



Submission to the

**Australian Senate – Employment, Workplace
Relations and Education Committee**

**Inquiry into the Education of
Students with Disabilities**

April 2002

Executive Summary

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities.

Our members recognise that theirs is a crucial role, in that they need to create a positive climate that encourages participation by students with disabilities in all learning areas.

To prepare students for the 21st Century is a huge challenge; to prepare students with disabilities is an even greater challenge.

Adequate funding in both the public and private sectors is critical.

The conjunction of anti-discrimination and the poverty of integration funding is an interesting one. Funding mechanisms certainly need to be reformed.

The need of the child must take precedence, so that resources can be tied to the student not the sector of schooling attended.

The current categories and criteria for identification need revision and clarification.

The areas of learning disabilities are not usually specifically included in the categories of students with disabilities eligible for funding support.

Students, their families and teachers need expert support from experts in their field.

When properly planned and implemented and adequately resourced, integrated education enhances learning opportunities for all students.

Perhaps the most important strategy with which the Commonwealth could offer assistance is the provision of incentives to encourage schools to set up excellent, innovative and appropriate programs for students with special needs.

There needs to be improvement of literacy and communication skills.

Currently, basic teacher training is usually inadequate in preparing teachers to work with students with learning disabilities.

Scholarship or study grants could be made available to release teachers working in the areas of learning difficulties.

Further research is needed on the function of the brain and how it influences the way children learn

There must be effective parent-school partnerships.

The proper resourcing of all of these students, **no matter where they live or attend school, is essential.**

AHISA'S Submission

Introduction

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities and commends the Senate for inquiring into this matter. It is one that should have high priority, as there are many children in need of assistance.

The members of this national Association have a strong interest in the quality of learning of all students in Australia. However they recognise that there is a real need, at the present time, to examine the factors that inhibit the learning of students with disabilities with a view to improving the situation for them as quickly as possible.

The Association is a peak educational organization and presently its members are Heads of more than 300 Independent schools in Australia educating more than 250 000 students. The Association feels that it is important that parents of students with disabilities have the opportunity as well as the right to choose the appropriate school for their children.

Preparation of this Submission

There are valuable and innovative programs in many of our members' schools, especially where time energy and resources have been devoted to the support of these children. There has been widespread consultation, extensive research, including action research, discussions by teachers on what works and what doesn't, and an increased use of professionals, from fields other than education. Our members recognise that theirs is a crucial role, in that they need to create a positive climate that encourages participation by students with disabilities in all learning opportunities provided by the school.

Because of this interest in improving the **learning** opportunities for these children, the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry were distributed via e-mail to our members with an invitation to respond to the AHISA Secretariat if they wished to provide input to this submission. Many members took advantage of this invitation and this submission has been prepared from the material provided. The Association would be pleased to enlarge on any of these issues providing more specific information if required. Certainly some of our members will lodge their own submissions which will contain details of specific school issues

Support in our Changing World

The increase of technologies in our world has meant huge changes have occurred and are occurring at a rapid rate. This generation can access information in a global context from many different sources at once; they are exposed to global issues such as poverty, health, conservation, discrimination etc; they have different and enormous pressures to

deal with; they learn differently; they lack the knowledge of security of future employment. They are told they must be flexible, adaptable, tolerant and ethical, be good communicators and negotiators, be able to work in teams, become reflective thinkers; indeed that they must have a balance of generic life skills and capabilities that are transferable and that can be applied not only in a wide range of work situations but also in broader contexts.

To prepare students for the 21st Century is a huge challenge; to prepare students with disabilities is an even greater challenge and one where the Australian nation must provide support. This support should be readily available, preferably beginning as early as possible, if these young people are to grow into positive, active, well-educated, fulfilled and happy citizens. This support must come from the Commonwealth and State Governments, and must be available to these young people, no matter what school they attend.

Funding Issues

Adequate funding in both the public and private sectors is critical and it needs to be sufficient to provide long-term assistance to all students with disabilities within schools. Determining which students receive special education support and how much support they need is a complex process. The conjunction of anti-discrimination and the poverty of integration funding is an interesting one. Funding mechanisms certainly need to be reformed.

The targeted funding for students with disabilities in non-government schools is woefully inadequate and it would be appropriate to use the funding for a student in the government sector as a benchmark for the funding of a student in a non-government school. The complexity of the whole funding issue is further increased by the fact that funding arrangements vary across States and Territories. The funding of students with disabilities is an area where the differing contributions of the Commonwealth and State governments, based on the sector of schooling the child attends and where the child lives, is most stark. This is an equity issue.

