

June 13, 2004

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Training

Inquiry into Teacher Education

Dear Madam / Sir

I wish to make a submission to the Inquiry with specific reference, to Item 7 (VI) of the Terms of Reference, re the adequacy of current training with respect to the readiness of teachers for teaching children with additional needs:

7. Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:
(vi) deal with children with special needs and/or disabilities.

The document that I wish to submit is a statement that I have recently submitted to the Council of Deans of Education. This statement is based on both professional and personal experience: I have worked as an academic for ten years, teaching language studies as part of a Bachelor of Education program, prior to which I taught in secondary schools, and finally, I am now the parent of a child with Asperger's (known also as an autism spectrum disorder or high functioning autism).

I have sought to make the case for improved pre-service training for all teachers in matters relating to children with the cognitive style and indeed cognitive impairments that mark these disorders. It is likely that every teacher will in the course of their professional life, work with students with these or related disorders. In situations where their impairments are understood, where appropriate behavior supports are in place, and where their difference is treated with respect, it is well known that students with these disorders can manage and even flourish.

Having worked as a practicing teacher at both secondary and tertiary levels, my submission is made from a position of respect for teaching as a profession, and practical understanding of the demands of the workload. In addition, as a parent, I am concerned, that as we are forced into a role of having to advocate for our son, that we are being seen as requiring something from schools that is somehow extra or other than what is the ethical responsibility of schools.

In summary, argument which is made here, is that in failing to provide graduating teachers with sufficient information and training to enable them to understand the variable learning style which characterizes those with Asperger's Syndrome, and the techniques which work best with children thus diagnosed, is in effect a failure of duty to both the trainee teacher and the children whom they will eventually teach.

The provision of improved baseline training in these areas is essential if students with these disorders are to be able to educate in ways which respect their dignity, and their difference, while also upholding the educational needs of children in the classrooms in which they are included.

Yours sincerely,

Maryrose Hall.

Council of Deans of Education

The Case for Pre-service Training

Several weeks ago, I led a group of parents in a forum before a State Parliamentarian, Ann Barker, the Parliamentary Secretary for Education. The purpose of the forum was to give her the opportunity to hear some first hand accounts of situation of children with Autism Spectrum disorders (including Asperger's Syndrome) in the education system, from the perspective of their parents. The forum had been initiated after I had heard a number of very alarming accounts of disastrous experiences in the early weeks of the current school year, for children with ASD's in mainstream schools.

Prior to the gathering, the group of five parents had not met each other. To my surprise, the common thread which emerged spontaneously in their accounts was the lack of understanding on the part of teachers, of the nature of their children's impairments and the impact this had on the child, and subsequently on the family. Where I had expected there to be a focus on funding issues, access to aides, access to allied health professionals within schools, each person described problems which grew out of teachers' lack of knowledge of the cognitive deficits which underlie the child's difficulties and lack of information of how to deal with them. On the other hand, there were some accounts of positive outcomes when classroom teachers had even minimal training in relation to dealing with children with these disorders.

It is as a result of that forum that I now write to the Council of Deans of Education. There are several key points which I would like to put before the Council, with a view making the case for the provision of baseline training for teachers in dealing with children with these developmental disorders, in all pre-service teaching programs.

Children with Asperger's and Autism spectrum disorders are part of the cohort of children in mainstream schools. In this sense, inclusion is not some kind of optional extra - there are no dedicated settings where these children, (I refer specifically to children at the high functioning end of the so-called spectrum) can or should be segregated to for their education. What needs to be understood, that while they generally do not meet the criteria for having an intellectual disability, they may have significant cognitive processing impairments which may impede their learning, alongside the impaired competence in social understanding which is the hallmark of the disorder, a critical deficit in the social domain of a school!

In historical terms, it interesting to note that as recently as the early nineties, an American couple report that they travelled from state to state in the U.S. trying to get someone who knew enough about Aspergers, to be able to give their son the diagnosis they had come to think was probably appropriate for him.¹ It is of course probably the case that children with these disorders have always been present in mainstream classrooms, where their needs were poorly understood, or not even recognized. As the techniques for diagnosing children at the higher functioning end of the spectrum have been refined, in combination with increased rates of prevalence, there is a greater likelihood that any individual teacher will have to teach children with the cognitive impairments such a diagnosis indicates.

