

ACROD LIMITED

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

17 May 2002

1. Introduction

ACROD strongly supports the principle of increased integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. However, ACROD also notes the danger that such 'inclusion' will ignore the particular interests and needs of, and outcomes for, students with disabilities and may unwittingly lead to 'exclusion'.

For example, in 1999 Commonwealth, State and Territory education ministers agreed to the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century. The ministers stated their commitment to a system of national reporting on education outcomes and agreed that the Goals would be used as the basis for reporting on six areas of schooling (the first two being literacy and numeracy). However, the ensuing National Reports on Schooling in Australia for 1998 and 1999 — published by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs — totally failed to address the question of outcomes for students with disabilities.

A second example is the Programme for International Student Assessment 2000 Survey of Students' Reading, Mathematical and Scientific Literacy Skills, jointly published by the OECD and Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).¹ A representative sample of 231 schools nationwide — with a student total of 7,250 — participated in the survey. The sample was based on judgement rather than random selection. The target population for the field trial was 'all students born in 1983'. Yet students with severe physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional or other disability were excluded from the survey² — precisely according to the international methodology.

A third instance is what has — or rather, has not — happened to the final report of a project on *Literacy and Numeracy Acquisition, Including the Role of Braille, for Students in Australia who are Blind or Vision Impaired*, submitted to

¹ J. Lokan, L. Greenwood & J. Cresswell, *15-Up and Counting, Reading, Writing, Reasoning ... How literate are Australia's Students* Australian Council for Educational Research, OECD & ACER, 2001.

² The other excluded category was 'students with limited proficiency in English' (ibid., p. 228).

the (then) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in September 2001.³ This report resulted from the only national project to date to assess the current situation and educational needs of students who are blind or vision impaired. The Department of Education, Science and Training has so far failed to release the report or to address its recommendations.

These instances demonstrate that, as with 'care in the community', there is a serious risk that the high principle of integration may be used to underwrite a less exalted practice of disregarding the interests and needs of, and outcomes for, students with disabilities — effectively treating them as peripheral to mainstream education. Put simply, *adoption of the principle of inclusion is insufficient to prevent a practice of exclusion.*

In this submission, ACROD addresses both terms of reference 1(a) and 1(b). However, because of the overlap of subject matter in sub-sections 1 (a) i-viii, we shall deal with the pertinent issues by reference to the more general categories given below.

2. Definitions

The current policy trend of disregarding individual needs and differences in educational service provision, and the practice of defining 'disability' as an overarching generic condition (for purposes of simplified program design, administration and funding), constitute the major weaknesses of integrated education models.

Similarly, 'inclusion' is often poorly defined and interpreted as individual schools see fit. The model of service delivery is often dictated by the allocation of funds.

In the NSW public education system, for example, there are fairly clear guidelines for understanding the method of allocating children to the several categories of disability. The practical problem is that there may only be a couple of hours' difference between the level of support allocated to a child with mild disabilities and one with severe disabilities. The categorisation is also fairly rigid. If a child with primarily a physical disability also requires assistance with learning, this is often not taken into consideration. Children with spina bifida often also have specific learning problems, although they may not have an intellectual disability.

In the Catholic education system there are no clear guidelines on what parents can expect. Integration seems in general to be less important to the prevailing ethos. The central office recently made clear statements that no child could be provided more than one or two hours aide time per week. On an individual basis, this may vary as some schools do a great deal to try to accommodate a child with a disability through general school resources. But most commonly, mothers are still expected to come to school several times during the day to see to their children's toilet needs.

³ Jolley William and Associates (2001) *Literacy and Numeracy Acquisition, Including the Role of Braille, for Students in Australia who are Blind or Vision Impaired* (unpublished).

The definition of disability should be broadened to accommodate the needs of those students with significant behavioural challenges, learning difficulties and/or mild disabilities. And as the definition of disability is expanded, funding should be increased to accommodate the needs of these particular students and to establish new programs to provide greater student support.

3. Assessment

Accurate assessment and early identification of needs are essential to enhance the future wellbeing and progress of students with disabilities. At present, organisations, schools and professionals in different States and Territories are using different tools of assessment. There is plainly a need for consistent assessment terminology that is clearly defined and uniformly applied across Australia. Accurate and consistent collection of data across Australia is needed in relation to the assessment of students' needs and determination of their ongoing requirements.

Further, the current system is based on deficit-based assessment, leading to an overstated negative profile of the student. It also fails to recognise the need for short-term interventions. Students with short-term but real difficulties are severely underfunded — notably in relation to transition from one setting to the next.

