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**Tensions, issues and challenges in Special Education in  
Aotearoa New Zealand**

**Stories of mismatch between the policies and the practice**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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New Zealand

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Dedicated to my grandmother

Alison Hardy Dare

(1880-1954)

who had the vision and the strength to give her children and her  
grandchildren

opportunities that were beyond the gold mines of Karangahake.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study identifies issues, tensions and challenges within education in Aotearoa New Zealand through the responses of nine families who talked about their experiences when supporting their children with special learning needs in regular schools. The policies and practices of the Education Act 1989 and Special Education 2000 underpin a vision of inclusive education that gives all children access to high quality learning programmes enabling them to participate and achieve at school. My interpretations of the experiences of these nine families and their children suggests that these tensions arise from mismatches between the families' expectations and the philosophies, policies and practices of health, government and educational professionals which created barriers leading to the exclusion of their children from regular school placements. This thesis argues that these tensions and issues have an adverse impact on the children and their families.

The study revealed perceptions by families that some schools practised a culture of exclusion by being unable or unwilling to meet the learning or personal care needs of their children. Barriers identified by the families included some schools being unwilling to accept their children's enrolments; the inability of some teachers to provide appropriate programmes of learning; incidents of bullying of their children by students and staff; and issues involving access to therapist support. Barriers were also identified to positive communication between families and health professionals. Issues involving the Special Education case managers were also identified by the families as contributing to the families' decisions to remove their children from their regular schools or to seek alternative education providers at times of transition to secondary school.

This study concludes with recommendations for key stakeholders outlining ways that may enhance the experiences of families and their children with special needs within inclusive education. Children with special needs and their families do have a right to the experience of inclusive education. It is the role of the key stakeholders to ensure this becomes reality for all children and their families.

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**IDEOLOGY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?**

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## Barry's story

Meet Barry. Barry was introduced, by a psychologist, to the unit where I was teacher in charge. The unit was based within an infant school in a Kentish town. The young children enrolled in this unit were labelled 'maladjusted'. This was in the 1960s and labels were fashionable. *'He's nearly 5 and he doesn't talk. He's still not toilet trained, but I think he would fit into your group very well'. 'If you don't take him, we will have to place him in a mental hospital.'* We took him.

Barry arrived. Yes, he did not speak and he was not toilet trained, but he joined our group of seven interesting, challenging and VERY vocal students, a teacher and a teacher aide. There were certainly good language role models for Barry. Days, weeks and months passed by. Barry was soon toilet trained and he participated in all the class activities, but remained silent. The terminology 'autistic' was beginning to be heard within education and Barry's behaviours and lack of speech were placing him within this field.

One day, John asked where cream came from. *'I know cows make milk but how do they lay the cans of cream?'* Now there was a challenge for a Kiwi teacher working in Kent. Off we went to a local dairy farm to see cows being milked and the cream separator in action. Then it was off to the local milk bottling factory to watch the cream bottles being washed, dried, filled with cream and capped with shiny red tops. Throughout this visit, Barry held my hand and watched the bottles rattle along the conveyor belt. End of story: *'John, cream comes from cows'* answered Mrs Baldwin.

No! Not the end of story. That evening I answered a call from Barry's mother. *'Where have you been today? Barry's talking about soldiers marching up and down the hills'.* Barry was talking. He arrived off the taxi transport the next morning *'Good morning Mrs McIntyre, Good morning Mrs Baldwin. How are you today? Isn't it a lovely day?'* Barry was talking, talking in six-year-old sentences. Barry never stopped talking that day. He had six years of experiences to tell his classmates.

Although Barry needed ongoing support through his schooling, he reached very high standards and was granted entrance into Oxford University when he completed his secondary school courses. And this is the boy for whom a mental hospital placement was the second option for his schooling at age almost five.

Barry has been my inspiration throughout my long teaching career. Not every classroom has a cream bottling machine in the cupboard, but the challenge is to provide programmes of learning for all students to enable them to meet their potential.

Thank you Barry.