The fact that their cognitive processing difficulties meet the criteria for a diagnosable developmental disorder should be taken to be an advantage for a teacher, in that once a diagnosis has been made, there are a number of approaches and strategies which can readily be implemented. Doing so, will only enhance the situation, of the individual child, their teacher and the peers in the classroom. There are excellent resources dealing with the what the educational needs of children with these disorders are likely to be, the typical learning style and techniques and strategies are which work best. Of course teachers need to be able to access such materials and feel competent in dealing with the different challenges such children may present.

As such do not meet the criteria for disability funding in most states, they are unlikely to have aide assistance. They are however, likely to be victims of the myth² that kids with Aspergers are “very bright” academically, with associated the risk that their particular learning impairments will be overlooked. Hence the one thing that such children need is teachers who have accurate information about the disorder, and the techniques which are effective in teaching children with it.

I believe teachers need to know is that that instead of an intellectual disability, children with ASD’s have a cognitive impairment and consequent learning style which may be at some variance from that of the their typically developing peers, that such children can and do function within regular classrooms, and that they can be successfully taught in these settings.³ To provide some baseline preparation in these areas as part of general-pre-service training is a realistic response to the reality of the presence of these children not just in schools but in the “normal population”. To regard the education of such children as somehow the domain of the special-ed teacher or a region’s special school simply does not work, and is no longer viable, nor in the end ethically defensible.

While applauding the opportunities given for parents to participate in the educational planning for their child, it must be acknowledged that in such a situation parents can be placed in the role of educating the child’s teacher not just about the child, but about the disorder and the teaching methods which are likely to be effective. Doing so alters the relations between teacher, parent and school in ways which are not always positive or beneficial to any of the parties. Very often, parents are placed in the dubious role of “advocate” for their child, a role in which many parents feel decidedly uncomfortable, and which may distort the relationship between the parent and even worse, the relationship between the teacher and the student.

Having taught in both secondary and tertiary settings, I am fully aware of how demanding the working life of the average teacher is. I feel that attempting to train staff by default in after-hours meetings and days out of the classroom doing PD, only adds to a rather unwieldy workload and does not necessarily bring about the best results. While recognizing the benefits that concurrent professional development can bring for individual teachers or whole schools, my feeling is the horse may have already bolted and that the real benefit may be in providing appropriate and targeted component that addresses these matters in pre-service education.

Failing to provide training in these areas is to risk graduates being underskilled and indeed vulnerable when meeting the rather complex world of the mixed ability classroom where there are children with significant cognitive differences. Lack of knowledge in how to deal with such situations is to set teachers and their students up for an escalating cycle of misunderstanding, poor management, poor behavior and poor learning outcomes – indeed negative outcomes for all. Within an environment where inclusion is valued and where there is an ethic of respect for individuals, I think it is crucial that pre-service teacher education programs provide some baseline education about the educational profile of children with these disorders.

I am a secondary teacher myself, with a background in English Language Education, and Literary Studies. I have an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and am part-way through a PhD, yet prior to my son's diagnosis I had no knowledge or training with respect to developmental disorders or language pathologies. In this sense I think I am probably not unlike most members of the profession. I often try to imagine myself in the role of the teacher trying to take on board what I see the teacher having to take on board in order for my son to be “integrated” in her class. Notwithstanding the fact that our son is by temperament happy and enthusiastic, has good reading ability, whose “challenging behaviors” are now minimized, it is the case that he does have significant cognitive processing impairments. Understanding and dealing with these will present a challenge to any teacher who works with him in the next fifteen years. It is reflecting on these experiences which prompts me to put this case before the Council for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Maryrose Hall.
(Mother of 7 year old in a mainstream school)

1. D.Hyatt-Foley and M. Foley, 2002, *Getting Services for Your Child on the Autism Spectrum*, Jessica Kingsley Press, London.
2. J. Manjiviona (2003) “Assessment of Specific Learning Difficulties,” in Prior.M.(ed) *Learning and Behavior in Asperger Syndrome*, Oxford U.P
3. F. Happe, Autism: Cognitive Deficit or Cognitive Style, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 3:6, pp216-212.