

**Standards plus Inclusive Education Conference**  
**Te Ururoa Flavell; MP for Waiariki**  
**On behalf of the Associate Minister of Education,**  
**Hon Dr Pita Sharples**  
**‘Making Inclusive Education Happen —**  
**Ideas for Sustainable Change’**

I am privileged to be able to speak to this conference, on behalf of the Associate Minister of Education and Minister of Maori Affairs, Hon Dr Pita Sharples.

It seems fitting to firstly acknowledge the passing of three remarkable men, each who in their own unique way promoted the concept of inclusion for all.

On Thursday we heard of the passing of Professor James Ritchie and Sir Howard Morrison.

Professor Ritchie invested his life in sharing his understanding of the challenge and opportunities inherent in, what became the title of his 1992 book, ‘Becoming Bicultural’.

Ta Howard used his public profile to promote the Tu Tangata philosophy, of Maori standing tall on their own two feet; while at the same time embracing and welcoming Pakeha in to his world.

And of course in the magnificent setting of Te Papa we remember Dr Seddon Bennington, the late chief executive. Dr Bennington had a two year stint at teaching, and once said he believed there was "*no more significant profession in our society*".

It was a belief instilled in him by a science teacher at his school in Culverden, whom Dr Bennington considered, and I quote "first opened up a fascinating realm of possibilities".

Each of these men did so much to open the door to endless possibilities for scores of New Zealand children. They inspired us, they challenged us, they provided us with the foundation for learning more, and so we remember them, and the legacy we must live up to.

This conference, initiated by the Inclusive Education Action Group and Standards Plus, will continue the reputation established by these three, as pathfinders.

The next three days will be devoted to "*Making Inclusive Education Happen*".

It's a great pleasure to acknowledge your impressive line-up of speakers, and to welcome to you all here today — educators, researchers and parents.

## **Inclusive Education**

As you will be aware, '*inclusion*' has many different definitions, which have been developed and debated over time.

In a 1993 United States Court of Appeals, the Judge summed it up in eleven words, "*Inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few*'.

The Judge upheld the right of Rafeal Oberti, a boy with Down syndrome, endorsed full inclusion, supporting the right of Rafeal to attend his neighbourhood school.

Back home in Aotearoa, inclusion, along with cultural diversity, the acknowledgement of the Treaty of Waitangi and community engagement are four of the eight principles of *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

A description of the New Zealand Curriculum is that it is

*"non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory. It ensures that students' identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed."*

So what is the process by which we increase the number of people included in the category, 'we' or 'us' and decrease those labelled as "them"?

To be honest, process is the only as good as the values and beliefs of the people who put them into action.

Inclusion may be best looked at as a process, in which students and staff are all valued equally. But it does not mean they are all treated as the same. There is '*no one size fits all*' in education.

For some students, school simply does not meet their needs.

Some have special needs, some have learning difficulties, some simply struggle. In the past, many people believed that these students simply had to change to fit into the system.

That thinking must be challenged.

If the attitudes, structures and processes of the system are failing our young people, then it is not the young people who should change – it is the system itself which must change. That is what we mean by inclusion.

Inclusive education is about embracing all, doing whatever it takes to provide each student an inalienable right to belong, not to be excluded.

The cultures, policies and practices in schools must adapt and respond to the diversity of students. We must identify opportunities, tailor education to the learner. We must invest in people and local solutions. We must be willing to learn.

And students with differences must not be looked at as having problems to overcome. All students have potential, and their diversity must be celebrated and embraced.

The frame of 'diversity' rejects the notion of a single 'normal' group and various 'other' or minority groups of students.

The process of inclusion is not always easy. It demands a shift in attitude that some find uncomfortable. And it requires the determination to change.

I want to just share an example from a study of the concept, inclusion, as it relates to Maori.

### **Inclusion and Maori education**

For years the English medium education system has not been a good fit for many Māori. In response, Māori have developed kohanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori and whare wānanga. These provide a pathway for education which has at its very heart the world and the values and the aspirations of Māori.

Māori medium education has produced some outstanding results for Māori. Strengthening this pathway will remain a focus for the future. However, we need to step up the performance of the whole education system to *ensure* Māori enjoy success as Māori in whatever setting they're in.

