Funding Issues and Proactive Responses in Special Education

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Abstract

This article looks at some of the issues and possible responses for funding in special education, with a focus on the author's experiences as a special education teacher in Manitoba. Issues include making necessary changes to align funding with changes in policy, the problems associated with several different funding models, and the practicality of providing tiered levels of funding in diverse, inclusive classrooms. Programming alternatives include using tiered levels of funding to redistribute resources, training educators to implement inclusive strategies effectively, and keeping in mind the reason for a need to alter funding formulas to respect the rights of our students.

Funding is complex. My new role as a resource teacher in Manitoba requires understanding the changes in funding for special educational needs, using a decentralization approach, what types of funding models are available and problems with those models, and the feasibility of providing equitable and effective funding to all students with special educational needs by using tiered funding. The changes in funding over the past 30 years have forced schools to face the "enormous cost of re-engineering existing schools, structures and practices" (Graham & Sweller, 2011, p. 942). Several funding models are used across the world, with no agreement among educational leaders on which model is the best. The cost of delivering effective and equitable funding needs contemplation because 12-20% of the education budget in most countries is dedicated to special education (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015, p. 927). The feasibility of providing adequate tiered funding resources to special education, when the demand seems to be increasing and budgets seem to be decreasing, is a concern. Alternative programming and redistributing funds in special education by placing students in tiered levels using the Response to Intervention (RtI) ideology, training teachers about inclusion and how to differentiate instruction for students with special needs, possibly by using universal design for learning (UDL), could be a necessary proactive response. I feel the most important consideration for funding in special education is basic human rights and recognizing that all students have the right to education.

Funding Issues in Special Education

In recent years, there has been a movement toward the decentralization of special education in Canada and elsewhere in the world; several funding models have been used in the past, including placing students into tiered levels. Over the past few decades, special services have been provided in the regular classroom, discontinuing pullout environments (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2009). How to provide for students' special educational needs in conventional schools is challenging when there is no international agreement how to do so. Reorganization is happening to support inclusive education in a profitable way, but a lack of consensus among principals and other educational leaders on the definition of inclusion has resulted in an "implementation gap" (Banks et al., 2015, p. 938). There are variations between the goals of the policy and real-life practices in schools (Fletcher-Campbell, 2008). In Finland and the United States, there is a belief that changing to tiered intervention will not only stimulate inclusive education but will also lower cost by decreasing the number of special education students (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). There are similar trends in different countries, and I feel that educators have been left with an unsolved problem and unanswered questions. The only

definite answer is that change is inevitable in the decentralization of funding formulas for special educational needs, given the change in policy and expectations worldwide.

Several funding models have been used in the past, including input funding, which directly shares out resources to students or parents, through-put funding, which uses block grants based on a range of specifications, and input based, demand-driven or categorical funding, which is based on assigning funding to certain students with the amount based on the degree of need (Banks et al., 2015). Most previous versions of funding models attached resources to individual students and had high numbers of children working in isolated settings (Banks et al., 2015). Parents were able to select where they desired to have their children educated, and there was assurance that students would receive the resources they were allocated. The issue with that type of funding model is that it obstructs inclusion because it isolates special education students and places the emphasis on deficits and categorizing. Until recently, funding models have disregarded the student outcomes that funding was meant to acquire (Banks et al., 2015). Funding models can unite special education and accountability if inputs and outputs are connected and attention is placed on essential outcomes. The school or local authorities should be responsible for the budget because they know the child best (Gray & Jackson, 2002). Several countries are turning to a combination approach to funding models. Sweden uses a "through-put model with elements of input-based support" (Banks et al., 2015, p. 929). New Zealand assimilates a combination of through-put and input funding. I think that a combination approach would be the most effective way to fund special educational needs, but my next concern is the feasibility of providing enough resources to meet diverse needs in mainstream classrooms.

Greater numbers of students with special educational needs are attending conventional schools because of inclusion policies. Some schools are not equipped to meet the diverse needs of special education students, such as our school in Forrest, which underwent extensive renovations to accommodate a student with special needs. The criteria for funding used to be more difficult to meet but, with the tiered approach to funding, students not previously funded can now receive interventions (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). That means providing more interventions with the same amount of resources. For a long time now, Finland has been delivering resources to students who do not have diagnosed disabilities but have some other kind of "learning or behavioral difficulty" (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016, p. 147). In Alberta, the key areas of support are "supports for positive behavior, differentiation of learning, and access to technologies and digital media," with importance placed on comprehensive supports (Howery, McCellan, & Pedersen-Bayys, 2013, p. 278). Meeting the needs of all students, no matter where they are on the pyramid of tiered intervention, seems daunting to me and I am not the only one. A school superintendent from a large school district in the United States said that his budget is increasing because parents are more informed and people are advocating for their educational rights (Dunn & West, 2010). With an increase in the number of students with special educational needs, along with an increase in the awareness and advocacy for students with special needs, it is reasonable to expect an increase in the budget. That does not seem to be the case in my experience, with budgets being tightened and resources being cut back. Feasibility of funding special educational needs through tiered funding is a problem that is not easily solved. Decentralization of special education funding, selecting a funding model appropriate for the changes in policy, and placing students into tiered levels are all issues that need to be considered moving forward.