During the past ten years the costs for special services (visiting teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists) have more than doubled. The amount of money from both Federal and State Governments has NOT kept up with the cost of these services. The independent sector would benefit greatly from having access to the same resources as (and also information disseminated by) the government sector.

When a student with disabilities transfers from the government sector to a non-government school, the resources do not follow the child. This means that parents often cannot send their children to the school of their choice because there are significant financial disincentives for them to enrol their children in an independent school.

In any future restructuring of special education resources, the need of the child must take precedence, so that resources can be tied to the student not the sector of schooling attended. The cost of meeting the needs of students with disabilities should be borne by the general community not a specific school community. This is again an equity issue.

There is a real financial concern for independent schools that want to provide appropriate education for a student with a disability, because the extra costs are carried

by the parents of that **school**, whereas a government school, that takes in a child with a disability, is provided with extra funding out of the general educational funding allocation of the **system**. Heads of Independent schools enjoy having these children in their schools, but understand that this usually means added financial burden for the other parents of the school.

Criteria Issues

A constructive approach to the developing of appropriate definitions of disability is required. The current categories and criteria for identification need revision and clarification. These categories represent only a small percentage of students with special needs. The situation is so complex that it is sometimes difficult to fit students into the categories mandated. At present there are young people left out, who should be funded. An example of this would be a student who is multiply disabled, yet misses out on funding, as his/her level of each disability is not deemed serious enough to require funding. Yet when one adds the layers of several disabilities, a student in this category should certainly be funded.

Learning Disabilities

The areas of learning disabilities are the most challenging in terms of definition but they are not usually specifically included in the categories of students with disabilities eligible for funding support. Assisting these students involves extensive support and therefore extensive resourcing. A systematic program and policy on funding is required to recognise the needs of this group of students.

There is a need to define what constitutes a learning disability and to determine the impact this has on individual students. This needs to be done in conjunction with schools, where the needs of these students are understood within the school, the socio-economic and the cultural context. The percentage of these students within a given population can also be accurately defined in the school context. There are excellent testing materials available and specifically related professionals willing to assist.

Early intervention programs are essential and this should occur in the primary school where the opportunity exists to help our young people and their parents before they become discontented with their school life, which may then become unproductive.

The secondary school is a huge challenge for students with learning disabilities. In each year level in secondary school there are usually a few students who have extreme difficulty with literacy, language learning and communication, despite programs to improve these skills in primary school. It is then very difficult for teachers, parents and students as these students often cannot access the curriculum and do not qualify for teacher aide assistance. They need special on-going, one-to-one support, modified curriculum and special resources. Financial support is needed for them just as much as Integration Support is given to other students. In fact, often students with specific learning disabilities have far greater problems accessing the curriculum than those who receive integration status. These students have poor self-esteem, often have behaviour difficulties and are prone to anxiety.

Anxiety has now been identified as the major risk factor of depression, which is becoming a huge worry for all in schools. Where once the diagnosis of depression would come first and the treatment follow, now it is considered that it is best to use the preventative measure of providing students with the coping skills to deal with anxiety while at school, that will give them the resilience to avoid depression later. Depression is a very serious health problem.

It is now realized that teachers cannot deal with all of these problems and our schools are increasingly using professionals from associated disciplines (eg health) and improving counselling services

The point needs to be made that students, their families and teachers need **expert support** from experts in their field, and teachers are learning to work collaboratively with these people on social and curriculum modification for the good of these students.

Australia is a multicultural nation and this is reflected in the students of many different cultures in our schools. Language and cultural barriers can result in misunderstanding, misinterpretation or misrepresentation that can cause a host of problems. Ideas about and attitudes towards disabilities are often culturally influenced. People from other cultures may not have a corresponding concept and may not agree that a particular child has a disability. Some of our schools have found that involving members of the students' ethnic community who are also part of the school community, in conversations and planning where appropriate, can be helpful.

Students with an English as a Second Language background also require extra support, especially in the secondary setting, in order to improve their literacy skills and access the curriculum.

The question of how to handle students with ADHD needs to be considered further. The latest research seems to indicate that this is not necessarily a behavioural phenomenon but associated with brain function. It may be that these students should be considered for Integration funding. As with students with specific learning disabilities, these students often do not reach their potential. Yet some specific treatments (e.g. allowing them movement while they learn, the provision of a laptop computer so that they can use ICT technologies) have had positive effects on their learning.

Integration

Many schools have a commitment to providing an appropriate education for **all** students and strive to create a culture within their school that promotes differentiated teaching and learning. When properly planned and implemented and adequately resourced, integrated education enhances learning opportunities for **all** students, providing benefits beyond academic learning, helping students to prepare for life and work in a diverse world.

