NEMP ASSESSMENT AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Since 1995 educational achievement in New Zealand primary schools at year four and year eight has been examined and reported on by the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP). Prior to this New Zealand students had participated in international educational studies that provided information in some curriculum areas. The aim of NEMP was to gather information about the educational achievements of New Zealand pupils within the context of New Zealand education.

This study looked specifically at the pupils involved in NEMP who are classified as special care (special needs), having physical or intellectual disabilities. The major questions explored were: 1) How do schools make decisions about which children will participate in NEMP studies? 2) What processes do schools go through in deciding whether to include or exclude students (in particular those defined as special care)? 3) How well does NEMP cater for the inclusion of students with physical and intellectual needs?

Data was generated through phone interviews with seven Canterbury schools, all of which had excluded or included (or both) children with special needs in the 2001 NEMP process. The principle findings were that; Schools have clearly established consultative processes that are used in order to decide which children will participate in NEMP; The importance of the random sample is recognised and respected by schools; The support given to schools by NEMP is an important component in ensuring the success of the process.
Introduction

The National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) was established to monitor and report on educational achievement in New Zealand. Each year primary school children at year four and year eight are randomly selected to participate in a number of assessment tasks, administered in schools by teacher administrators. Prior to the establishment of NEMP in 1995, New Zealand students had participated in international educational studies that provided information in some curriculum areas. The purpose of NEMP is to gather information about the educational achievements of New Zealand pupils within the context of New Zealand education.

The starting point for this research was casual conversations with colleagues. For some time I had wondered if schools were disadvantaging special needs children within the NEMP process by removing them unnecessarily from their random testing lists. This raised the question of; What process do schools go through to arrive at such decisions? Also of importance was the impact the removal of these students on NEMP; were they being marginalised in the testing process?

NEMP is based at the University of Otago and is funded under contract by the Ministry of Education. NEMP assessment involves the systematic and regular collection, interpretation and reporting of information about
student achievement. Random sampling is used to select pupils for inclusion in the process and as part of this sample there are those children who are identified as ‘special care’ (also known as special needs). For the purpose of this project the children who were identified as special needs are those who have intellectual or physical needs that require the adaptation of curriculum delivery or the school environment. These children were also identified as requiring special care in their assessment by the teacher administrators of NEMP. Teacher administrators implement NEMP in schools.

**NEMP approach to assessment**

With the establishment of NEMP in 1995, Flockton (1999) states that there is a dual purpose for NEMP. Accountability to the government, educational sector and wider public are a driving force. Secondly NEMP would assist with the ongoing improvement of educational outcomes for pupils in New Zealand schools. The guiding principles of NEMP are as follows:

- To provide trustworthy information
- Focus on national change over time
- Assess a broad range of achievements
- Involve practicing teachers
- Use best assessment practices
• Provide information that can be used for improvement
  
  (Educational Assessment Research Unit, 1999)

Flockton (1999) acknowledges that there are issues surrounding a government-funded project, and its need to account for the quality and effectiveness of its work. He is also clear that the purpose of NEMP is not to test students but to assess them. Wiggins (1996) states that the assessing of students is carried out once learning has occurred. The purpose is to see how the students have achieved with regard to particular tasks. This is a paradigmatic shift from highly standardised tests that seek to compare the success of children and are often done as one-off exercise.

What should be remembered is the importance of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupil responses to educational tasks over time. This highlights the different processes involved in testing and assessment. Assessment is not a one off event but involves the ongoing monitoring and revisiting of both task and students.

Irving (1997) identifies the purpose of NEMP as establishing a broad picture of both achievement and other educational outcomes of a nationally representative sample of students. With around 3,000 students in approximately 260 schools taking part in NEMP annually, a large amount of data is being collected, analysed and reported on. As NEMP
continues this annual process, it is obvious that the information on achievement in curriculum areas will continue to be examined.

**The present study**

This report examines the access to testing for special populations within the annual sample, specifically those children defined as ‘special care’. This study examines the processes for selection of participants, accompanying criteria and subsequent decisions by NEMP or schools to include or exclude students with highlighted physical or intellectual needs.

