



**DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURAL AND
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

Submission

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee**

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

April 2002



1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Government, in its *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society* recognises the special needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) clients in general as well as the possible “double disadvantage” that may be faced by CALD people with a disability when seeking to access government services. Furthermore, in its outcomes for Australians with disabilities the *Commonwealth Disability Strategy* recognises that there are people with disabilities who have additional needs to be considered, which may include being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

- 1.2. People from CALD backgrounds with disability, when compared with other people with disability are less likely to: be in paid work; receive vocational rehabilitation; be streamed into labour market programmes; or receive senior secondary and/or tertiary education. They are also less likely to access disability as well as general programs and services. Conversely, they are *more* likely to be isolated and marginalised within their own communities and the broader community, harassed and discriminated against, institutionalised and live in situations where they are vulnerable to violence and abuse. It is estimated that approximately 4.6% of the population or 902,082 people in Australia are from a CALD background with a disability¹, as detailed data is frequently not collected.

- 1.3. The following issues highlight the difficulties and discrimination which may be faced by CALD students with disability. Policy developers and service providers need to ensure these issues are taken into consideration in the development of policies and programmes for this group. Furthermore, policy and programmes should not simply be ‘adequate’ to meet their education needs. Rather, the aim should be that CALD students with disadvantage are given equal access to information, services and assistance in line with the broader Australian population so they can fully participate and contribute to Australian society.

¹ NEDA, *Assessment and Early Intervention: NEDA Response* (2001)

2. The 'double' disadvantage faced by people from diverse cultures with disabilities.

- 2.1. While the literature dealing with ethnic disability issues often describes being from a CALD background and having a disability as a 'double dose' of discrimination, there is a danger that in doing so the issue may be oversimplified. This so-called doubling of discrimination does not encapsulate the complexities of the issues experienced by people from CALD backgrounds with a disability.
- 2.2. Discrimination occurs on an individual and systemic level. People from CALD backgrounds with a disability often experience highly regulated environments where much of the discrimination is systemic. There is also a danger that these people will be relegated into the 'too hard basket' in the provision of services, including educational services. People may find it difficult to access information and knowledge about essential services, and there may be a lack of culturally appropriate services.
- 2.3. The myths, misconceptions and negative stereotypes about both disability and ethnicity in general in the wider community add to the complexity of disadvantage.
- 2.4. Discrimination, however, may also come from within, as the relative degree of stigma attached to disability appears similar across CALD and English-speaking communities.

3. The fact that disability is hidden by many cultural groups, and can be a source of shame.

- 3.1. There is a growing body of literature that shows that the lives of individuals with disability around the world are usually far more limited by prevailing social, cultural, and economic constraints than by specific physical, sensory, psychological or intellectual requirements. Individuals with disability are treated well or poorly, based in part on cultural beliefs about why they

became disabled. In effect, their lives are limited also by the social interpretation of that disability.

3.2. Attitudes towards disabilities, while varying within cultures can be affected by: levels of education; access to information in community languages; socio-economic status; length of residence in Australia; and, rural or urban upbringing. Equally important are cultural factors such as issues of shame, honour, blame, status, marriageability and religious beliefs which result in either acceptance or guilt. Such cultural factors may vary between cultures and highlight the complexity of discrimination suffered by CALD people with a disability. The effect, however, of some of these views of disability is to reduce or deny educational opportunities to people with disability from CALD backgrounds.

3.3. Isolation is an additional factor, exacerbated by prejudicial attitudes and misconceptions prevalent within their peoples' own communities and the broader communities. This may be particularly relevant in the case of CALD people living in rural and remote areas. In addition, migrants who have acquired a disability as a result of torture and trauma may face a lack of understanding from the wider community as to the extent of their disability.

4. The low use of disability services by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds compared to the general Australian population.

4.1. It is estimated that three out of four people from a CALD background with disability miss out on receiving Commonwealth disability services. Many services may be unable to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity for a number of reasons. Furthermore, poor language skills on the part of carers may prevent carers from accessing services in order to develop their own capabilities. Finally, the subscription to the stereotype of extended family support by service providers and funding bodies may result in fewer services for CALD communities.

4.2. The primary issue for providers, therefore, is one of cultural competence and ensuring that meaningful outcomes are delivered to people with disability from all cultural backgrounds. In order to achieve these outcomes, providers would need to:

- Ensure ethnic communities are considered when defining the 'target group';
- Provide continual accredited quality training in cultural difference, diversity and disability for staff, with a focus on the nature and reality of the person's experiences;
- Adopt basic mechanisms for CALD people with a disability such as the use of interpreters and easy access to material in languages other than English; and
- Ensure the development of strategies and practices to ensure that CALD people and their families and carers participate in decision-making.

5. *The need for effective communication of information on educational opportunities for people with disabilities to people whose first language is not English.*

5.1. Information provision is an important issue for the government and community services sector. There is a concern, however, that information about disability, entitlements, rights and service provision has been inaccessible or at the very least difficult to attain. A lack of information to the disability sector has a twofold consequence: people with disability know little about disability, rights and opportunities and entitlements; and, families, carers and communities have little knowledge about disability entitlements and assessment processes. This can lead to the stigmatisation and isolation of people with disability and their families. The provision of information on educational opportunities, as well as in general, needs to be distributed to different ethnic communities in such a way as to ensure that there is a high level of awareness of services available.