It is best if the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream groups occurs early, preferably from pre-school where non-disabled children learn to accept differences at an age where differences are noticed, but prejudices have not yet developed.

Children with special needs are like all other children. They need to be physically comfortable, feel secure, and have opportunities for social interaction that help the body, mind and spirit grow and develop. In an inclusive environment, they learn life skills. Integration also gives disabled children the chance to make friends and to socialize with other children. Through this interaction, they learn the values of communication and the give-and-take of conversation. They learn how to play independently and how to take care of their own needs.

Interacting with children who have a variety of needs teaches non-disabled children how to focus on the individual and not on the disability. Children who participate in integrated programs can grow up accepting people with disabilities as valuable and valued members of society.

The experience is also beneficial to teachers and other staff members in a school. They also develop a more positive and accepting attitude towards people with disabilities. Working to integrate disabled children into a regular program helps teachers improve their observation, problem-solving and planning skills. Improving these skills helps in the caring for and teaching of all children.

However the successful integration of students with disabilities requires careful individualized planning regarding services and support in a whole school approach. These may include

- the use of technology
- preparation of peers, teachers and teacher aides
- support from other professions and
- social integration planning to assist in experiential, interactive educational methods that assist the learning of all students.

Strategies to Assist Students with Disabilities

Perhaps the most important strategy with which the Commonwealth could offer assistance is the provision of incentives to encourage schools to set up excellent, innovative and appropriate programs for students with special needs. These may involve personnel, finance and professional development but to have the support of the Government could provide the incentive to accomplish something really worthwhile for these children.

Schools have tried to support these students in a variety of ways, sometimes through inclusion in mainstream classes with adequate support, sometimes by providing access to specialist areas or groups, perhaps doing small group-specific work, and sometimes by providing one-to-one support. The success of any program is dependent on the identification, planning, monitoring and ongoing review of the student's learning. The strategies being used, include

- The establishment of **Learning Centres** where specialist staff assist students on a one-to-one or small group basis. They develop **coping procedures** in the students so that they can access the curriculum and be involved in the total life of the school. These centres usually include assistive technologies, especially appropriate computer systems and a large range of ICT programs.

- The use of **information and communication technologies (ICT)**

The impact of ICT on education in the last few years has been enormous and will continue to grow. Computer technology is transforming our lives and this generation of students has grown up with technology as an accepted part of their lives. Access to computers has enabled special needs students to take more control of their own learning and to alter their perceptions as learners. For visually impaired students to be able to increase the font size of the text on their screen is just one simple example of the assistance that computers can give

The ICT area is one in which many of these students feel comfortable and it may well be an area where **their educational outcomes can be improved dramatically**. Where resources such as computer technology have been seen as being helpful for students with disabilities, they should be available for use at home and in school.

- Provision of **specific programs and curriculum** within the school, to meet identified needs
- Access to a range of **community based programs** for attendance outside the school
- Increased **access to Vocational Education and Training** and Community Studies and extended **work skills programs** with employers interested in assisting these students
- Co-ordination of the service of **other specialists** or agencies to facilitate the learning of these students
- Inclusion of special needs students in **interschool sports** competitions
- **Effective behaviour management** practices to be used by staff
- Extensive use of **teacher aides** to support students with special needs in regular classes.

It is recognised that many of these strategies will help poor achievers as well as those with disabilities. Any work that can be done in schools to improve the development of all students is to be applauded.

Improvement of the literacy and communication skills of these students.

Poor literacy and communication skills impede learning and most schools favour a strong emphasis on the improvement of these skills for students with learning disabilities. The funding that has become available for these programs has been a positive move.

Reading is an important part of literacy. The American National Institute of Child Health (NICHD) has shown that 85% of individuals with learning disabilities have difficulties in the area of reading. The NICHD research has determined, however, that a particular overall approach to teaching reading offers the greatest chances of success for overcoming reading difficulties. Long-term studies funded by NICHD have shown that from 90 to 95 percent of reading impaired children can overcome their difficulties if they receive appropriate treatment at early ages. (Again NICHD research suggests that the greatest possibility of success lies in identifying and treating these children before they reach Year Three.)

Techniques used in our members' schools include

- Identifying specific difficulties in this area early and providing early intervention
- Explicitly showing children that words are made up of tiny segments, moving to phonic instruction, then introducing specific whole language programmes in the early primary years, perhaps concentrating on immersion of language in specific years, but certainly having a structured language learning programme through the primary years
- Providing plenty of opportunities for oral work and making drama lessons available to all primary students
- Providing individualized support and assistance
- Providing a wide range of literacy resources.