The population focus for NEMP is students at Year four (ages 8-9) and Year eight (ages 12-13). Participants at these levels work through a four-year cycle of learning areas and skills. The aim of the testing is to cover the broad range of content from the New Zealand curriculum, using a range of tasks enabling a picture of student capability to be established. The process is also designed to be inclusive, taking full account of differences of language, culture, gender, ability and disability in the design and administration of assessment tasks. The diversity of the New Zealand population presents its own particular challenges in this regard.
With the development of the Special Education 2000 Policy (Ministry of Education Special Education Guidelines, 1995) a framework was put in place within New Zealand education for greater inclusion, access and resourcing for special needs children within the setting of mainstream education. The concept of SE 2000 was in keeping with global trends. The disbanding of special needs classes and resulting integration of children with a wide range of physical and intellectual needs has put brought into question the potential strain on teachers and school resourcing. Ballard and Mc Donald (1998) in Ballard (1999) comment on the workload of inclusion within the paradigm of an inclusive philosophy. They ask if it is possible to separate out one particular area of workload and put it as greater or less than another part, or is that in fact merely adding (in this instance) to a particular discourse of disability.

Given that increasing numbers of children who have been identified as ‘special needs’ are now being catered for within mainstreamed settings, it seems reasonable to expect that, in the course of national testing, that these students are represented in the data gathered through NEMP. I would hope that the information gathered on special needs students could give an indication as to their achievement. This could potentially assist educators in ensuring more effective programming as they aim to meet the educational needs of these students.
But are these students able to access the NEMP testing regime in an equitable manner or are they being marginalised by the decisions that schools make as to who will participate in NEMP testing? How do schools make decisions around the inclusion of special needs pupils in NEMP? Is there support from NEMP with regard to this process, with guidelines for schools and training for the NEMP teacher administrators if and when they encounter special needs pupils?

**Research Questions**

The main research question was “How do schools make decisions about which children will participate in NEMP studies?” Arising from this question were related sub questions:

- How is the presence of special needs children in the NEMP testing lists responded to by schools?
- Do schools regard the results for the NEMP studies as a direct reflection of their own performance? If so, how?
- How prepared are the NEMP teacher administrators for working with the special needs children that they may encounter?

For an independent examination of NEMP material and processes, the NEMP probe studies have been developed. These studies are overseen by
Dr Alison Gilmore at the Unit for Studies for Educational Evaluation at the University of Canterbury. There are four main purposes for these probe studies:

- To provide further understanding or interpretation of student performance
- To improve understanding of assessment tasks and student response to them
- To examine the performance of subgroups
- To contribute to future policy development in the areas of curriculum, assessment and student achievement

This project will contribute to a NEMP probe study overseen by Missy Morton, Senior Lecturer at the Christchurch College of Education, focussing on NEMP assessment and children with special needs.

Ballard (1999) states that inclusive education has become part of the general discussions on education held at an international level. As an integral feature of many education systems, inclusive practice continues to evolve as stakeholders grapple with change, funding and having a ‘voice’. Do special needs children have this ‘voice’ within the NEMP process or are they being further marginalised through decisions made by schools with regard to their ability to participate and play a full and active part in the process? Ballard (1994) describes disability as a creation of
specific social and historical beliefs and contexts. So it would seem that there are questions about whether current discourses on disability create a perception of disability or in fact disable others through what is said and done and in the environments that are perpetuated.

In New Zealand, policy on the integration of special needs students within mainstream education has often preceded resourcing and funding. Special Education 2000 marked significant changes in the classroom delivery and access to resources for students with special needs. Ballard and Mc Donald (1999) have explored the themes of inclusion and exclusion within New Zealand education. They identified the effects on people’s lives of disabling environments, the need to advocate for access to education and how labelling within the education system can continue to segregate special needs students from their peers.

With the inclusion of greater numbers of special needs students within New Zealand schools, there is a responsibility to report on the progress and achievement of these students along with their peers. Do these students have equitable access to NEMP? If so, then how are the processes adapted so that they are able to participate? If not, then what adjustments should be made to ensure their inclusion? Is their non-participation compromising the integrity of the national sample?
Methodology

This research was informed by the qualitative approaches to social science research, relying on the assumptions of interpretive or critical social science. Qualitative research is generally non-linear as many parts of the research may occur simultaneously. Neuman (2000) states that the examination of case and context are central to the process. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) refer to qualitative research as an umbrella term encompassing several research strategies that share certain characteristics.

As a form of research, qualitative research is concerned with natural behaviour or experiences in real situations. The most common methods or strategies used in qualitative research are observation and interviews. Burns (1997) describes these methods as an attempt to capture and understand descriptions and meanings of events from groups and individuals. As information is gathered, it is up to the researcher to interpret patterns and themes.

