

Comments on terms of reference for the Senate inquiry into the education of students with disabilities.

From Rosemary Rush – parent member of Early Childhood Intervention Australia Inc.

I would like to comment on references 1a iv to vii.

### **The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.**

I have a son who has autism. There is considerable evidence available from research as to the importance and success of early intervention for all children with a disability. It is especially critical for children with autism to have access to intervention programs as early as possible. Diagnosis plays an important part in this process as the earlier it happens the earlier a child can access suitable programs directly.

For children with autism the success of a program will depend on the recognition that it must be individually designed and delivered to the child. An effective program for a child with autism will also be intensive. A high number of children with varying disabilities all needing intervention often sees the structure of a group and the resources supporting it suffer. Consequently the specific and individual needs of children in that group suffer also. Programs in early intervention are mostly of a generic nature intended perhaps for children with an intellectual disability.

Dedicated professionals are involved in the running of early intervention programs. Consultation with specialists such as speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists is limited as is the dedicated time they have for each child. It is during this time of early intervention that children with autism need to learn about the reason for language, how to hear language and to speak. They need to learn how to observe other children and then learn more through imitating their behaviour. Early intensive intervention will give a child with autism basic social skills, preparing them for school.

Without early intervention and the necessary change in social attitudes, children with disabilities will be seen as causing a huge financial burden on the community. Outcomes and effectiveness of early intervention would teach us more if they were monitored or reported.

### **Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors.**

Australia's thinking needs to be inclusive first then funding and support for students with a disability will flow. Norway has no issue with funding because social attitude is such that children with extra needs are supported from the beginning across every part of their life. In Norway students with a disability have a standing in the community.

Again, in Australia, diagnosis opens the door for accessing funding and support. Even so parents still find that funding doesn't automatically flow. Unless the parent can advocate for their child and be 'the squeaky wheel' a child simply misses out. This is a real concern.

Forward planning, using statistics from cross-agency support seems sensible. This could happen more as shortfalls in funding have repercussions right throughout the education system. Students funding simply disappears and by nature, once it's gone, it's unlikely to be reinstated.

### **The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students**

In Tasmania inclusive education is the preferred option for students with a disability. Educationalists are vital in the role they play to encourage the learning opportunities for a student with a disability. The extent of this will depend on the skills of the teacher and the effectiveness of the child's individual education program (IEP). Each child has a right to access the curriculum. Each student with a disability has a right to access the curriculum in the most effective way possible. An IEP provides both the program and process for this.

Autism is a spectrum and Aspergers Syndrome is on that spectrum. There are many undiagnosed students with Aspergers Syndrome in mainstream schooling. To this end, instead of understanding these students they are met with very inappropriate behaviour management plans and are regarded as problem children. What students with autism need most is to be understood.

### **Teacher training and professional development**

It becomes very obvious very quickly when people haven't been trained effectively for students with a disability. This is stressful for the student, the teacher and parents, and all those who are associated with the student in their place of education. For successful training and development about disabilities and how to teach students with a disability, a broad area of consultation and feedback must be established both from inside and out of education departments. This training needs to be part of the general professional development provided through the curriculum. At this base level a better rate of learning is ensured.

For those in pre-service training, a larger, more practical special education model is now required. Special education can no longer take a side seat in training.

Rosemary Rush - Parent