

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

This submission is made by Brett and Debbie Hughes. It summarises our views based on our experience with our first daughter, Lillian.

Our Story

Lillian was adopted by us at the age of 2½. The WA Government agency responsible (the Department for Community Development) failed to tell us that Lillian had developmental delays. It would not have affected the adoption, as we love Lillian with all our hearts, but despite the information being available we were ignorant of her educational needs for many years.

Lillian initially spoke few words, but quickly caught up when she started at kindergarten. She seemed to progress satisfactorily but by year 3 we were quite worried about her development. The teachers said she was fine, others were struggling more than she, and that she would catch up. It was all wrong, and we were still in the dark. They seemed unable to discern those in the class who were at risk, especially if they were well behaved and not disruptive.

Because we were concerned, we spent a lot of time trying to find whether she had aural, visual, psychological or other problems. Eventually we arranged a test which showed she was around the 10th percentile or lower for all her literacy and numeracy skills. She was two years behind average 8 year old children. She was in a class of 34 disruptive children and the State school indicated they could offer her minimal additional support. Teachers are expected to do so much these days it's impossible for some of them to cope with the demands.

After considerably more investigation we found Lillian has ADD and dyslexia. She is clever, has excellent verbal skills and is musical. But she will never be able to spell or add up. She works **very** hard, but it takes her 4 times as long to do her homework.

We were ably assisted by Dyslexia-SPELD and Lillian has now been tutored for 5 years. In the first year she caught up a year, but continues to lag well behind her cohort. We sent Lillian to a private Christian school where she received love and sensitive teaching.

For middle school we searched widely for a supportive learning environment. It was clear the State high school could offer no special support. "If she had Down's syndrome or Cerebral Palsy, we would be able to offer her help, but it was kids like her that slipped through the cracks", we were told.

We sent her to an 'elite' private school (Penrhos College) where her needs were generally ignored, and she learned little. Despite being told otherwise she was required to learn a second language. This was so stupid, uncaring and arrogant; she can't even learn English to a basic standard. Her reports indicated 'satisfactory' progress, throughout, but she remained below the 10th percentile on the WA year 7 benchmark testing, which didn't seem satisfactory to us. In our view this school was negligent and failed in their duty of care to provide the education Lillian needed and they had promised.

We try to talk to all Lillian's teachers before she starts a new year, but many teachers are uncommunicative, feel threatened, are disbelieving and are unhelpful. They are a sad representation of a 'profession' which is so valuable. (It's somewhat bizarre relating to teachers who act more insecurely than their students).

Lillian's tutors have rarely been accepted as partners in Lillian's education. They are often ignored and are apparently seen as a threat or a sign of the teacher failing to do their job.

Lillian now attends a Christian school (Carey Baptist College) which is generally sensitive and supportive, so she is progressing satisfactorily. She still struggles with a curriculum aimed at university courses she will never be able to enter. Some teachers still remain a challenge.

Our Experience

Our experience is:

- As a broad generalisation, of every 8 teachers who have taught Lillian, approximately:
 - 1 will understand and teach appropriately without our involvement (but our support is appreciated),
 - 2 will understand after the issues are discussed and teach appropriately,
 - 2 will understand after the issues are discussed but can't manage to teach appropriately,
 - 2 will listen, won't understand and but can't or won't adapt their teaching, and
 - 1 will refuse to acknowledge there is any problem and will treat us like idiots.
- About half of all teachers feel threatened by parents or tutors who try to give informed advice about their children's needs.
- Many teachers are unwilling to communicate with parents or tutors as equals and partners in a child's education.
- The State school system is failing children with significant (but not debilitating disabilities).
- Some private schools are no better, despite exorbitant fees and promises.

Our Opinions

In our opinion:

- Knowledgeable, supportive parents have an essential role to play in the education of their children with disabilities.
- Too many teachers have unprofessional attitudes towards children with disabilities,
- Too many teachers believe they are the 'professionals' who know much that the opinions of parents are irrelevant.
- The education system and the teaching profession are failing to educate our children to their potential.

The Tragedy

Lillian's story is not a tragic. She is growing up as a wonderful, talented, likeable young lady who will find a happy, fulfilling place in society, because we have the means and will to provide for her development.

The tragedy is that there are many others like Lillian who will be lost. They will grow up without a future, be picked on, never achieve their potential and live very sad lives. Our society has failed them in the past and continues to fail them now.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

Our responses to the Inquiries Terms of Reference are:

(1)

- Current policies and programs are inadequate for children with significant, but not debilitating cognitive disabilities. At least 10% of children do not get the education they need.
- Teachers and the educational system do not have either the skills or resources to even **identify** children with significant disabilities. So they obviously can't define disabilities of differentiate levels of disability.
- Children from non-English speaking backgrounds, overseas or low socia-economic groups have little chance of getting a decent education.
- There are no programs available for children with significant disabilities. 'Early intervention' is specious, since it assumes early identification, adequate teaching skills and open attitudes, all of which are widely absent.
- Students with disabilities need:
 - skilled teachers,
 - teachers who are open and don't think they know everything,
 - teachers who are willing to treat children as individuals who need specific teaching strategies,
 - individual, sensitive attention,
 - a focussed curriculum which suits their life needs, not the just needs of other children who aspire to university,
 - smaller classes (25 maximum),
 - teachers aids in higher grades where more difficult concepts are taught,
 - LOTE (second language) not be compulsory,
 - allowance in programs for reduced workloads.
- Funding and support for children with cognitive disabilities are grossly inadequate.
- **Tax breaks should be provided to parents of children with disabilities for special educational expenditure** (eg audio books, talking/writing software).
- Teacher training is irrelevant until teacher attitudes towards parents and children with disabilities are awakened.
- Fewer restrictions on aids for children in classrooms and examinations (eg computers).
- Excellent skills and resources are available through parent groups such as Dyslexia – SPELD and LADS (in Western Australia). These groups are extremely valuable but **grossly** underfunded and provide better value for money than most government programs.
- **The best use of additional funds is to raise teacher awareness of disabilities and increase funding to parent groups.**

(2)

The proper role for government is simply to provide a high level of education which meets the needs of children as individuals, and assist parents to educate their children. Currently governments, education systems and teachers are failing to provide this to children with significant disabilities.

Contact Details

We would be delighted to discuss this with you further.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this critical issue.

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