

Submission to Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training Inquiry into Teacher Education

from

Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4)
(www.a4.org.au)

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss issues affecting people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their associates (families and carers).

Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4) is a national grassroots lobby group representing people with ASD and their associates. It communicates directly with its members using the internet and represents a significant number of people from each state. A4 has a close relationship to the Autism Council of Australia (ACA) which is the peak body for the various state and territory autism associations.

A4 gets no government or corporate support. It has no staff. People with ASD, their parents and representative prepared this report.

A4 wishes the Committee every success with this Inquiry.

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Convenor

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Introduction

This submission focuses on teacher education relating to students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

ASD was once considered a rare disorder. But the number of Australian students with a diagnosis of ASD has grown significantly¹ in the last decade.

“Over the whole of Australia between 0.6 per cent and 1 per cent of children are affected by autism or a related disorder.”²

ASD is by definition “severe and pervasive impairment”³. A student who is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder is recognised as having severe or profound disability pervading the areas of communication, social skill and behaviour. Students with ASD typically have difficulties that extend beyond these diagnostic criteria for ASD.

Communication disability means a student with ASD generally has significant impairment both in:

- understanding people (receptive) including teachers and peers.
- expressing themselves to others.

Social skills are important for students. In the early years of school, students need to imitate their peers, wait with others, take turns, recognise appropriate behaviour (and how others respond to inappropriate behaviour), etc. These skills are essential prerequisites for learning in a group setting.

Most autistic behaviour interferes with effective learning. Stereotypical and repetitive behaviour works as an escape from or avoidance of the learning environment. Inappropriate behaviour typically results in a student with ASD being excluded from learning opportunities. Absences of imaginative play is a sign that a student with ASD lacks the ability to imagine consequences of choice options or predict outcomes.

Some students with ASD are especially good at learning aspects of literacy and numeracy. They may be highly skilled at rote learning. But they typically have difficulty generalising their skills and using them functionally in life.

Many parents of children with ASD report their being bullied. A recent survey of students with ASD reported that 100% of respondents reported being bullied.

Recent data from FaCS shows many students with ASD are granted a Disability Support Pension (DSP) at age 16 years, before they even leave school. This shows schools do not prepare students with ASD for employment and for participating in the community.

¹ R. E. Buckley (2004) *Autism/ASD diagnosis rates in Australia*, Biennial Australian Autism Conference, Autism Association of the ACT.

² Employment, Workplace Relations and References Committee (December 2002), *Education of students with a disability*, The Senate, p54.

³ American Psychiatric Association (1994), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, p69.

Educational Needs of Students with ASD

ASD is a clinical disorder that needs clinical intervention. Few children in Australia receive treatment for their ASD.

“Services available differ between areas, and in Australia there are no government-funded programs providing the recommended amounts of intervention. There is a need for increased government financial support for early intervention programs.”⁴

“However, most young children with autism in Australia do not receive intensive behavioural intervention programs — partly because such programs are not recommended by many health professionals and partly because of their prohibitive cost for families.”⁵

Many students with ASD enter school with untreated with their ASD untreated. They do not have the skills they need to learn effectively in a mainstream environment without highly skilled and intensive support.

The consensus of people expert in educating students with ASD is well known.

“The [expert] committee recommends that educational services begin as soon as a child is suspected of having and autism spectrum disorder. Those services should include a minimum of 25 hours a week, 12 months a year, in which the child is engaged in systematically planned, and developmentally appropriate educational activity towards identified objectives. ... Each child must receive sufficient individualized attention on a daily basis so that adequate implementation of objectives can be carried out effectively.”⁶

Teacher training provided in Australia does not prepare teachers to educate students with ASD successfully. Teachers do not know what students with ASD need from their education. After continued failure to teach these students, teachers are inclined to regard the student as unteachable rather than accepting that the teacher’s limited training and skills (and the absence of crucial resources) is a barrier to the child’s learning.

Issues A4 members have raised include:

- The need for specialised training for teachers working with high-needs students with ASD. These students have extreme (clinical level) difficulties with communication (understanding their teacher and showing the teacher their lack of understanding), social skills (participating in or learning from other students, recognising the meaning of the behaviour of others, etc.) and behaviour (such as appropriate behaviour, attending to instructions, staying on task, etc.). They experience enormous barriers to learning.

⁴ Wray J., Silove N. & Knott H. (April 2005) Language disorders and autism MJA; 182 (7): pp354-360, see http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/182_07_040405/wra10330_fm.html

⁵ J J Couper, A J Sampson (2003), *Children with autism deserve evidence-based intervention*, MJA, 178 (9): pp424-425. http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/178_09_050503/cou10054_fm-1.html

⁶ National Research Council (2003) *Educating Children with Autism*. Committee on Educational Intervention for Children with Autism, Catherine Lord & James P. McGee, eds. Division of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p6. see <http://www.nap.edu/openbook/0309072697/html/index.html>

- Teachers training does not develop critical thinking. Few teachers, education academics and education administrators can distinguish between an attractive hypothesis and a conclusion resulting from comprehensive research. For example, most educators treat “inclusion” in mainstream as a successful outcome when it is at best a placement option to be considered for a student who is disabled by their ASD.
- Teachers who work with students with ASD need to be taught to set clear measurable goals. Teachers should be taught methods for measuring, recording and reporting the educational and behavioural progress of students with ASD.
- Teachers are not taught effectively to respect the knowledge and skills of parents of children with ASD. They are taught to say they respect parents but either their training or their workplace culture ensures they do the opposite.
- Professional development for teachers whose classes include students with ASD is inadequate.
- Teacher training develops a pastoral culture where teachers aim to get by with what they have rather than seek additional resources and professional support needed to meet their students needs.
- Teachers are not trained sufficiently to ensure that they prepare most students with ASD for employment when they leave school.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Items 4 & 5

Item 4. Examine and assess the criteria for selecting and rewarding education faculty members.

