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A DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR  
BACKWARD PUPILS AT PRIMARY AND INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLS IN  
NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Psychology  
at Massey University

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis begins with a brief account of why and how special classes for backward children were instituted in New Zealand schools. There follows an outline of how special classes are currently organized: policies and procedures for the admission of pupils to special classes: goals of special education for backward children: the recruitment and training of special class teachers: the special class curriculum: specialist services , available to special class teachers and children.

The literature survey focuses initially on early studies comparing academic achievement and social/emotional adjustment in mildly mentally retarded children assigned to special classes and those retained in regular classes, studies which, because of inadequate and inappropriate assessment methods and a variety of uncontrolled variables, show conflicting results. The writer then reviews more recent studies which have been concerned with two main issues: societal and educational inequalities which influence the selection of pupils for special class placement and the extent to which special education merits the description "special".

These two themes underlie the series of questions compiled by the writer for distribution to a 20% random sample of special class teachers at primary and intermediate schools throughout New Zealand as described in the third

segment of the thesis. The questionnaire is concerned with demographic data on special class teachers and pupils and a variety of data on curricula, parent/school relations and specialist services available to special class teachers and pupils. 96% of the teachers surveyed returned completed questionnaires.

Analysis of the data thus collected leads the writer to the following conclusions: disproportionate numbers of special class children are male, Maori and/or of low socio-economic status: for the majority of pupils special class placement is permanent: the average special class teacher is a woman, under 36, trained and experienced in regular class teaching but with little training and relatively brief experience in teaching backward children: since there is no curriculum designed specifically for backward children at primary and intermediate schools, teachers must rely primarily on their own resources in adapting regular curricula to the special needs of their pupils with limited assistance from organisers of special classes and educational psychologists and virtually none from the advisory service: the integration of special and regular class children, as endorsed by the Department of Education, occurs primarily in the non-academic areas of the curriculum: special class teachers succeed in meeting most of their pupils' parents for the purpose of discussing the progress of individual pupils but opportunities for parental participation in school life

are apparently limited: organisers of special classes constitute the major source of professional assistance for special class teachers however the demands made of them appear to be excessive in view of their limited training and numbers.

In the final segment of the thesis the writer returns to the two issues which motivated her survey and concludes that, for many New Zealand children, special class placement represents confirmation of their inferior status within the larger society and that special education for backward children at primary and intermediate levels in New Zealand schools does not appear to merit the description "special".

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