

SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY

The Impacts and Trickery of “Choice”

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Our submission centers on our family’s journey towards the inclusive education of our daughter. Our story is one with a happy ending, or rather one in the making. For the last two years we have been privileged to see our 8 year old daughter blossom. She is becoming increasingly confident, articulate, bossy, independent and dare I say it, typical. We are excited about the skills she is acquiring every day (at least most of them) and the future is no longer something we fear.

We have learnt a great deal on this journey and our hope is that our story will provide an insight into some of the challenges and pitfalls families with children with a “label” face. Because of our experience in both special education and inclusive education we are able to make recommendations on three key factors that we believe need to be addressed in order to improve the accessibility and effectiveness of inclusive education and improve the educational outcomes for all.

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This road that we are on now began with a turn we nearly missed. We started thinking about school shortly after our daughter turned 1, researching our options. We visited multiple schools, attended a number of Education Options Forums and met with the director of the Centre for Inclusive Schooling, several teachers, therapists, a school psychologist, our Disability Services Commission Local Area Coordinator, parents of children with similar diagnoses who had already been through the schooling process, tapping into every imaginable source of information. We most often left these encounters feeling none the wiser and certainly less confident in the system’s ability to meet our little girl’s needs. We got the idea that our daughter was by law entitled to an inclusive education, but no one was able to tell us what inclusive education is, what it looked like. The overwhelming focus was always the level of funding and resources available, but no one ever gave us the vision and the hope that we were so desperate for.

And so by default our daughter went to our local primary school which came equipped with an Education Support Unit (ESU). We were told that this setting was best suited and equipped to cater for our child’s specific needs. We assumed that it would be inclusive, for if under the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education all children have the right to an inclusive education, then surely the State and Federal governments could not be backing a system that is NOT inclusive?

But we were wrong. The reality of the ESU was an ugly one where ten or so

children aged 6 to 12 spent most of their time together in a class with 5 to 10 Education Assistants (EA's). The ESU had a focus on life skills, a presumption of incompetence and generally low expectations. Not just low academic expectations, but low expectations across the board - physical, emotional and social. Even when children were allowed to go and "visit" their mainstream classes in the afternoons, they were often made to sit in the back of the class at separate desks with their minders, the EA's - 'proof' of their lack of belonging due to their perceived differences. Information around how our daughter's day had gone, what kind of work they had done and how she had responded to it was not forthcoming. There was no opportunity or time allocated to discussing our daughter's week, never mind her day with teachers – mainstream or ESU. We were instructed to not approach the EA's with questions and they were in turn forbidden to provide any information to us. If there was anything to discuss we were asked to make an appointment with the ESU coordinator.

Within a few months it was clear to us that our daughter was regressing. Strengths and skills that she had acquired were being lost and replaced by behaviors modelled on the other children in the ESU. We approached the school about exploring opportunities to have our daughter included more in her mainstream class, but we were threatened by the withdrawal of her support and even on one occasion with being denied an ongoing position at the school. We felt trapped, but did not know that there was anything better out there for our child.

Fortunately salvation came for us in the form of a research paper that we stumbled upon one night by pure chance. The title of the paper was "*Inclusion or Segregation for children with an Intellectual Impairment: What does the evidence say?*" – written in 2008 by Bob Jackson, an Associate Professor at Edith Cowan University. In the paper over 40 years' worth of studies into the benefits of inclusion versus segregation in education was analysed. The paper concluded that academic and social outcomes for children in fully inclusive settings were without exception better than in the segregated or partially segregated environments like ESU's. As important was the finding that including children with a disability had no impact on the academic performance of normal developing children, but brought marked social benefits to their normal developing peers. This was the piece of information we had searched so hard for.