Sometimes appropriate assessments are gathered from outside sources that know the child well in other circumstances. However, in general, departmental assessments are given the most weighting. Much also seems to depend on what resources are available. Some children appear to be 'squeezed' into available resources rather than allocated resources that would more appropriately meet their needs. As one service provider notes:

When an attempted integration of a five year old child with autism spectrum disorder did not seem to be working with the aide time allocated to him, there was inordinate pressure put upon his mother to accept a placement at a special school for behaviour disordered children. The program at his school certainly did not fit the requirements of his disability, but there was no vacancy in any class for children with autism.

In Queensland, the Cerebral Palsy League of Queensland (the League) has a needs assessment process and consults with the State Government about these issues. There would be little or no support for many of these children in educational settings if the League were to withdraw services. The funding is also administered very prescriptively, focused on inputs, specific items that the funding can be used for — such as a therapy salary category — and unnecessarily long acquittals which impinge on already reduced resources. There are also considerable costs, as for travel, that are not adequately funded. At best, the service can only be of a consultancy nature with one or two visits per year to a school.

The current Ascertainment system has been labelling children and has sometimes resulted in a student with a disability being ascertained higher than

needed by a school so that a parent's subsequent request for mainstream education for their child to attend a school with their siblings is denied for fear of extra load on resources. There is a review of the Ascertainment system and profiling project in place to see if this is a more appropriate and flexible system (profiling is also being introduced in other States).

For many children with significant physical disabilities who opt for integration but require physical modifications there are often considerable problems. The process of enrolling a child into school should be undertaken well in advance where possible. Modifications may be ordered and approved in time, but fail to be implemented. School modifications, once recommended by a therapist, can take between six months and two years.

Some students attend a special class because of the level of their physical support needs, but when they do not have an intellectual disability. Many specialist units, even if funded for physical disability, cater for a range of disabilities and the curriculum is focused on the less intellectually able. There is frequently an impediment to students attending classes in the mainstream because of the way aides are funded and their availability. This can be a real barrier to the student achieving adequate educational outcomes.

Greater emphasis should be given to the developmental potential of students rather than on their 'deficits'. Individual Education Plans should be developed, involving the school, family and family support. Assessments need to be carried out before the beginning of the school year to enable programs to be properly put in place, with appropriate support for the student starting the term. There is a tendency for professionals to overstate disability as funding directly correlates with the level of disability.

In short, ACROD questions the capacity of some assessment tools currently in use to accurately identify needs and determine funding. Inconsistency and inaccuracy in assessment lead to the inequitable allocation of funding. This places unfair pressure on family resources which, in many cases, are already stretched to the limit.

The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should analyse and review the various tools of assessment currently in use in order to establish consistent best practice across Australia.

4. Blind and vision impaired students

There are significant differences between students who are blind and those who are vision impaired in respect of the strategies used to acquire literacy and numeracy. For students who are blind, braille literacy skills, listening, aural reading and technology-related skills are of high importance. For those students whose primary medium is print, visual skills, use of aural reading and technology-related skills are required.

Many current overseas demographic data affirm that educators will increasingly have to address the needs of individuals with low vision. In Australia, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) has

suggested that the ratio of students with low vision as opposed to students who are blind is in the region of 4:1. DET has identified the population of students with low vision as being most at risk of failure in literacy and numeracy.

In all Australian States and Territories limitations and impediments in the assessment of students who are blind or vision impaired have prevented the establishment of benchmarks comparable with those established for literacy and numeracy acquisition in sighted students.

All governments should collaborate to develop such a set of benchmarks as a matter of urgency; and to provide adequate funding to do so.

5. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds

The needs of children from non-English speaking backgrounds must have better recognition, along with greater awareness of literacy issues. Interpreters are frequently not used. This should be automatic for parent-teacher meetings and planning meetings to give greater attention to communicating information. It appears that for families of Indigenous backgrounds, where there is an Aboriginal aide employed by the school, families are able to use them as intermediaries within the system.

Funding increases in the area of interpreting are urgently needed. Along with other unfunded services, interpreting services must be upgraded. The necessary costs are currently being met by providers from other revenue bases which are in decline.

Written information must be provided in user friendly and accessible formats and in appropriate languages. And interpreting services should be immediately upgraded and appropriately funded.

6. Early intervention

There is an urgent need within the sector to develop an equitable and transparent resource allocation tool for the funding of early childhood intervention services. A proper funding model needs to address not only the needs of the child but also the needs of their family and should take into account the barriers and facilitators to community participation as described in the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (1999) 2nd Edition.

Within early intervention, there are inequities in the allocation of resources and funding among service providers. Such inequities result in variable levels of service provision across regions, placing unnecessary pressure on some families because their access to services is reduced. This needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

As noted in a recent study:⁴

⁴ Shonkoff, J. P & Phillips, D.A. *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academy Press, 2000.

Effective intervention demands an individualised approach that matches well-defined goals to the specific needs and resources of the children and families who are served. Interventions of this kind have been shown to be more effective in producing desired child and family outcomes than services that provide generic advice and support.