In order to engage students with learning difficulties, teachers need to have special classroom management techniques. These include

- Improving classroom practices in general, but understanding how students with specific learning disabilities prefer to learn
- Using more audio-visual aids, interactive whole class teaching, step-by-step treatment of new material, breaking classroom activities into shorter more intensive periods of time on task, dynamic lesson introductions
- Rewarding effort, care and detail, giving immediate praise and recognition
- Giving reasons for doing things
- Using skilful teaching techniques that allow the inclusion of special needs children in the classroom conversation
- Positioning special needs students as close to the teacher as possible while ensuring that they are integrated into the general classroom group
- Avoiding placing pressure of time or competition on them and always allowing them time for preparation before a task

The pre-service and professional development of teachers

It is important that **all** teachers are encouraged to develop an understanding of students with special needs, and to acquire skills to help these children with their learning. Pre-service teacher training and professional development of staff in schools should include a study of these issues. Every primary school teacher will have to teach students with special needs.

Currently, basic teacher training is usually inadequate in preparing teachers to work with students with learning disabilities. Teachers need to commence their professional life with knowledge of how to differentiate curriculum and assessment to meet the educational needs of all students. There should be much more pre-service training done in classrooms with quality teachers, than in lectures. Both Commonwealth and State governments should push for a change in teacher training. There should be an increase in the amount of training on the job and in the training of working with students with special needs.

Secondary teacher training needs to address the development of basic literacy and numeracy skills because students frequently enter the secondary school without having these skills. Secondary teachers need to be trained in literacy and communication strategies, especially those who teach in the middle school years. They need strategies to help poor readers.

Programs, where effective methods of communication via literacy, that relate to the work of the neuro-psychological and the linguistic development areas, should be available to practising and pre-service teachers.

At present the level of professional development of teachers often depends upon the individual school and its perceived priorities for the allocation of the Professional Development budget. Perhaps the Commonwealth could consider a subsidy for this particular area of Professional Development, especially for teachers who have the care of children with special needs? Perhaps opportunities could be made available for teachers to upgrade their qualifications in the areas of Special Education (including specific areas of disability) and ESL education, free of any HECS payment? To assist teachers in remote areas, or teachers with family obligations, courses should be available as part-time/correspondence courses.

Scholarship or study grants could be made available to release teachers working in the areas of learning difficulties, students with disabilities and ESL so that they could visit schools exhibiting good practice, participate in courses at tertiary institutions, attend conferences and courses. This would be of great benefit to those teaching in remote areas.

Given the usually inadequate preparation of teachers in the area of special needs, resource demands are currently great. Specialist staff is required to provide professional development for teachers.

The importance of further research into learning disabilities

Further research is needed on the function of the brain. There are powerful technologies that allow researchers to compare the brain function of people with reading disabilities to the brain functioning of skilled readers. Early results of other NICHD-funded studies suggest that key areas of the brains of people with reading disabilities function differently from the brains of people who read easily. These research projects may one day provide the basis for more effective treatments for reading disabilities.

Effective parent-school partnerships

Many schools consider it advantageous to use as many opportunities as possible to have parents connect with the school, to take a real interest in, and learn about their children's education. This is vital in the case of students with special needs because parents know their children better than anyone else. The learning experiences of these children can be greatly improved by teachers and parents working together. This partnership will ensure that hopes and expectations are communicated effectively, that any problems can be addressed quickly and that the needs of all involved are reflected in any decision-making process. Parents can be involved with the school in the planning of the ongoing development programs for their children. They can reinforce the work done in school, with support from home. They can become active partners in supporting the learning of their children.

It is important that this parent-school contact is regular and ongoing, and that it becomes a monitoring process for the progress of the student. Both parents and the staff of the school can provide opportunities for students with special needs to become increasingly self-sufficient. These students should be encouraged to make use of all the support services available so that they can achieve independence not only as much as possible at school but also in life-after-school.

Conclusion

If students with disabilities are to make the most of their learning opportunities while at school, they deserve the unqualified support of the Australian government. This submission includes examples of appropriate techniques and strategies that can be used to help these students.

However the proper resourcing of all of these students, no matter where they live or attend school, is essential.

The present complicated system for the treatment of students with disabilities is unacceptable. Students with disabilities deserve better than this.

Authorised and submitted by

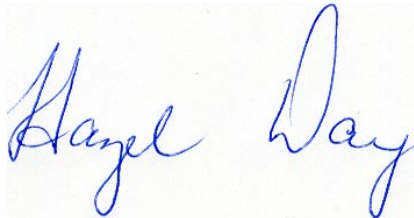
Chair of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia

Ms Noelene Horton

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Noelene Horton". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Prepared by the Executive Officer

Hazel Day

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Hazel Day". The signature is written in a cursive style.

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