This study draws on the methodological principals of social constructionism, one of a range of ‘qualitative’ methodologies. A social constructionist examination of the place of children with special needs in ‘mainstreamed’ settings attempts to identify how those settings maintain
and perpetuate particular ‘discourses’ of disability. In the case of this study, how the assessment of children with special needs positions them within mainstreamed classroom settings and more specifically with relation to their inclusion or exclusion with regard to NEMP.

A discursive analysis of disability depends on the idea that disability is constructed and attributed. Ballard (1994) identifies disability as a social issue. I believe that physical environments, along with relationships and attitudes, are powerful forces in shaping behaviour. In order to establish what the ‘official’ discourse is on disability, it is necessary to examine information that is currently being promulgated by the government.

In December 2001, Parliament made significant changes to the Human Rights Act (1993). The government is no longer exempt from fully complying with human rights standards, and this includes the access of disabled people to education. In April 2001 the New Zealand Disability Strategy was launched. The purpose of this strategy is to:

“...guide government action to promote a more inclusive society”
(Minister for Disability Issues, 2001, page iii)

It is designed to change New Zealand from a disabling society, to an inclusive society. A key point noted in the summary states that:

“Disability is the process which happens when one group of people creates barriers by designing a world for their own way of living, taking no account of the impairments other people have”
(Minister for Disability Issues, 2001, page 1)
Social constructivism is a psychological theory that examines how meaning is constructed or interpreted through social interaction. Social constructionism as an outgrowth of social constructivism, explores how layers of thinking and action may serve to inform, and may also perpetuate social norms. How have the NEMP tests been constructed? What views have been taken with regard to the inclusion in testing of special needs students? How do the results of those special needs students who do participate, affect the results nationally? Scott (1990) explores the relationship between data and behaviour and comments on the manifestations of behaviour that relate to the structure in which they exist. In all social interactions there are layers of understanding and assumption that relate to interpretations of information and processes.

Sample

The initial task was to establish a target group to assist in generating information that would be analysed as part of this research. The target group was Canterbury schools who participated in NEMP in 2001. There were 14 participating schools at the year 4 level and at year 8, 13 individual schools along with two sets of paired schools. Initially a convenience sample of ten schools was chosen five each from the year 4 and year 8 list. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) describe this type of
approach as purposive sampling. This is when the cases to be examined are handpicked based on their typicality. This builds up a sample that will inform the focus of the project.

In speaking with the principals of the first four schools I contacted, I discovered that none of them had made any changes at all to the lists of children randomly selected by NEMP. This raised a concern that this would be the case of all the schools that I had selected for my sample. I went back to NEMP who were able to provide a list of five Canterbury schools involved in the 2001 NEMP who had replaced children on their lists because of special needs.

**Method**

Contacting schools was the next task. I had intended to make initial phone contact in order to establish a time to complete a phone interview. Due to the busy nature of schools what invariably happened was as follows: Having made contact with the principal (or in one case the deputy principal) I explained the purpose of my call and the nature of the information I was seeking. Usually the interview then took place immediately, having gained initial verbal consent to use the information that was shared.
Once completed, the phone interview was then transcribed. Difficulties with the equipment used to tape the interviews resulted in the transcripts having to be largely constructed from my handwritten interview field notes. Each participant was then supplied with a copy of his or her transcript to check and written consent was obtained to use the information for the purposes of this project. One of the five schools had experienced major staffing changes and it was not possible to interview anyone, which left four.

Since four schools would not be a large enough sample, and in keeping with the emergent design of this type of research, I decided to investigate the schools who chose to include children with special needs. This meant that I could compare and contrast the decision making surrounding inclusion as opposed to exclusion.

There were three year eight and three year four Canterbury schools who included children with special needs. Three of these schools were ones that had also excluded children because of their special needs. This brought the total number of schools contacted to seven. These ‘new’ schools included one of the original four schools that I had contacted at the very start of the process. A summary of the sample schools is shown in Table 1.1.
### Table 1. 1 Summary of Sample Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Exclusion = E</th>
<th>Inclusion = I</th>
<th>Decile</th>
<th>City/Town</th>
<th>Contact Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School A</td>
<td>E: 0, I: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School B</td>
<td>E: 0, I: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. School C</td>
<td>E: 0, I: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Deputy Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School D</td>
<td>E: 1, I: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. School E</td>
<td>E: 1, I: 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School F</td>
<td>E: 1, I: 0</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. School G</td>
<td>E: 2, I: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total of Students Excluded:**
5 from 4 schools

**Total of Students Included:**
7 from 6 schools

I also interviewed Terry Crooks, Associate Professor at the Educational Assessment Research Unit, University of Otago, one of the NEMP
Directors. The purpose of this interview was to gather information on NEMP’s perception of the decisions schools make around the inclusion and exclusion of children with special needs. Key questions were:

- How does NEMP define special needs children?
- How does NEMP understand schools to interpret this term?
- What preparation is provided for the NEMP testers with regard to special needs children?
- What are the expectations of NEMP with regard to the inclusion and exclusion of children with special needs?