Proactive Responses in Special Education

Placing students into tiered levels, training teachers to differentiate instruction, and considering the educational rights of our special needs students are all programming alternatives worth investigating in order to respond to the funding issues in special education. Creating student profiles, class profiles, and school profiles, as a basis for distribution of

resources and intervention, is the direction that our school division has taken. Response to Intervention (RtI) is a process that ensures every student receives timely interventions before falling behind (Buffam, Mattos, & Malone, 2018). Students in different tiers are grouped by need, rather than label, with Tier 1 students requiring the least interventions, Tier 2 students requiring more interventions, and Tier 3 students requiring the most intense interventions (Buffam et al., 2018). Interventions are anything schools do, in addition to lessons students already receive, to help developing learners succeed academically, behaviourally, and socially (Buffam et al., 2018). When Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are not helping students achieve the outcome desired, more intensive interventions must be delivered (Smith, Poling, & Worth, 2018). Instead of increasing the Tier 2 strategies, strengthening interventions by providing "explicit instruction" is recommended (Smith et al., 2018). The school profile created from student and class profiles should identify the staffing needs and supports required to provide interventions (Murray & Lawrie, 2016). RtI promotes early intervention strategies, so that school divisions can use resources to assist students who were not previously funded (Buffam et al., 2018). Implementing RtI successfully requires a considerable amount of support, and strategies must be provided with consistency (Arden, Gandhi, Edmonds, & Danielson, 2017).

Training teachers to differentiate instruction effectively, assess students accurately, and provide appropriate interventions is important. There was once a belief that students who required an individualized education plan also required individual support from an educational assistant (Katz, 2013). This belief resulted in many educators giving the responsibility of educating our struggling learners to our least trained staff. Teachers can use inclusive instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction, to provide accessibility to diverse learners, without handing over the responsibility. The chances of successfully providing effective classroom practices greatly improve if teachers are trained, coached, and supported throughout the implementation stage (Arden et al., 2017). Resource teachers can help support classroom teachers by collaborating, setting goals together, and having a "push-in" instead of a "pull-out" philosophy (Katz, 2013, p. 25). Universal design for learning (UDL) is an approach based on exploring student strengths and building on them (Katz, 2012). The goal is not to "fix" the student, but to provide supports for the student to be successful (Katz, 2013, p. 7). Educators are often expected to implement policies and practices after receiving only one session of training (Arden et al., 2017). Therefore, properly training teachers how to implement UDL, and how to differentiate instruction, is crucial. School teams often have the data and can identify students who require intervention, but struggle with what to do next (Arden et al., 2017). The key to implementing any program or policy is in training, guiding, and supporting the educators who are expected to do the implementation. Leaders also need to reinforce the reason for the change in policy or program, most notably in funding for special education: the rights of our students.

Recognizing the importance of human rights, and why funding has changed to respect human rights, is key to understanding the new approach to funding. Appropriate education acknowledges that all students are different, have individual abilities, want to belong, want to be respected, and learn in different places and at different rates (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2007). Reasonable accommodation for special needs is a human right, but there needs to be a balance between the "rights of an organization and the rights of the individual" (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2007, p. 29). The evolution of our inclusive policies has required a change in practice (Task Force on Special Needs Funding, 2015). Creating a provincial funding model is complex, and four funding models were considered by a provincial task force. It all comes down to human rights and having equal access to education by removing barriers (Manitoba Education & Training, 2017a). The philosophy of inclusion means that students have the right to a respectful and safe learning community (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017b). Any funding model needs to consider what is best for the individual child, while respecting the right to education and being free from discrimination. Placing students in tiered levels, and training teachers how to differentiate instruction and provide inclusive learning

environments, all contribute to strengthening the equality and rights of students while reinforcing the need for a change in funding in special education.

Conclusion

The changes that have occurred in most countries, regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the general classroom, have forced educators and policy-makers to examine funding models and make necessary changes, through decentralization and tiered intervention, to meet the needs of diverse learners. There are several models for funding, and most countries are now using a combination of funding formulas to meet the needs of students placed in different tiers or levels with different interventions or adaptations. There is no consensus around the world of what the best approach is for funding special educational needs. For new policies to be successful, it is crucial that schools and families join forces to meet student needs (Gray & Jackson, 2002). Placing students in tiered levels is a proactive response our school division is currently exploring. Training, coaching, and supporting teachers to implement RtI, differentiated instruction or UDL, and providing interventions with fidelity, will be crucial in the evolution of funding in special education. The most important consideration in funding for special education is the rights of the child, and any alterations in funding, must consider human rights and dignity as the inspiration for change.

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