

Submission to Inquiry into Teacher Education

I write to you to express my concerns with the current nature of teacher education in Australia, and the consequential poor delivery of education to a large portion of children – those children with hidden and diagnosed Special Needs. Allied to this is the chronic shortage of resources available to teachers, even when they do have the requisite skills to deal with children with Special Needs.

I have a son who is nearly 11 and is in Year 5. He has multiple, neurologically based disabilities. He was diagnosed quite late, and has not had any benefits from Early Intervention (if it was available), instead being labeled by his Year 1 teacher as a behaviour problem from a dysfunctional family, neither of which were accurate.

At 7+ he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and an IQ that places him just short of Gifted. Just before his 10th birthday he was diagnosed with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - Aspergers Syndrome (AS), which can be said to be at the higher functioning end of the Autistic Spectrum. And now he has another label – Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD).

I have experienced both the State and Independent Education Systems. I despair that so many schools promise to cater for the individual, and fall so terribly short of that goal with so many of our precious future resources – our kids. And in fact, poor teaching methods and attitudes can have an extremely damaging impact on the future of a child with an ASD.

A child with AS/ASD/Special Needs often has low self-esteem, and this is further threatened by poor teaching methods and attitudes, and the resulting school experience. My son experienced concerned, but poor, teaching and management strategies at his former (Independent and State) schools, which I believe was a major contributor to his new ODD label. He became extremely school averse and developed some antisocial behaviours. This has made his integration into a new school even more difficult as he must 'un-learn' the poor behaviours that developed in that environment.

The resulting mess is now being addressed, with a great deal of success, thanks to his (State school) teacher who has a child with an ASD. It has been my experience, and anecdotally that of others, that there are some very good teachers dealing with AS/ASD children, and more importantly producing positive outcomes for these children. Most of these teachers appear to have a family connection with Autism. In other words – **they understand**.

These people are too rare in a system that by its actions and outcomes, appears overwhelmed by the diversity in the presentation of Special Needs. Those teachers who succeed are self-taught, creative thinking, cherished individuals who have little mainstream support with resources, continuing education, or development. These dedicated individuals make a huge difference to the outcomes for our kids and **there are not enough of them.**

Allied to this is the apparent lack of continuity of skill and care that a child currently experiences as s/he moves between Years and then to on to high school, and further education.

Australia has put a great deal of effort in supporting the learning needs of girls with incredible results. Now we need to address those with special needs – learning disabilities, dyslexia, ADHD, ASD, intellectual disabilities and Gifted and Talented, amongst others

My child displays the common characteristics of AS :-

- His social interactions are impaired – he does not make eye contact and cannot ‘read’ facial expressions; he has only one friend his age who also has specific learning disabilities; he doesn’t understand the rules of conversation and play; he cannot cope with a ‘normal’ playground environment; he does not understand the concept of personal space
- He has many repetitive motor behaviours – rocking, joint cracking facial tics; has special interests about which he is quite knowledgeable, and can be fixated; operates best with a consistent routine; and becomes anxious with unexpected change
- He is accident prone; inquisitive; has appalling handwriting (Dysgraphia); has few social graces; doesn’t understand friendship with his peers; has a high pain tolerance; and is highly anxious.
- He has many sensitivities – touch, sound and smell, and a very restricted diet. He can find it difficult to watch, see, hear and copy at the same time. Large groups and places cause him great difficulties
- His ADHD is largely of the attention deficit kind, rather than hyperactivity. This manifests itself as finding it difficult to keep on task, not hearing or receiving the last few of a multiple instruction to an activity; being easily distracted; and being a perfectionist. Many of these issues are the same in AS.
- When he is overwhelmed by his environment (too many, too much, too loud, too confusing and so on) he will become more and more anxious. The more anxious he becomes the more self-destructive he may be (loud, physical, tics, speechless, inconsolable) until he finally ‘shuts down’ - curls in a ball in a corner.

My son is not a “bad” child, but he is challenging, and will reward his teacher with trust and good performance if motivated. I feel great sympathy for teachers who are exposed to such a wide range of special needs, with what seems to be no

particular training in dealing with the particular needs of children with an ASD or like my son.

I am not suggesting that teachers should diagnose children, but to be aware that different teaching and participation styles may be the key to a child's positive outcomes. Anecdotally, it appears that all children in a class may welcome and respond well to changes introduced to cater for special learning styles.

