that enable young people with intellectual disabilities to experience real achievement in their learning and arm them with the skills and knowledge that they will need in the workplace and in the community at large.

Incorporating a strong and varied work experience focus.

Such experiences need to begin from around age 15 and be in community settings. These opportunities need to be well supported by both the school and local employers. Some secondary schools have well established partnerships with local employers so that a range of work experience settings are available on an ongoing basis. In some communities local supported employment providers are also providing a link between schools and employers, making the possibility of after school jobs a real option. For the schools part it is also essential that students with disabilities are included in school wide career and work experience opportunities.

Work experience is an important element not only for the individual student to explore options and acquire skills, but also for educators and post school providers to learn about optimal support strategies, modifications and adaptations that will be needed by the young person in the workplace.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that become Individual Transition Plans or Career Plans

By developing such a focus a change in orientation is introduced that makes explicit the outcomes that are now being sought after many years at school. This ensures that learning goals, planning activities and support strategies match the vision that paid work is indeed a desirable and attainable outcome. Transition or career plans enable us to listen carefully to the aspirations and preferences of the young person, be explicit about the supports that will be necessary in the workplace and to seek a “match” on this basis.

Planning processes that are individualised, empowering and future orientated.

This is essential if a shared vision that includes employment is to develop. The PATH process - Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (Pearpoint, O'Brien and Forrest, 1991) and its variations, has been adopted widely in New Zealand as a tool that appears to work well to achieve a positive view of the future and that propels those involved into action to achieve agreed goals.

PATH is a process that includes the whole team (student, family, friends, educators and providers) and requires skilled facilitation (a point often overlooked). Usually two facilitators are needed to ensure a positive process for participants and an accurate record of the planning session. This is because the PATH record involves words and pictures combined into a large poster or graphic. The process starts by identifying a vision of the future with identified outcomes, looks at where things are at now, who needs to be enrolled for support, what is needed to strengthen resolve as well as short and long term goals and how the team will support each other in attaining these. As well as a vehicle for developing a detailed transition plan the PATH process also has the effect of building and sustaining team work in pursuit of a common goal.

The development of collaborations and partnerships between schools and the providers of post-school support services.

In the context of achieving employment outcomes relationships between schools and supported employment providers are showing the most promise. In some cases protocols have been developed that spell out roles and responsibilities for activities such as facilitating transition planning meetings, career planning, finding work experience placements, providing job coaches, employer liaison and communication with parents. In this context supported employment can actually begin at school. The result is a transition process that becomes a shared responsibility between the agencies involved.

The development of these relationships usually require that some work is done to arrive at a shared vision and values. Such collaborations evolve over time and rely on sustained leadership from the organisations involved. Currently there is a lack of clarity around funding mechanisms and responsibility for transition activities which makes the task of establishing partnerships between schools and post-school agencies problematic. Much current activity operates under the auspices of "pilot projects" which creates a level of uncertainty in which more permanent collaborations are difficult to develop.

A coherent funding and purchasing strategy is a critical next step to enable more widespread implementation of practices and programmes that are known to achieve employment outcomes – as well as more certainty for young people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

Transition "expos" and information forums.

These events have usually grown out of the collaborations already mentioned and are aimed at ensuring that various stakeholders have all the information they need.

Forums are provided in which post school providers share information about their services and programmes, schools provide information about transition activities and parent support groups provide information and parent perspectives. All participants, particularly parents, find these events very useful and contribute to much more informed decision making. They are also a useful way of highlighting service and information gaps in a particular community. Many of these forums have been the catalysts for further collaborations among schools and agencies. Service directories have often been published as a result of these events.

Given the current uncertainty around service provision and funding these forums are proving to be an essential ingredient in helping people keep abreast of the constantly changing landscape of programmes provided by post-school agencies.

Ensuring that transition is more than just "transition to work," but transition to adult life and broader participation in the community at large.

Securing and sustaining paid employment for young people with intellectual disabilities can be an extraordinarily challenging enterprise. In the absence of full time paid employment, options that include further education and training, leisure, recreation and voluntary work are essential components of a valued and well supported life in the community – and therefore need also to be a focus of transition planning. The tendency in New Zealand is to respond to these needs by way of congregate "day programme" type options rather than exploring more individualised and supported options that are consistent with the vision of an inclusive community.

Young people with intellectual disabilities are making it clear that they share the aspirations of their age group peers for access to the world of work on the same basis as everyone else. Access to "an ordinary life" also includes participation in the broader life of the community and in ways that people feel valued and included. Parents are also making it increasingly clear that there is a pronounced scarcity of post-school services that are able to effectively support their sons and daughters participation in a range of inclusive work, further education and leisure/recreation options (To Have an Ordinary life, 2003).

Promising practices and programmes are emerging, including supported participation of young people with intellectual disabilities in tertiary "life skills" and foundation education courses, membership in clubs and organisations and the opportunity to contribute to the life of the community through volunteer work.

There is still some considerable movement required to reach a point where such options are the norm rather than the exception.

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