Interviewees were invited to examine the transcripts for accuracy and adjust, if necessary, the information that they had supplied. In consenting for the information to be used in this research, it was clearly understood that in no way could individuals (with the exception of Terry Crooks) or their schools be identified. Participants were also assured that the data would remain in a secure location and that twelve months after the examination of this research, it would be destroyed.
Data analysis

As with the examination of any form of data, the reading and re-reading of transcribed interviews becomes a search for patterns, contradictions and repeated phenomena. Immediately following a phone interview I made notes on what I suspected could be emergent themes. My thoughts were at this stage informed through reading and obviously successive interviews serve to impact on my emergent thinking. Re-reading the notes as they were transcribed was the next opportunity to look for repeated patterns. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) state that data collection and analysis go hand in hand. The nature of this project meant that I did not generate huge amounts of information and this perhaps made it easier to establish and follow possible themes.

Coding the data was done over a number of weeks once the interviews were completed. Neuman (2000) explains the importance of looking for patterns and relationships early in qualitative research, expecting to establish and explore tentative themes. Intuitive coding, relying on feelings and impressions, also formed part of establishing the main themes of this project. The subtleties of an interview often lend themselves to an impression or reaction to information that is not necessarily captured in a transcript.
Findings and discussion

The result of this process with the data that I had gathered was the identification of three pivotal themes:

1) The decision making around the exclusion or inclusion of special needs children in NEMP was generally carried out with consultation between school staff.

2) Schools recognise the importance of random sampling so the decision to exclude or include a child would not be taken lightly.

3) NEMP have provided clear guidelines and support to schools which aids in the decision making process.

1) Importance of ‘in-school’ consultation

There was ample evidence from the sample schools of consultation and collaboration around the decisions made to exclude and include special care children with regard to NEMP. Apart from one large school where the deputy principal had oversight of the NEMP process, it was the principal that I spoke to with him or her holding a key role in relation to this decision making. Once a school received its random list, they then
proceeded with making decisions around the inclusion or exclusion of some students.

In most instances the principal consulted initially with the classroom teacher and often with the special needs coordinator or other management staff as well. In the decisions that were made there was a considerable amount of evidence that the best interest of the child were carefully considered.

In deciding to exclude the following children with: down syndrome, spina bifida and very high needs ORRS from the NEMP process, the following comments were made:

“As a staff we sat down and discussed this decision, we decided why put a child into a testing situation who would score all zeros and only have an attention span of about two minutes. The main reason was for the sake of the child.” (Interview, School F)

“It was felt that the NEMP testers would not get quality information from testing her. It was also felt that the child would not cope with the testing herself so it was decided by myself (principal), special needs teacher and the classroom teacher that it was not in the best interests of the child to take part” (Interview, School G)

“The process for the decision making was to consult with the special needs coordinator, and the classroom teacher. In the end it was really the commitment to the IEP that we made the decisions and judgment that we did.” (Interview, School E)
Deciding to include children with special needs showed the same commitment to discussion and collaborative decision making. For a child with autism and severe learning difficulties:

“This decision was made with the same consultation as above, (Principal, special needs teacher and classroom teacher) the same people were involved.” (Interview, School G)

The principals of a physically disabled child and another child who was hearing impaired with motor difficulties generated the following comments:

“We chose to keep the child as part of the testing process....... His needs were physical and not intellectual and he didn’t need any extra assistance to complete tasks.” (Interview, School B)

“I would have discussed this with ***** (deputy principal) and we would have made the decision to include the child, this would have been the standard process.” (Interview, School A)

Within the sample of schools chosen, collaborative decision making was an important factor in assisting schools to reach a consensus on the inclusion or exclusion of children in the NEMP process.