Early assessment and planning are essential to maximise the benefits that may accrue from limited funds. The high level of family support encountered in these programs is not funded once the child enters primary school. Currently there is no funding for professionals to provide assessment results for children entering the primary school system. Psychological assessments for school entry are also currently unfunded.

The importance of supporting the family as a whole with the provision of excellent quality services cannot be over-stressed. At the same time, there is a continuing need for individualised, well-targeted, specialist and specific therapeutic interventions aimed at the impairment and disability experienced by the child. Getting the right balance is crucial.

The policy initiatives and directions being undertaken by the Victorian Department of Human Services which focus on community participation for families who have a child with a disability or developmental delay are to be welcomed.⁵ However, despite the excellent work being undertaken, waiting lists indicate that the supply of these services does not satisfy community demand.

In the public system, the learning support team that is supposed to be established when a child is enrolled in school, sometimes works well and sometimes not so well. Getting adequate therapy support for children once they commence school is a major problem in mainstream schools as well as special classes. To take one example from an ACROD member:

A six year old boy with a physical disability who is unable to communicate verbally recently moved to a school in Sydney from a regional area. On arrival at school he had some technical aids which had been prescribed by a therapist 18 months previously. The new school did not know how to use this equipment. The boy has been at school for one term and the equipment is still not being used and he is unable to access the curriculum. An appointment with an occupational therapist who specialises in equipment has been made to train the school for term 2, but the Department refuses to pay for this.

There should be an early review of early intervention strategies and practices with a view to developing a consistent national policy framework and system of benchmarking.

⁵ See the Department's *Early Intervention Services in Victoria: The Way Forward 2001-2005*.

7. Specialist supports

Rural areas currently are not able to offer all the support services that are required. There are real difficulties recruiting and retaining professional staff in these rural areas. Families are often faced with the choice of moving to another area or foregoing appropriate services and support. There is a need for cultural understanding and a recognition of different cultural requirements. There is a particular need for extra funds to support staff working with non-English speaking families.

Educational professionals must encourage all families to become involved in appropriate support groups as early as possible in the life of their child. Successful examples include regionally based parent support groups and family support associations like the Association for Children with a Disability in Victoria.

In Victoria also, Disability and Impairments funding should be reviewed and eligibility expanded to accommodate *all* students attending government, independent and Catholic schools. Without this change, families of children with a disability will remain limited in their educational options.

Assessment procedures for those students requiring extra support should be implemented by an independent and appropriately qualified person who is not directly associated with either the resource allocation system or the school.

Students with hearing loss and auditory processing delays can easily fade into the background and be overlooked by teachers. There needs to be funding for visiting teachers who provide specialist supports to students with hearing loss to follow up with classroom staff so as to ensure that inclusive practices are consistently being implemented. There needs to be adequate funding available for teacher training and professional development in relation to understanding the effects of hearing loss. The problem is illustrated in the following case:

My nine year old son has a hearing impairment with an auditory processing delay. The visiting teacher took the time to see him and explain his hearing loss to the teachers. She provided a video that simulated what a hearing impaired person heard so teachers could watch and hear what my son was hearing. She explained the importance of where he should sit in the classroom. These were such simple things, yet they had such a positive impact on his schooling. From time to time the visiting teacher called in to see if she could do any more to help the teacher. Unfortunately, this service stopped as the funds were thought to be better spent in other ways — my son's hearing loss wasn't enough to qualify for ongoing help. He became the target of bullying and he was finally removed from the school.

The proliferation of fragmented services does not allow for efficient allocation of existing resources. *There must be a formal and inter-governmental effort to secure a consistent and comprehensive national system of coordinating specialist supports.*

8. Transition

Special programs should be introduced to support students in transition from early intervention to primary schooling, primary to secondary education, and secondary schooling to employment. Families and students need to be supported to plan for and accommodate change between educational settings.

Career planning should not be left to a panic in year 12 but should be addressed throughout Grades 7 to 12. If a career plan is developed, employment is not always considered an option. It appears that the expectations of many students with disabilities are not the same as those of other students. Many young people with disabilities on leaving school and being referred to open employment agencies do not realise that employment is an option.

On the other hand, students who undertake work experience while at school do not always have positive, pragmatic experiences. The experience may have set up unrealistic expectations for the student about employment in a particular industry, whereas the work experience employer may consider it have been a poor placement. Students with disabilities need one-on-one support for work experience but, due to lack of funding for the additional teacher resource, many undertake work experience with no support. Work experience needs to be 'hands-on' and realistically geared. Sending a student with an intellectual disability to 'observe' work will not benefit that student; and, indeed, might well prove counter-productive.

Some students undertake VET courses while still at school. This can be positive but it can also work against those students when they leave school and are unable to proceed to the next certificate level. If this happens, open employment agencies find they cannot easily find placements. The young people in question have some qualifications, which makes it expensive for an employer to take them on, but lack that all-important 'hands-on' experience.

