

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

Submitted by:

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This submission is made in my capacities as

1. A professional educator, with an initial degree in the teaching of Science, post graduate qualifications in Religious Education and Special Education and over twenty years of experience in the classroom teaching students of all ability levels and
2. My role as the parent of a child with a disability who has been enrolled in an inclusive mode in a systemic Catholic school for five years.

I am of the view that children have as a basic human right unimpeded access to an education within the mainstream. It is only through such presence within the community that the fullest needs of each individual to support within that community can be realised. For students with disabilities (and probably for their non-disabled peers), what is commonly termed the “hidden curriculum” is of equal, if not greater importance than the formal school offerings. With this in mind, I have attempted to address each of the criteria outlined.

1ai. Criteria Used for Definition

- Adoption of a categorical model to both define and differentiate disability is undesirable. Use of such models reinforces in the minds of both teachers and the wider community that students with disabilities are inherently different to the wider population. While this makes the job of resource allocation easier, it does not always mean that scarce resources are always allocated in a way that maximises their positive use
- Use of the term handicap in the terms of reference is itself questionable. Given the concept of handicap as a predominantly social construct that may or may not arise as the result of a disability, this is difficult to respond to. Many students have disabilities, but these do not always result in handicap. Often, the degree of handicap experienced is more the result of lack of adequate attention/resource allocation to the needs of the learner than any inherent aspect of the condition

ii. Accuracy of Assessment

- Generally, students' disability needs are accurately assessed to the degree that is possible by available specialist staff. The dearth of such staff, particularly in rural/remote areas (see below) means that, at times, some needs are not being adequately addressed or programs not implemented
- Assessment of the needs of a particular student arising as a result of their disability does not mean these needs are being met. For a variety of reasons, many needs of students with disabilities are only partially accommodated, if at all.

iii. Needs of Students from Different Backgrounds

- Students with disabilities from low socio-economic, NESB, Indigenous backgrounds or rural/remote areas are particularly disadvantaged. While this is for a variety of reasons, the predominant reason is a lack of adequate trained staff/therapists to deal with their needs. As an example, in Bathurst for several years there was NO access to a paediatric speech therapist. There is now one available but her caseload is ridiculous, given that she is only employed two days per week. In other centres that are far more isolated, the situation is even worse
- Unfortunately, case management to the extent necessary to ensure the needs of students are met in a streamlined manner occurs only infrequently. Generally this is due to lack of available resources. Parents from the groups concerned in this section often lack the skills needed to ensure their children's needs are met and access to advocacy services to assist them is far too limited (we find it difficult as well-educated and reasonably articulate parents. We feel for those who do not know and are not informed of their rights/options).
- Related to the point above is the well documented disempowerment of parents in attempting to gain appropriate education for their children. This is particularly so when parents desire an inclusive education. Resource allocation to this area, as opposed to segregated settings is inadequate, resulting in negative attitudes from many educational administrators and teaching staff.

iv. Early Intervention Programs

- From a parental perspective a positive of our experience has been the availability of a generally well resourced Early Intervention service who promoted the positive side of parenting a child with a disability. Their work with my daughter has undoubtedly assisted in the overall success (to this stage) of her inclusion.

v. Access to and Adequacy of Funding

- In both capacities outlined in my background (teacher and parent) I would judge the access to and adequacy of support in both public and private sectors to be totally inadequate. Access to any funding for specialist services in the public system is stretched so thinly that these services are often only available in a piecemeal fashion (here I refer particularly to itinerant support services). Funding for these services within the private sector, at least in rural areas, appears to be non-existent. A far more

co-operative model between sectors, with increased funding for both, would enable a far more efficient delivery of services.

- The successful inclusion of my daughter has been primarily a result of the dedication and commitment of staff. While minimal support funding has been allocated to assist her, this is at a level nowhere near what she would have allocated in the Public system – and as already mentioned this is inadequate.
- In my current workplace, we attempt to cater for diverse needs within that group of students who receive integration funding. Current resource allocation is totally inadequate to, firstly, allocate sufficient time to each student and secondly, to adequately provide appropriate professional development for staff. In my position as Special Needs Coordinator (an unpaid voluntary position) I experience extreme stress from being unable to properly cater for the needs of the students for whom I am responsible.
- Despite a plethora of inquiries and investigations from governments at all levels, little has been done to address the regularly reported inadequacy of funding for students with special needs. While the numbers of these students in mainstream settings has increased enormously over the last few years, the funding to cater for their needs has not. This has meant a contraction of our resource allocation per student which leads to some of their needs being less than fully addressed.

vii Teacher Training

- While current teacher training involves tertiary students being involved in courses concerned with the teaching of students with disability (I have been involved in the delivery of some of these courses), such subjects can only properly cover an attempt to influence the attitudes of student teachers. A focus on the implementation of courses in areas such as behaviour management or specific teaching strategies would assist not only students with disabilities in their classrooms, but all students. Significant research has indicated that improvements in learning for ALL students occurs when changes in teaching styles are made for an included student

viii Legal Implications

- When compared to similar countries (eg US or UK) the legal requirements on systems to provide for students with disabilities in Australia are minimal. While some anti-discrimination legislation has helped in this regard, there is still an entrenched feeling within significant sections of grass roots Australian education that is not very accepting of inclusion and far more positive toward segregated settings. Fundamentally, the existing legislation needs to be far more fully resourced to help overcome this negativity

(b)

- Clearly the proper role of Governments at all levels in supporting the educational needs of students with disabilities is the same as that for supporting their non-disabled peers. In a country such as ours, the right to a well-resourced education should remain as a fundamental right for all people. While clearly supporting the needs of students with disabilities is more demanding of resources than is the 'average' student, if these people are to be assisted in becoming contributing members of society then such resource allocation is essential. The evidence from research illustrates that people with disabilities can and do become self-supporting individuals within their communities, given adequate support systems when young. Surely the allocation of greater resources to education, and hence saving later on, makes not only sound economic sense but sense in providing a greater quality of life to a larger number of people.
- Current legal requirements of both State and Commonwealth legislation create a tacit obligation on governments to provide sufficient resources to education systems to allow them to meet their legal requirements. These obligations are currently not being met by any standard of measurement.

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