2) Respect for random sampling

The decisions made with regard to the random lists of sample students appear to have been influenced by staff awareness of the importance of maintaining the integrity of the random sample. These decisions were
further assisted by the supportive nature of the protocols that have been
developed by NEMP. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) describe
random sampling as the opportunity for each member within the
population under study having an equal chance of selection, with the
selection of one participant unaffected by the selection of other members
of the population. In order for NEMP to maintain the integrity of their
information gathering and reporting it is essential that the random lists of
schools generated each year and in turn the random lists of pupils remain
as unchanged as possible.

Crooks pointed out in our phone interview that the percentage of children
not participating in NEMP from the original random sample lists is
around 2%. Of that 2%, around one third to one half of the children have
English as their second language, having arrived in New Zealand within
the last 9 months. Crooks identified that in other countries the number of
children who do not participate in national monitoring projects are in
some instances as high as 10 – 15%. It appears that the overall accuracy
of the NEMP random sample remains largely intact. This is borne out by
the comments made by schools participating in this study who showed a
clear understanding of the relevance and importance of the random
sample.
A number of the participants in this study articulated their commitment to maintaining the integrity of the random sample:

“Because the process is designed to test a random sample”  
*(Interview, School A)*

Not only were the comments pertinent to the general nature of the sample, but also specifically related to the importance of including special needs children

“As a national sample the balance evens out. Didn’t consider recommending that any of the students be substituted or changed because it had been clearly stated that it was a random sample. Substituting children or asking for them to be replaced is not really an option, if you have special needs children on the list and they are being catered for in a mainstream setting then why shouldn’t they participate?”  
*(Interview, School C)*

“They (NEMP) say that if there are any special reasons for a child to be taken from the list because of special needs then schools can, obviously they (NEMP) are aiming to be inclusive and not preempting a child’s participation”  
*(Interview, School E)*

Crooks also indicated that, of a sample of (say) 280, schools, it could generally be expected that 100 of these schools would respond to NEMP saying that the sample of children chosen were a ‘low bunch’. He also suggested that higher decile schools seem to set a higher threshold for the inclusion of special needs students. This seems to be linked to a recurring myth among higher decile schools, that the results from the NEMP testing can somehow be traced back to the school, so they are more sensitive to the end result. Of the schools that I contacted only one (School G, Decile
6) commented that on the whole the random group that was chosen was not representative of the school and that they had ‘lucked out’ there. The perspectives of schools with regard to NEMP and the inclusion or exclusion of special needs children in the testing as they relate to decile rating is certainly one that warrants further investigation.

3) Support from NEMP

In speaking with the sample schools, it was quite clear that the assistance and guidance provided by NEMP provided very good support for schools as they made decisions around the inclusion and exclusion of pupils within the NEMP process. Once the random list of schools for the year is generated, initial contact via phone and mail is made.

Having agreed to participate and supplied a list of students to NEMP at either the year 4 or year 8 level, schools are then sent a letter (see Appendix 1.1) by the NEMP directors with guidelines for decision making around the inclusion or exclusion of students for the random list. The letter states that the inclusion of special care students is desirable to maintain the integrity of the sample. It is also pointed out that because of low pupil – teacher administrator ratios and ‘carefully planned procedures’ it should be possible for all students to have a ‘satisfactory experience’. When schools indicate that they want to change one of the
randomly chosen students, NEMP states that this may be possible following careful consideration of the schools point of view and discussion with NEMP.

When schools do return the random list to NEMP they will have identified the particular needs and concerns related to children identified as special care. This information is then shared with the teacher administrators to enable them to effectively assist and test the children when the time comes. Throughout the entire process contact between the schools and NEMP is maintained.

Schools have positively described the process and contact with NEMP:

““The whole thing was easy to do, easy to do and easy to run....there were no problems and we were absolutely happy with it” (Interview School C)

“We had close contact with NEMP before them coming.....there was good consultation before during and after the process......they were in tune with what we needed and what we said....we have fully supported throughout the process” (Interview School D)

“We would repeat the process again, we were quite happy with the way things were handled” (Interview School G)
Conclusion

Ideally, research of this nature should occur within the school setting as decision making is carried out. This would allow for the gathering of much more detailed information and greater understanding of the processes and reasons for decision making that schools undertake. The research I have conducted provides just a small insight into the decision making process of seven schools.

It is tempting to try generalise the results of a project such as this. Neuman (2000) explores the thinking that qualitative data provides more than simple descriptions, yet does not lay claim to sweeping generalisations. The purpose of this study is to inform and not to answer all questions that pertain to NEMP and special needs. Perhaps another researcher could seek to establish if the identified themes are peculiar to these particular schools, the Canterbury region or if they are representative of national trends. What is important for this project is that, from this sample, themes have been identified that appear to have implications for NEMP and the NEMP process with regard to special care children.