The Te Kotahitanga project has given us a fairly good idea of exactly how well the system is performing in relation to Maori education. The project investigates how years 9-10 Maori student achievement in mainstream schools can be improved.

In the project, teachers who were interviewed identified that deficits within the home or problems that Maori students brought with them to school were deemed the major influence on Maori achievement. In turn, their perceptions of Maori students as having inadequate nutrition, access to drugs and alcohol, inadequate parental support or lack of

access to resources were described as the major reason for schooling failure.

Yet what the study finally concluded, was that it was actually the deficit theorising of teachers – their low expectations of their students – that was actually the major impediment to student achievement. In other words, the teacher attitudes led to a downward spiralling self-fulfilling prophecy of Māori student achievement.

It doesn't have to be too hard.

Māori students, interviewed for the Te Kotahitanga project, said that they were more likely to listen in class if the teachers listened to them. One student said: "*when teachers listen and you can ask questions, learning stuff is okay*".

The students were more likely to want to learn when the teachers understood something about their culture, their home, their whānau — something about what's important to them.

There is no better time than now for our schools, our teachers and our communities to realise that Māori students' identity, language and culture are fundamental to who they are as learners.

There is also no better time for our education system, our schools, our teachers and our communities to realise that Māori students, along with all students, have immense potential for success.

We must develop an education system that is culturally responsive to the diversity of the learners who participate in it.

So how does the example of Te Kotahitanga apply to special education and the opportunities for children with disabilities?

To make progress, we must completely close the door on deficit explanations or on the 'failure' of Māori learners — and this is true for all learners. These explanations do not help.

Instead, we must focus on the *potential* of every learner. To do this, we must ensure that we have effective and responsive leaders and teachers. These are the kinds of leaders and teachers who are committed and confident in developing productive partnerships with students, parents and communities

Making education work for all requires the concerted efforts of many. We must make the most of every opportunity.

## **Government commitment to inclusion**

In parliament in September last year the Government unanimously ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Article 24 of that convention states that the rights of persons with disabilities to an education must be realised without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

But despite the legislative and policy support for inclusion, a recent study in New Zealand reported exclusionary practices.

Some students were denied their rights to:

- go to school;
- be safe at school;
- have access to appropriate funding and resources at school ; or
- be valued and holding equal status.

So there is still a lot of work to be done.

## **Special Education**

And yet a seismic shift has taken place in special education. Children with special needs are no longer isolated and tucked away from their communities.

An example of the change we're seeing is at ***Papatoetoe South Primary School*** in Auckland. Papatoetoe South serves a diverse community and has an inclusive centre for students with special needs. Principal Mark Barratt says they don't talk about students' ability or disability — they just focus on meeting the needs of all students.

Papatoetoe South has made it an absolute priority that all students will take part in school trips or learning experiences no matter what. They involve parents, families and whānau at every opportunity. And they help staff to focus on inclusion in their professional development.

Another example, which will feature at this conference, is ***Arahunga Special School*** in Whanganui. This school has transformed itself into a teaching support service so that all students can be supported to attend their local schools. The expertise and knowledge that "belonged" to the special school is now available across all schools in the area being served.

So slowly, but surely, we are making progress. We're recognising that all of our children and young people belong to local communities, and that the education environment has to fit the child and their community.

But there's much more to be done. That's why the Government is currently reviewing how special education operates in Aotearoa.

Now, more than ever, we need to know what works in special education. The Special Education review is an opportunity to look at whether the money in the system is being spent well. This is an opportunity to explore what works best, and it's an opportunity to make decisions based on research and evidence.

- Underpinning the review of special education are the following principles:
- Reaching potential.
- Fair and consistent access to resources and services.
- Value for money.
- The right to high quality education and professional services.
- Choice and parental involvement, and shared responsibility for working for the best outcomes.

### **Concluding remarks**

As we think about the future, let us think about how we can work together to produce an inclusive education system which unleashes success for disabled students, for Māori, and indeed success for all.

Giving every child a sense of belonging, value and worth enhances their overall quality of life.

I would like to congratulate you all on the extremely valuable work you do in supporting students and teachers. And in promoting inclusive education, and making it happen.

The values and beliefs around inclusion must become actions. When we see and hear stories about inclusive education in every classroom and early childhood centre throughout New Zealand, we will be inspired.

We will be making the changes that we need to make.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak with you today. And I wish you well for the rest of your conference.