

**SUBMISSION TO THE**

**ENQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION**

**OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

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This submission will comment upon the following issues:

1. The inclusion process
2. Role of the special school / special class
3. Transition from school to further study, employment and adult living
4. Need for research agenda and training initiatives at the University level
5. Parental involvement in the educational processes
6. Need for outcome measures and evidence-based practices

### **1. The Inclusion Process**

There is a genuine philosophical commitment by the majority of education providers in Australia to the principle of inclusion of students with disabilities into the regular school system. However, in practice, there is some way to go. It is argued that the presence of a parallel special education system is impeding the processes of full inclusion. I believe, as many writers attest, that the general school system has to become more accepting of diversity in the school population. For this to be achieved there needs to be a significant change in curriculum, teaching skills, and attitudes toward students outside the 'norm'.

One of the most striking examples of inclusive schooling was the former one-teacher schools where the teacher taught all grades. My first teaching position was a small school of 16 pupils in Grades K - 9. Its remoteness precluded post-primary students attending high school. If a student had a learning problem there was nowhere else they could go for assistance. In my 11 years in one-teacher schools in three separate locations no pupil left school without being able to read and to do basic arithmetical operations.

Many teachers with this experience became the first "specialists" in special education as they were skilled in the individualising the curriculum, teaching strategies, and group teaching within the one classroom. These are among the essential characteristics to facilitate inclusion.

Inclusion also means unconditional acceptance of all children in the school, irrespective of the diversity in their cultural and learning needs.

The Committee is also referred to the recent article by the respected US researcher Kenneth A Kavale:

Kavale, K.A. (2002) Mainstreaming to full inclusion: from orthogenesis to Pathogenesis of an idea. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 49, 201 - 214 (Attachment 1)

The findings are germane to the Australian scene.

## **2. "Role of the special school / special class**

The Committee is referred to the attached paper.

"The Role of Special Schools — A crucible for the Support of the Inclusion Movement"

(Attachment 2)

In this paper I have argued that Special Schools / Special Classes can act as *Centres of Support* to the regular school system. They can provide an environment where research can be conducted to develop curriculum and teaching strategies. Students enrolled in such settings should be seen as temporary enrolments as their local neighbourhood school carries the prime responsibility for their educational program. The special facility acts as a resource to support the regular school systems in its geographical region. Two such models are St Lucy's School at Wahroonga and Mater Dei School at Narellan where I conducted evaluations and recommended this resource model.

### **3. Transition from school to further study, employment and adult living**

In the period 1989 - 95 I led a team at Macquarie University that supported the development of transitional processes within the NSW Department of School Education. Key components were the development of individual transition plans (ITPs); the development of transition teams at the school and community levels; and the setting up of inter-agency collaboration. Other features included the development of a distance education teacher-training program that allowed teachers to gain credit towards a postgraduate qualification.

Important research elements were the two follow-along studies conducted to determine the outcomes of the transition processes that were established. An important finding was that students in schools that used a well-structured work experience program had better employment outcomes post school.

Presently, one of the most disturbing problems is the lack of opportunities for students with high support needs to access special employment supports upon leaving school. There is a wealth of evidence that with adequate specialist support these students can obtain and hold employment. The data show that these students, in particular, are being squeezed out of Commonwealth employment support programs onto State / Territory day activity programs that are often analogous to 'child minding'. There is an urgent need for all jurisdictions to address this lamentable situation.

One of the factors that impedes the effective transition for significant numbers of students with disabilities concerns the nature of the support they receive whilst at school. In most cases this is highly structured and the control is external to the student, who is not called upon to make many decisions. However, at the post school level where supports are frequently not mandated, the locus of control shifts to the student who is not prepared for the responsibility of negotiating his / her own support networks. An example of the result of this is the phenomenon of the 'revolving door' where students with disability take several TAFE courses with

little planning as to their expected outcomes. Unlike school there is not the same opportunity for students to receive career advice.

To relieve this situation the transition planning process should start **early** in the students' secondary school life. Decision making skills should be built into the individual transition planning processes with the student becoming increasingly responsible for initiating his / her support networks.

As post school options are becoming more limited for students with disabilities more educational facilities, geared to their needs, should be provided throughout their early adult life. Broad continuing education programs are presently extremely limited for this population. The prospects for many school leavers from special schools and special classes are severely limited and are, in many cases, uncoordinated. Given their learning disabilities the majority of these students at age 18 still require intensive educational support. The majority are proceeding to 'day options' programs where the staff generally do not have teacher training. For those who do proceed to formal educational programs such as TAFE, there is no guarantee that the teachers there will be equipped to handle the specific learning needs of these students.

For the Committee's attention are attached three papers in the context of transition:

- a) Parmenter, T.R. (1999) Effecting a system change in the delivery of employment services for people with disabilities: a view from Australia  
(Attachment 3)
- b) Parmenter, T.R. (2002) An Australian perspective on quality outcomes of inclusive employment *Disability Studies Quarterly* 22, 73 - 101  
(Attachment 4)
- c) Riches, V. (1996) A review of transition from school to community for students with disabilities in NSW, Australia. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 21, 71 - 88  
(Attachment 5)

#### **4. Need for research agenda and training initiatives at the University level**

While there are some good examples of research being conducted in this field in Australia, evidenced by a small number of locally sponsored journals, there is no national research agenda that prioritises the research needs of this population.