The issue of transition should be included in the training of both educational professionals, parent/family members and volunteer advocates. And a new inclusion transition support program should be developed to assist schools and parents with the transition from mainstream primary schools to mainstream secondary schools.

9. Teacher training and professional development

It should be taken as read that education professionals must be trained to have adequate knowledge and skills about services available (generalist and disability focused) for groups with special needs; and to understand the importance of referring families to appropriate services when required.

Training at undergraduate and postgraduate level should relate to disability, special education and core principles and values relating to inclusion. It should also incorporate significant input from students with disabilities themselves and from their families/carers. This contribution should be considered as valuable as expert specialist advice.

Networks to service the needs of key individuals involved in the education of students — for example, teachers, therapists, integration aides, visiting teachers and volunteers — should be developed. These networks should be established to support all schools — government independent and Catholic — thereby encouraging the sharing of training, expertise, support and resources at both a local and regional level.

Inadequate training of aides and their appropriate use is an issue. Sometimes aides are used as additional resources for the school with inadequate attention paid to the needs of the child with a disability. Conversely, the aide may provide too much attention to one child, inhibiting opportunities to interact with peers and learning as independently as possible. This requires skill and understanding from the classroom teacher and principal, as well as the aide.

While there are problems in the level of funding available and the way it is allocated, the most significant barriers to be confronted are the inadequate training of all involved in the process and the negative attitudes of many within the system.

The curriculum for undergraduate teaching courses should have an increased focus on special education as a 'core' skills area, including at least one compulsory, semester long unit on special education, inclusion and families of children with a disability.

Professional development for existing principals, teachers and other education staff should include direct input from parents of children with a disability and the children themselves.

10. Funding

Underpinning everything that has been said above is the issue of inadequate funding, especially for the non-government sector. While participation in this sector is increasing, it receives only about 25% of the funding granted comparable government institutions. While we must recognise the financial constraints under which all sectors now operate — and the general market philosophy now dominant in government at all levels — the question of allocation and distribution remains important.

At the moment the funding system does not allow sufficient flexibility and support for students with disabilities in mainstream schools. Direct therapy services are only one part of support required to allow children with high needs to attend mainstream schools. Many schools, for instance, do not encourage families of students with disability to join their community. Students with very high needs are poorly resourced, with the majority of funds often

used to provide full time integration aides. Such cost-shifting and improvisation cannot be sustained.

11. Conclusions

ACROD fully supports the principle of integration. Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should emphasise the obligation of all schools (government, independent and Catholic) to recognise the importance of inclusiveness throughout the educational life cycle of each student.

At the same time, governments should enforce the provision and implementation of an Individual Education Plan for all children with behavioural and/or learning difficulties and/or mild disabilities, irrespective of whether the child is receiving some form of disability funding. Proper integration does not mean homogeneity of treatment. Students with disabilities may well require additional support to enable them to have the same educational opportunities as other students (all other things being equal). So far as possible, there should be a level playing field for all students.

To a considerable extent, successful integration is about attitude. This requires the whole school community to itself be properly educated. Many teachers are willing but are frightened because of lack of knowledge. Many teachers and, most importantly, principals are simply not willing. Parents still feel very much that their child is in the school 'on sufferance'.

But most of all, it is imperative to avoid situations where efforts at inclusion, however well meant, have the effect of provoking exclusion, however unwittingly. As always with public policy, it is the unintended consequences of good intentions that can prove to be the most damaging.

About ACROD

ACROD is the national peak body for disability services. Its purpose is to equip and enable its members to develop quality services and life opportunities for Australians with disabilities.

ACROD's membership includes over 550 non-government, non-profit organisations, which collectively operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disabilities, including intellectual, physical, psychiatric and sensory. ACROD's members are located in every State and Territory in Australia and range in size from very small to very large — two-thirds of ACROD's organisational members have annual incomes of less than \$500 000.

In seeking to achieve its purpose, ACROD provides a wide range of advice and information to the disability services sector through a monthly newsletter, Newsfaxes, e-mail networks, conferences and seminars. Its consultative structures include a system of issues-based National Committees and State Sub-Committees, forums and interest groups that operate by correspondence/email, teleconferences and face-to-face meetings. ACROD's submissions to Government are developed in consultation with members.

ACROD also seeks to influence public policy so that it responds to the needs of people with disabilities. ACROD works with Government on all significant disability matters. It is currently represented on more than 20 Commonwealth Government (or quasi-Government) reference groups, working parties and advisory groups, and on numerous State and Territory committees.

ACROD has a National Secretariat in Canberra and offices in every State and Territory that focus on State issues in disability. The organisation as a whole is governed by a national Board which includes the elected Chair from each State/Territory Division as well as representatives elected directly by members.