Item 5. Examine the educational philosophy underpinning the teacher training courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure and materials, and methods for assessment and evaluation) and assess the extent to which it is informed by research.

Critical thinking is a part of what many university students are expected to learn.

Some subject areas in Universities do not develop critical thinking. There are signs staff and students in Education training are inclined to simply accept well promoted ideas. The education sector appears to accept hypotheses promoted by respected figures in the field.

For example, the whole language approach to literacy displaced the phonics pretty universally ... without much actual research to show its efficacy. Clearly many students could learn using either approach. Unfortunately, some students needed some phonics and their education suffered when this was absent.

Similarly, the inclusion model for students with a disability suits some students with disabilities. But some students make no discernible progress in an inclusive setting given the level of resource provisions. So some students, often the most vulnerable, miss out on an effective education, or have their education severely limited, in system dominated by dogma and lacking evidence of its efficacy.

Teachers, administrators and even academic staff in education seem unable to recognise a credible hypothesis.

In part, this must be due to the process of selecting and rewarding faculty members. There needs to be a significant change to ensure faculty members learn to recognise and direct their efforts to developing conclusions based on evidence.

The course structure, materials, methods of assessment and evaluation do not meet the needs of a significant proportion of students with ASD. Teacher training is not informed by the evidence available from other crucial disciplines.

Current courses tend to use a “one size fits all” approach to special education. Students with ASD may require specialised instruction⁷ in some very basic skills using methods that are intensive and regarded as ASD-specific. These specialised teaching skills require thorough training. The required training is not available inside the education sector in Australia.

As a particular example, many students with ASD require a significant level of one-to-one instruction. But the philosophy of education and all the training focuses on group instruction. Many students with ASD fail when group instruction is all that is available.

⁷ National Research Council (2003) *Educating Children with Autism*. Committee on Educational Intervention for Children with Autism, Catherine Lord & James P. McGee, eds. Division of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press,

Item 6

Item 6. Examine the interaction and relationships between teacher training courses and other university faculty disciplines.

Students with ASD have a clinical diagnosis. But the Australian health system simply leaves ASD untreated. So children with untreated communication, social and behavioural disorders enter schools with little prospect of success.

Of course, most of these students are omitted from the national literacy and numeracy testing regimes. So the scale of the challenge is unknown.

The culture in the education sector makes the classroom teacher responsible for identifying and meeting the needs of all the students in her class. In relation to children with untreated ASD, the expectation education authorities place on teachers is unreasonable.

Teachers need to be trained to recognised when a student's need are beyond their ability or resources. Teachers could be better informed about other disciplines and their roles in ensuring students with ASD learn. They could understand much better when other disciplines are not meeting the needs of their students and how to address the problem.

Item 7

Item 7. Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:

- (iii) effectively manage classrooms;*
- (v) deal with bullying and disruptive students and dysfunctional families;*
- (vi) deal with children with special needs and/or disabilities;*

The notion of "effectively managing a classroom" should extend beyond the students. It should encompass ensuring the required resources are available.

Teachers could be taught how to select, supervise/manage and better utilise classroom/teachers aides and volunteers to support students with special needs.

Currently, teachers and schools do not deal with bullying of students with ASD effectively. Parents describe being bullied by principals and senior school staff. With bullying endemic from the very top of a school, it is little wonder that it pervades schools.

Students with ASD, especially untreated ASD, are often seen as disruptive students. Certainly, autistic behaviour can easily disrupt a classroom. Teachers and schools need to better understand the nature of ASD and how to avoid inappropriate or challenging behaviour. They need to understand how to reduce disruptive behaviour. They need to recognise when specialist attention is required and how to get the help they need.

Students with ASD often have high levels of anxiety. Their anxiety is often disregarded in schools and ignored by the health system; so it goes untreated. They may have a short fuse. Students with ASD are unable to communicate when they are stressed, the unwillingness/refusal of school staff to hear their side and their desire to escape often escalate into unacceptable situations.

Teachers and school need to work as partners where children have special needs. While most schools and teachers espouse a partnership approach, relatively few have a real understanding of what partnership with parents/families means and very little idea of how to implement it effectively.

Teachers, schools and education authorities too readily see family as dysfunctional and having to be "dealt with". They treat people with contempt and resent people responding to them in kind.

Item 10

Item 10. Examine the construction, delivery and resourcing of ongoing professional learning for teachers already in the workforce.

Around 1% of Australian children with have a diagnosis of ASD by the time they leave school. Students with ASD may require specialised teaching techniques. These specialised techniques require careful training and plenty of practice. People who are learning need to be supervised while they are learning.

The capacity to train existing staff does not currently exist.

Conclusion

Education systems in Australia are failing to prepare students with ASD to participate in employment and generally in their community.

This can only change when:

- Students receive treatment for their ASD that is effective in preparing them for school — programs that ensure young children with ASD learn to learn; and
- Teachers responsible for educating students with ASD have the knowledge, skill and support required for them to succeed in teaching students with ASD.