So we could say that a change in teacher education embracing special needs will have a positive outcome for all children. Further, a more positive school environment may well see improved teacher morale and retention as they are not constantly fighting 'the system' or experiencing negative outcomes for their efforts in the classroom.

Training and support for all teachers and allied people in the school system should be broadened and include attention to issues such as these :-

- Communications - Instructions, outcomes and goals must be understood by all in the class. They can be delivered or achieved in many ways as long as they are clear and understood. Advise teachers on alternative delivery of information and measurement of outcomes, and ways to set achievable goals for the individual. The teacher or aide must appreciate that an AS/ASD child may listen without looking (just as we know some cultures avoid eye contact), or need to touch something to make the audio input relevant, and so on.
- Behaviour Management – An AS/ASD child will call out, be restless and fidgety, move around – is this bad behaviour or is the classroom environment hostile to learning?. Are there distractions such as old lighting, rattles, flouros, squeaks, scraping noises when chairs move, smells, cramped spaced, too much space. AS/ASD children may react to these stimulations which others don't notice – and therefore appear to be disruptive. Make the teachers aware of alternative classroom set-ups, resources and ways to achieve classroom harmony.
- Bullying – take care that the true victim is really identified. The AS/ASD child may be physical, but what has s/he endured? Verbal abuse (look s/he can't read – what a baby) can be insidious, if not addressed. Caution teachers to be vigilant, and not rely on the child to report an incident. AS kids find it hard to learn from their mistakes. And sometimes the need to make friends will place them in an inappropriate relationship in the playground.
- Parents as supporters and advocates – develop a culture in the profession that embraces the support parents can offer. They know their Special Needs child best, and may be able to provide a guide to reward systems, triggers to difficult behaviour and sensitivities. Improve communications and networking capabilities of teachers and information management relating to the child.

This may include formal handover conferences when a child moves into the next year, for example. But please, impart the need for full and open information and the need to read a child's file before you start to teach him/her. There is no point in reinventing the wheel.

- Attitude – children can be confronting, and especially so with Special Needs. There are many barriers to learning and failure to provide equal opportunity should be understood by those given the responsibility of teaching our children – these barriers may be physical, intellectual, cultural and neurological, amongst others. Our teachers should not exhibit their prejudices. Do not allow teachers to tell a parent – “oh, we had such a wonderful time while (my son) was away”. (as said to me by his teachers in Year 1 and Year 4)
- Classroom Management – There must be other solutions to discipline issues other than sending the child out of the class or the school, and therefore satisfying the child's need to remove themselves from a stressful environment, with the result that they do not learn. Alternative skills can ensure a child remains in the teaching area, on task, or conforms with reasonable rules must be provided to teachers.
- Intelligence – This is an indicator of potential not a guide to an ability to learn. Teach the different ways a mind can learn, and provide teachers with the ability to modify their techniques to cater for all. Just because a child may be bright, it does not mean that s/he can grasp a concept, work unaided, or have the organisational skills of an advanced neurotypical student.
- Initial and Continuing Teacher Education – Develop sound strategies for both. Having the best teacher training with no upgrades or follow-ups would be a waste. There seems to be little in the way of practical upgrades of a professional teacher's qualifications. I have met teachers with impressive qualifications but little practical application of their knowledge. Please find ways to keep the good ones, and not let them burn out or become bitter, and find ways to allow them to pass their expertise on to others. Consider a form of accreditation – but don't over-engineer the process and make it unwieldy. In the meantime consider mentoring.
- Related issues – I believe there needs to be an overhaul of teacher education, and that this should not be taken in isolation. Many problems that seem to occur within the school environment are related to large class sizes, insufficient teachers and teacher aides, underfunding of teacher/learning resources and the physical environment of the school

Incidence of the various disorders has not increased, they are now more likely to be diagnosed. With diagnosis comes intervention through understanding. You would not leave a child with a hole in the heart or a broken leg – you treat the

problem and associated complications. Ramps and lifts are installed for children with mobility issues. So we must treat children with non-physical disorders. Treatment in this case comes with the application of sound teaching methods, quality teaching and physical resources and appropriately trained teachers.

Once children who were different were, largely, ignored. Some survived and a few achieved to their ability, some left school, some were sent out to work (in many cases to the family business or farm), some became police statistics, or were looked after by the extended family.

The 21st century is a different place and it demands different treatment for all of our children.

Teach our children well – all of our children.

Adrienne van Spanje

13 April 2005

38 Cain Close
Wauchope NSW 2446