5.2. As an example, part of the *Australians Working Together* (AWT) package announced in the 2001-02 Commonwealth Budget, provided funding to DEST over three years from July 2002 in order to improve service coordination for people with a disability. The aim is to increase participation and outcomes in tertiary education and transitions to employment. Part of this package is the establishment of a Disability Coordination Officer (DCO) Programme to provide information, co-ordination and referral for people with a disability interested in seeking post-school education or training². The programme, however, does not appear to recognise particular difficulties faced by CALD people with a disability. As a result, there is a danger that DCOs will not receive training on cultural sensitivity or cultural diversity, and that CALD people will not be made aware of the existence of the DCO Programme, as no provision appears to be made to ensure they are aware of its existence.

5.3. Providers, therefore, need to develop strategies to inform CALD people with a disability about the range of services available, their entitlements to them and how they can be obtained. Providers must be sensitive to the needs and requirements of CALD people with a disability and responsive to their particular personal circumstances.

6. Cultural competence as a requirement in the training and professional development of teachers.

6.1. The *Teachers' Learning Report* produced by the Commonwealth Schools Commission's In-service Teacher Education Project in 1988 concluded the need to ensure that teachers could respond professionally to economic, social, cultural, technological and scientific change through the development of personal and intellectual qualities³. More recently the *PD 2000 Australia* report by DETYA indicated a concern by agency personnel of the need to see professional development as a conventional and valued aspect of teachers' working life⁴. Furthermore, while levels of teacher participation in activities

² DEST website www.dest.gov.au/ty/dco/

³ Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988)

⁴ McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland, Zbar (2000)

related to 'equity' issues have remained high over the last decade, there appeared to be a concern among those surveyed that not enough was being done, particularly in relation to the education of socio-economically disadvantaged students. Training in cultural competence needs to be made available to teachers, who need to be encouraged to undertake this training and update it throughout their career as a core part of their professional skills development.

6.2. The *Charter of a Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society*, whilst specifically for Commonwealth agencies, is a good model for ensuring service principles concerning cultural diversity are integrated into service planning, delivery, evaluation and outcomes. A charter would provide an important mechanism for helping education providers serve better the diverse range of clients on the basis of need and provide responsive and inclusive services. By ensuring services are planned with cultural diversity considerations in mind those services would be better able to meet the needs of all Australians.

7. Support mechanisms for refugee young people, particularly those who have a torture and trauma background once they are enrolled in mainstream classes.

7.1. In 2000 DEST commissioned a report *Literacy, Numeracy and Students with Disabilities* to investigate the provision of literacy and numeracy to students with disabilities in Australian primary schools. The study focused on teaching and learning strategies to improve literacy and numeracy levels for students in primary schools. No recognition was given to CALD students with disability.

7.2. The report, however, did state that one factor which is important to consider in the provision of literacy and numeracy for students with disability in Australia is the increased cultural and linguistic diversity of school populations. "In Australia we know little about the interface

between...disability and cultural and linguistic diversity.”⁵ Further research needs to be done to investigate and understand this interface to ensure that support mechanisms provided to refugee students with disability are both culturally sensitive and take into account their specific experiences of torture and trauma. Furthermore, this material needs to be made available to school counsellors and teachers of students with disabilities.

8. Educational opportunities for people with disabilities from diverse backgrounds in rural and regional areas.

8.1. Education in general, particularly at the tertiary level, is less accessible in rural and remote areas than in larger metropolitan centres. This is a significant disadvantage in areas where employment and local development opportunities are more restricted.

8.2. Coupled with this are the closures and cuts in health services in rural and regional areas. Many specialist services are not available in rural or regional areas and this lack may be felt particularly by migrants and refugees who require specialist treatments and counselling for health problems arising from circumstances that affected them before arriving in Australia.

8.3. For migrants and refugees whose first language is not English, accessing classes such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) may be affected by the comparatively small sizes of migrant communities in rural and regional areas. Additionally, there is often less language support in general for migrant children at school.

9. Culturally specific understanding of mental health issues and treatments.

9.1. There is a growing body of literature that questions the applicability of the western concept and measurements of mental health to explain the identification and treatment of mental health issues for people from a CALD

⁵ Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, Rickards (2001)

background. An emphasis on the biomedical model may prove limited when trying to address the cultural expression of emotional and mental distress and the whole range of life factors which impact on the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of these populations.

9.2. One perspective of mental health which helps in a more comprehensive understanding of mental health issues is one which includes biological, psychological and social components. This view of mental health explains the role, importance and value that social structure, culture, beliefs and practices have in the creation and maintenance of emotional, mental and social well-being.⁶ School counsellors, in particular, need an understanding of these issues when working with migrant and refugee children.

10. Conclusion.

10.1. Policy developers may take the following issues into consideration when determining policies and programs which affect students with disabilities:

- That CALD people with disability may suffer a complexity of disadvantage and discrimination;
- That definitions of disability and any stigma attached may vary between cultural groups;
- That data collection in the area of disability and education complies with the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Standards on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity* so that there is an adequate source of information on the characteristics of students to make informed policy decisions;
- That strategies accommodating linguistic and cultural diversity are developed in order to ensure the specific needs of CALD people with a disability are fully recognised;
- That ethnic communities are considered when defining the 'target group' in program development;

⁶ Queensland Health, *Coping in a new world* (2001)

- That information is distributed in culturally and linguistically appropriate forms to ethnic communities to ensure a high level of both awareness and access to the services available;
- That training in cultural competence is an ongoing requirement in the training and professional development of teachers and counsellors in academic environments;
- That further research is conducted into the interface between disability and cultural and linguistic diversity among students;
- That the specific needs of communities in rural and remote areas are taken into account to ensure proper access to services; and
- That disability is not seen as exclusively a health issue but one which requires the coordination of all elements in the services sector in order to ensure a more comprehensive approach to CALD people with disability in the education system.