Areas that call for increased research efforts include policy development around inclusion, the transition processes at the three major transitional periods in the students' school life, and strategies for assisting students with behavioural / emotional problems, especially those who experience a 'dual diagnosis'.

Given the decline in staffing in many of the Universities that have, since the 1970s been responsible for generating much of the research initiatives, there is an urgent need to address the need to replace staff who have left through either retirement and / or voluntary redundancy packages.

The dearth of senior academics in this field was recently demonstrated by the fact that an Associate Professor position in Special Education at the University of Sydney attracted a field where only one candidate was appointable.

A more aggressive policy towards supporting research in this field would produce greater numbers of higher degree research students who would ultimately provide replacements for those senior researchers who are ageing out of the system. However, the lead-in time for younger researchers to develop a sound track record is considerable.

The initiatives of the Commonwealth Government's in the 1970s to sponsor several research centres that led to the development of specific teacher training courses and parallel research programs gave a great boost to meeting a backlog of unmet need. The time is overdue for examining the need to make similar initiatives to reinvigorate this field. Research is the engine that can help teachers produce better outcomes for their students.

## **5. Parental involvement in the educational processes**

Studies that my colleagues and I have conducted in the role families play in the educational processes for this population reveal an alarming reluctance on the part of many schools to accept parents of disabled students as equal partners. The professional dominance of teachers and allied health professionals has a deleterious effect upon these relationships. Parents are often denied a voice by being rejected, or at best, being accepted in a token position on educational planning committees. This can be more evident for families who have added disadvantages such as having a poor educational background, or coming from disadvantaged cultural / indigenous populations.

One way to ameliorate this situation is to provide specific training for professional groups in how to collaborate with families in providing educational programs. In the final analysis it is usually families who have the most precise knowledge of their disabled child, and it is ultimately families who provide one of the basic life-long supports for their son / daughter. The excellent examples of collaborative partnerships evidenced in early intervention programs are seldom found once the child enters the more formal primary and secondary school programs. There is simply not the same culture of co-operation and sharing in the educational processes. The following chapter is relevant to this area.

Parmenter, T.R. (in press) Family quality of life: Implications for policy. In A. Turnbull, R Turnbull and I Brown (Eds) *Disability and the family. An international perspective on family quality of life*. Washington DC AAMR

*(Attachment 6)*

## **6. Need for outcome measures and evidence-based practices**

In 1994 I was the expert special education adviser to the Report *Schooling for Students with Disabilities*, a project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. I was responsible for the following paragraph that was included in the concluding section of the Report:

Ongoing assessment of student outcomes is necessary to ensure that the resources allocated to students with disabilities are effective in improving learning outcomes and opportunities for post-school training and employment. In this context it was noted that there is a need for national profiles and competency-based assessment to take account of students with disabilities, either through the modification of existing profiles or the development of profiles designed specifically for students with disabilities. The collection of systematic information on participation in post-school training and employment opportunities of students with disabilities. This could be achieved through the establishment of a systematic data base or register to record the post-school activities of students with disabilities, so that the progress and achievements of these students can be monitored over a period of time. (p 206)

There is little quality control in this field. Most of the data collected relates to inputs and processes, but almost none on student outcomes. In many cases students with disabilities do not participate in the regular statewide and national assessments of basic academic skills.

It is imperative that, given the amount of State / Territory and Commonwealth funds spent in the field, a national monitoring system be established to indicate the outcomes that are being achieved from this investment. Such a system would strengthen the application of evidence-based practices in schools and post-school educational facilities.

Special education has been a ready environment for untested experimental practices that give rise to 'bandwagon' and 'travelling snake oil salesman' phenomena that in many cases produce no positive effects for students. Unfortunately, the practices take up valuable time and resources that could be better spent on sound and proven educational ones. Parents, too, are ready prey for many of the so-called 'miracle' cures promulgated by entrepreneurs in this field.

There is strong evidence, too, that many students are over-medicated for behavioural / emotional / learning disorders.



In conclusion, a strengthening of overall school and post-school education systems will, in some measure, support students with disabilities. Schools that experiment with more contemporary models of delivering the teaching / learning processes are finding they can make better provisions for all students, including those with special needs.

While a strong special education system has a role to play, it must be increasingly drawn into the general education system. The segregation of these students has led to a segregation mentality where special education teachers and administrators often do not interact sufficiently with the general system.

The strength of the inclusion movement will not diminish, especially among advocacy groups and many families with a disabled family member. However, inclusion relates more to acceptance and relationships than to a physical phenomenon. It is disappointing that much of the argument is rhetorical, rather than empirically based. Greater publicity should be given to successful inclusion practices, together with more opportunities for partnerships between research centres and education providers to determine those factors that lead to successful inclusion practices.