The internal consultation used by schools to confirm decisions they make about the inclusion or exclusion of special care students was identified as
a strength within schools. This could be highlighted in NEMP information that goes out to schools in a number of ways. As stated earlier, Flockton (1999) describes one of the main purposes of NEMP is to improve educational outcomes for New Zealand pupils. How could this be done specifically for special needs children? A diagram or note in the initial letter from NEMP to schools indicating that this consultative model assists with effective decision making would be one way. Another would be to describe the process in the front of the results booklets published by NEMP, writing about the importance of this part of the process.

Ballard (1994) highlights the idea that the study of disability must include a focus on those who are not disabled. We need to know more about how staff in schools perceive the disabled students they deal with. Good quality decisions regarding the inclusion of special needs students (or in fact members of other particular groups within the national sample) will ultimately assist in maintaining the random nature of the sample and overall, the integrity of the process. It is important to understand why people make the decisions that they do. Mainstreaming means that there are more special needs children in our schools. It will be very useful if their achievement in NEMP can assist with ensuring greater effectiveness of teaching and greater progress for pupils in their learning. To this end it could be helpful if more specific categories are designed for special care
children and their assessments examined separately to generate findings to help teachers in their daily classroom practice.

As schools recognise the importance of random sampling within the research process, the decision to exclude a child from NEMP will not be taken lightly. It appears that it is now much more common for schools to use research to inform practice and the result of this is teachers who are more informed in terms of their pedagogy. Increasingly research is informing practice and vice versa. The implications in this for programmes such as NEMP are considerable. It is possible that researchers could expect to have greater access to schools for research and there should be greater understanding about the assessment process and possible implications of results for future practice.

The support provide to schools by NEMP occurs through letters, phone contact and, once the assessment process has actually started, through the teacher administrators of the assessment tasks. The decision making process around the exclusion of pupils from the process is shown in the NEMP letter (Appendix 1.1.) There are no assumptions a child will automatically be removed from the process if requested by the school, rather that there will be a period of discussion and then mutual consensus reached.
Once in the system for assessment how do special care children fare? Is their participation in the process harmful in any way to them? Are they catered for adequately through (if necessary) adapted tasks? How well are the teacher administrators prepared for dealing with these children? At present, they are largely reliant on information supplied by schools by way of preparation. Could this be improved or enhanced in any ways to help all parties?

The journey of research often seems to offer greater benefits for the researcher compared to what they contribute to the wider field. In setting out to discover more about how children with special needs were catered for in the context of the NEMP, I was unsure as to what new knowledge might be generated but did expect to learn a lot myself along the way. This has indeed been the case.

It was encouraging to discover that schools were using a model of collaborative decision making. Informed decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of special needs students in the NEMP assessment process came about as a result of principals discussing the children individually with at least one other (and often more) staff member. This provided an internal check on process and ensured that children were not being automatically excluded based solely on the fact that they had special
needs. Ways of ensuring their inclusion without compromising the child or the assessment process were considered.

An awareness of the importance of a ‘random’ sample was also held in common among the seven schools. The fact that only five schools, from the original 27 who were part of NEMP in Canterbury in 2001, substituted children from their original random sample list because of their special needs, is an encouraging finding. It could be that a heightened awareness in schools is occurring. With an increase in the way in which research is informing practice there could be a flow-on effect for the involvement of schools in the likes of NEMP. If schools have a greater understanding of how to support and maintain the integrity of research then there will be benefits for all those involved.

The support of NEMP staff in relation to schools appears to be an integral part of the success of the assessment process. The procedures followed by NEMP ensure good communication and negotiation with schools as well as making sure that the process itself is standardised. There is written and verbal communication with schools before the list of pupils participants is finalised and then once the assessment begins it is carried out by trained teachers who are of course familiar with how schools operate and the dynamics of working with children.
In working through this project my understanding of NEMP has grown enormously. It is a very valuable system for monitoring educational outcomes at a national level. It also provides a potential vehicle for examining the performance of specific groups within our school population. Along with this I now have a much greater awareness of the process behind the decision-making schools engage in related to the inclusion or exclusion of special needs children in NEMP.

I hope that this research might spark ideas in others. It takes perseverance to take the research process from beginning to end. The important thing is that along the journey new knowledge confirms or alters the thinking and direction of an individual or group. Who knows where this may lead to next?

Murray Overton

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