In a bold statement of destiny, it turned out we lived in the same city as Prof Jackson. We attended a workshop where he was presenting the research on inclusion together with Parents Learning Education Development Group ("PLEDG") CEO, Darrell Wills and family members who shared their experiences of inclusion – from earliest interventions through to high school. We learned for the first time about REAL inclusion – Physical, Social and Curricular. Together they helped us to vastly change our perception of our daughter, her abilities, her (and our) potential and her rightful place in the world. All of the doubts we had, the reasons and justifications for segregating our daughter were vaporized. Whatever it took, we decided to move our daughter out of ESU and into a mainstream class

As the situation in the government school was not workable, we decided to move all three of our children to a private community school. Our new school had very little history or experience with “special education” but we did not view this as a negative. Our daughter’s support funding allocation was vastly lower than it was at the government school, but we used the little support that we received optimally. Our daughter was in mainstream with kids her own age who, with a little bit of guidance from the teachers, welcomed and embraced her. No longer was her education special, it was just education and she was simply one of the kids.

Our view of our daughter’s capacity and the way we approached her education was shifted by the encouraging studies in the field of neuroplasticity – where brain capacity and intelligence is increasingly not being viewed as “fixed.” Academically we made the shift to presuming competence. Our partnership with PLEDG meant access to strong evidence-based literacy and numeracy programs. Working collaboratively with teachers and PLEDG, our daughter’s literacy and numeracy capacity increased exponentially to the point where she is now reading at her year level and just below her year level in numeracy. Skills that were lost have been regained...with interest. Furthermore, our daughter is having a very real impact on the lives of people all around her – in her class, her school, in her family and beyond. We can unreservedly say that the world is an infinitely better place for welcoming her into it.

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From our experience in both “special education” and inclusive mainstream settings we have come to believe that there are three main issues that need to be addressed in order for inclusive education to assume its rightful place.

Firstly, in order to truly challenge the status quo there should be a greater focus on providing parents with the right information to enable them to make informed choices. Whilst a wealth of paper was piled upon us during our initial investigations, none of it gave us any real information with which we could measure and evaluate the schooling options available. Research needs to be made accessible to parents in easily understood language. Parents (and teachers) need to see examples of what inclusion LOOKS like and how it works. We can unreservedly say that if we were able to access this information earlier, we most certainly would never have chosen a segregated setting. Research tells us that special education and inclusive education are not equal. The impact of “education” in segregated settings needs to be clearly laid out in the same way we warn smokers of the negative impacts smoking can have on them.

Secondly, the playing field of choices has to be levelled. We were fortunate enough to escape the riptide that is special education and lucky enough to find a school where, despite a significant lack of resources and funding, the teachers and principal were of the opinion that they had the skill and commitment to be able to teach ANY child. This is not the norm. Parents are often discouraged by schools from even considering enrolling with them due to the lack of funding. It is often argued that parents have a “choice” because

their child can by law not be refused an inclusive education should they choose this option. However, parents' ability to pursue an inclusive education is very much limited by the fact that funding and resources allocated to a child in a segregated setting is not transferable and does not follow the student. In light of this, the pertinent question is do parents really have a "choice?"

Lastly, the position of Australian governments at both State and Commonwealth level has to shift from ideologically not being opposed to inclusion, to actively supporting, enabling and promoting inclusive education. In the last few years we have come to realise how incredibly effective "special education" system is at funneling children with labels into segregation - which in Western Australia manifests as ESU's and Education Support Centers (ESC's). Once a child enters this system it is incredibly hard to escape it and the pre-ordained road to dependency, sheltered workshops and group homes are the confronting realities that lie in wait at the end of the "education" tunnel. These ESU's and ESC's are relics of an era where children like ours were locked up in institutions for the entirety of their lives. In spite of their ugly origins and overwhelming scientific evidence that they hold no academic or social benefit and the enormous financial cost to run them, these segregated systems continue to attract a disproportionate amount of the funding and resources pool. It can be argued that through its support of these institutions, both State and Commonwealth governments continue to actively support and endorse segregation. While inclusion is supported by the science, it appears that support from governments and the political courage to affect change continue to be sorely lacking.

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Following our daughter's first year of Inclusive Education her teacher who had no "special education" training or experience gave the following assessment of what it was like to have our daughter in her class.

"I believe your daughter taught more to her peers and me than we taught her. She is a joy to be around and has so much love and joy in her life. She has taught the children in her class perseverance, resilience and most importantly acceptance. It breaks my heart to think that she was ever excluded from mainstream schooling. If inclusion was more accessible and widely accepted, we would be bringing up a new generation of children who were thoughtful and full of acceptance of others."

Lisa, Year 1 Teacher