

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

I am a mother to my 11 year old son who has severe autism and anxiety. He has been on medication for his anxiety since he was 4 years old because he could not and would not leave the house.

With no support or hope in seeing a future for my son, let alone transitioning him to school, my mother sold her own home to fund \$80,000 towards behavioural therapy in the hope that this would equip him with the skills he needed for school.

His first year of school began with mostly home schooling and a very slow transition to kindergarten over a space of a year.

After his second year at school, I attempted to return to work. Needless to say that my boss could not tolerate 'leaving at short notice' for too long. I was constantly called in to his school to pick up the pieces from his meltdowns. I soon realised that his behaviours were more often than not, a consequence from someone else not being fully trained in the field of autism. If you had a child with a hearing or visual impairment in a classroom, then the school would employ an aide/teacher that was specialised in reading Braille or using sign language- it should be no different when working with students on the autism spectrum.

I then decided to begin a university degree in Education so that I could teach my son myself- or at least train up the staff around him. I am in my final year now and completing my Honours in the field of autism.

Six years have passed with his schooling and I still continue to be frustrated with the lack of funding and support for teachers and aides in the education system. My son has never been to school full-time because of this and the impact this has had on me financially is crippling. I am unable to leave the house and must be on constant 'stand by' in case I receive the phone call to pick him up early. I am unable to work and accumulate superannuation because he is not at school full time.

My recommendations:

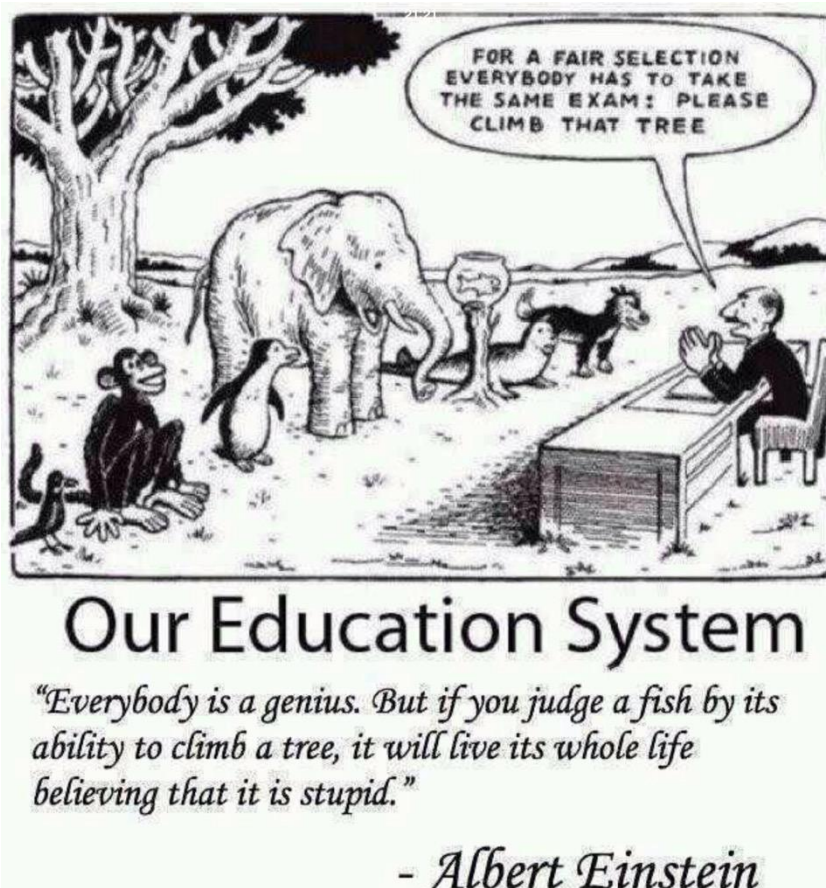
- The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2014) stated that teachers must differentiate their teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities. I have never seen this happen. The majority of teachers do not have the time nor the confidence with these specific skills.

Solution: Give more responsibility to teachers' aides so that they can design, create and implement appropriate teaching materials for the student. Why: They usually have more in depth knowledge of the student, working so closely with them and their families. This would mean taking some pressure of the teacher but would also mean increasing the pay of the aide to match that responsibility.

- To cater for the diversity in classrooms, teachers must implement the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to maximise the potential for all students- not just those with additional needs. We know now that there is no such thing as a 'typical' student anymore. There are many different types of learning styles and needs that teachers must cater for.

Solution: Teachers need support in developing the skills to implement the principles of UDL through professional development as well as support from senior staff. This will give teachers the skills to provide multiple means of delivery of information to their students as well as multiple ways for students to demonstrate their understanding. Why: All students need the appropriate mode of delivery of information to remain engaged and demonstrate their learning. This will enrich the learning environment, increase confidence, self esteem, independence and productivity as well as helping make the learning practice more inclusive. The principles of UDL are also consistent with the Disability Standards in Education (2005) legislation.

A great example that can support the above paragraph is the following illustration- Everybody is a genius by Albert Einstein:



- Again, in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2014), standard 4.3 with the focus area on student behaviour, teachers must demonstrate knowledge of practical approaches to manage challenging behaviours. In some states and territories, statistics show that over 40% of beginning teachers leave the profession in the first five years due to difficulties in managing challenging behaviours (Ashman & Elkins, 2012). Having said that, experienced teachers may have well-developed behaviour management skills but employ traditional approaches that are largely ineffective (Synapse, 2015) and possibly lead to unnecessary forms of punishment such as suspension or expulsion.

Solution: For University students, focus more units on Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) throughout their degree. One unit is not enough to equip them with the necessary skills for a ‘real life’

classroom. For experienced teachers, participate in professional learning seminars to update their knowledge and practice and remain consistent with the current, well researched approaches to challenging behaviours. Why: Positive behaviour support (PBS) is a modern approach to challenging behaviours. PBS uses proactive strategies (rather than re-active strategies) to increase a student's quality of life. When teachers are proactive, they are anticipating potential issues and preventing form occurring rather than reacting when things go wrong.

An example: If a teachers knows that a student with autism becomes so distressed when computer time is finished, why would she deliberately want to put the student, herself and the rest of the class through the behaviour when she knows all she has to do is a couple of simple strategies to prevent that from occurring in the first place.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Alicia