

13 July 2015

Submission for “ An inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.”

By Tanya Stephens-Smith

SUMMARY

I am the mother of an 8-year-old boy with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We were enrolled in a Catholic School in QLD from 2012 to Term 3 2014. (Prep to Y2). We were unhappy with the level of support at this school and moved to a State School with an SEU unit Term 4, 2014. We have had a significantly improved experience at our current State School. The following points, explain some of the issues we experienced, how this affected our son and family and some possible recommendations.

Whilst our son was at the Catholic School, we experienced and endured a significant amount of stress that stemmed from a number of deficits in the mainstream schooling system in relation to our son’s complex needs on an academic, social and sensory level.

ISSUES EXPERIENCED

Class Size/Number of Students coupled with Sensory difficulties

- My son was in a class of 28 children in Grade 2. His sensory needs are very complex. A day in school, in a mainstream classroom is overwhelming and exhausting for him. In this large class, they are sandwiched in this room, and personal space is limited which places undue stress on him and inhibits learning.
- With this many children, the noise level is extremely high with 28 small people talking, finding books, pulling out desk trays etc. My son has an Auditory Processing Difficulties (APD). He can hear well in most cases, but he cannot discriminate between background noise and what they need to hear, i.e. the Teachers instructions. In my son’s case, he gets very little academic instruction because he cannot tune in to teacher instructions because of his APD. Consequently he falls behind, he doesn’t know what work needs to be done and in most cases it is beyond his level of understanding. This creates stress and frustration in a little boy who already suffers from diagnosed Anxiety. Audio technology to amplify the teachers voice is a great benefit to the whole class and should be considered in all classes with ASD or hearing impaired students.

Staff Resourcing, Education and Experience

- With 28 children including 3 ASD children in our one class, one Teacher was unable to deliver the individual education assistance our children need. Most activities for ASD students need prompting, clarification and scaffolding for the child to actually achieve. Not to mention the other neuro typical children who move at a faster rate in some cases...

- Our son needs a lot of visual prompting and scaffolding. This takes time. Without Teachers Aides (TA's), this is not possible. The Principal at this school did not provide sufficient TA's due to his belief the Teachers should be able to handle the class on their own.
- Teachers or TA's should have some PD or mentor support when having an ASD child. We experienced staff with very little/or no knowledge of the intricacies of Autism. We had asked for Professional Development to be taken by TA's and our school principal said no. By doing this it is obvious that he him self is uninformed and lacks significant knowledge in how challenging schooling life can be for ASD kids.

Special Education Units or lack there-of

- We were offered very little resources at our previous school that support a child with Disability's. Our particular area of concern is no small group interventions by the Learning Support Educator. Latest evidence based research (EBR) shows this method is incredibly effective in assisting our kids with learning. The only group work my son is offered is a 1 x 15 minute session of reading with a parent volunteer. This is not addressing his significant delays in the areas of literacy and how difficult schoolwork is for him. One teacher often said to us 'the gap is constantly widening between him and his peers'. This was very sad for us, as we are parents who do everything we can at home to help with his learning. But to be honest, he is exhausted from school and teaching at home at the end of a long day is too stressful for him and I don't believe parents should have to do what is not done at school. We feel very unsupported by the schools lack of support and systems.

Academics

- My son does not learn in the typical way. He needs a lot of scaffolding to achieve tasks. He needs adjustments to the curriculum to be offered a comparable education to a NT child. We have found this only possible to achieve with constant negotiation and follow ups with the school. This is exhausting and frustrating for us as parents who have work commitments. As parents of an ASD child we are already constantly trying to do our best to educate our child at home in a game of catch up as the school does not seem to care that falling behind constantly has a negative effect on our child's self esteem.
- Sensory Difficulties (SD) play a significant role in our son's ability to concentrate and attend to schoolwork. Some staff have very little knowledge of the significance SD have on a child's attention and cognitive abilities. Our son needs sensory breaks and tools to aide in his body/mind regulation and attention. We had reports detailing what our Occupational Therapist (OT) requires. School would not provide this, so we were left with no choice but to employ a private Occupational Therapist (OT) and Therapy Assistant to tutor our son at school for 3 x 1 hour session/week. This is unfair and unjust that we had to pay privately a significant amount of money and co-ordinate this to happen when the school showed no interest or understanding that this is an essential part of an ASD child's schooling. He simply cannot learn or function in a mainstream school without his SD being taken into account.

Parent and School Communication

- Any school enrolling a child with disabilities needs to ensure they have adequate staff. Our experience was with a P/T learning support staff member who had several extended breaks, where she was often not replaced. Because of this, we had no 'case manager' as such that can ensure important communication between home, Teachers, privately paid for OT, Learning Support etc. All being on the same page is imperative as our son struggles with generalising across different settings.
- An in-experienced staff member completed my son's IEP. We were disgusted to have to wait 4 months (including us chasing this up) and then receive an IEP with **no specific adjustments** for our son, or any goals and measurable for our child's learning. It was a cut and paste from the Curriculum, which is important to work to, but there, is no recognition of how best to help my son achieve this and goals to work towards in order to encourage and motivate him.

How our son and our family was affected:

- In our case, our son was significantly left behind all his peers. The negative impact on his self-esteem was significant. He was happy to go to school in the beginning but he now does not see himself as a learner due to his negative unsupported start at school.
- Our experience as a family at his former school was so stressful that we withdrew him from school 3 weeks early in a term and home schooled for the remainder of that term, until we started a fresh at a State School the following term.
- The amount of time and energy it took to attempt to get some help and support for our son, no family with a special needs child should endure.
- We have a number of challenges at home already accommodating our son's needs. It is unfair for the responsibility of learning, support and schoolwork to take up a significant portion of a parent's time.

Recommendations:

1. Provide **minimum standards** for disability support in regards to:
 - a. Time frames and time limits on producing documentation on review's and IEP's and ICP's etc.
 - b. Staff experience and/or PDtraining on ASD.
 - c. Set maximum class numbers when a child with ASD is the class.
Resource Teachers with appropriate TA support and time and minimum number of hours/week.
2. A significant amount of funding goes into Early Intervention, which I applaud. However once schools starts, too many families are left to 'fend for themselves', which has been a very stressful experience for our family as neither our son nor our family were not supported by the school we chose.
3. When looking for a school, we were told that "Learning Support" would provide all the support our son would need. New parents to schooling, who have an ASD

child, need to be educated about what they might need to look out for when looking at schools. New parents do not know what their child really needs in the form of modifications/adaptions. If there were some sort of scale or checklist to help parents this would save a lot of heartache and stress to families. Perhaps some sort of rating scale via my school so they could assess how well resourced the SEU is, with SEU staff numbers, number of Students accessing SEU etc.

4. There needs to be some level of transparency and honesty with regards to funding and resources. We knew our son's school was getting funding however we truly could not see how most of this money was spent to benefit our son.
5. In class audio systems that aide children to hear the teacher and not the background noise, should be investigated for children on the spectrum and the hearing impaired in a classroom.

After our negative experience with lack of support, we spent significant time researching the best option for the new school we chose. We are very thankful that the State School we chose has an excellent staff member in the role of HOSES, who has made schooling significantly better for our son and in turn made life more relaxed for our family.

It seems to be specific staff members who make or break an ASD child's schooling experience. If there was a way to provide minimum standards across the board, perhaps some other children and families could be saved the extra stress and trauma that a bad schooling experience creates for a family who already have a number of challenges at home.

I would be happy to explain any of the above as required. I would like to thank-you for your time in reading our concerns.

Yours truly,

Tanya Stephens-Smith