

CHAPTER 5

How to better support students with disabilities in schools

Introduction

5.1 The committee received numerous suggestions from submitters and witnesses on what, other than increased funding, could be done to better support Australian students with disability in the school system. While funding is of critical importance, it is not the only block for students with disability in the school system. This chapter will outline some key ideas and debates highlighted through this inquiry.

Mainstream inclusion v. special schools

5.2 One of the most prominent debates regarding the education of students with disabilities is the question of which sort of education produces the best outcomes for students: inclusion in 'mainstream' schools or classes or via special-purposes schools.

5.3 While this debate is largely about issues other than funding, it is worth noting that there is a disparity in terms of funding of students with disability depending on which type of school they attend:

Students with disability at a mainstream school attract a students with disability loading of 186 per cent of the base per student amount; those at a special school attract a students with disability loading of 223 per cent.¹

5.4 Approximately 90 per cent of students with disability in Australia attend mainstream schools.²

5.5 Inclusive education refers to the philosophy of not just enrolling students with disability into mainstream classrooms but about designing education environments and teaching strategies to include all students. Students with disability may require additional adjustments, tied to the specific needs of individuals, but the teaching approaches employed in a genuinely inclusive classroom should benefit all children.

5.6 As will be discussed further below, research in the area has consistently shown that best-practice teaching for students with disability is in fact best-practice teaching for all students.

5.7 Dr Kathy Cologon, of the Children and Families Research Centre in the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University noted that the weight of evidence is firmly on the side of mainstream inclusion:

1 Department of Education and Training, *Submission 246*, p. 4.

2 See, for instance, Children with Disability Australia, *Submission 257*, p. 5; Dr Rosemary Butt, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

... inclusive education is important because it results in the best possible outcomes for everyone involved. As outlined in a recent extensive review of the literature, inclusive education results in more positive outcomes for all students – students who do and students who do not experience disability... Inclusive education also results in greater personal and professional satisfaction for educators and assists educators in becoming more skilled and flexible as they expand their ability to provide multiple forms and modes of engagement, thus leading to higher quality education for all students.³

5.8 However, other submitters just as firmly advocate for attendance at special schools, wherein students can be taught in purpose-built environments, by teachers specialising in the education of students with disability and amongst a class of other students with disability.

5.9 One of the primary drivers of families choosing to enrol their child in a special school is a consequence of the practice, discussed in chapter 2 of this report, of informal gatekeepers at mainstream schools discouraging the enrolment of students with disability on the ground that the school would be unable to properly accommodate that child's needs.

5.10 The Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2012 Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers (SDAC) found that for students with profound or severe disability, those attending mainstream schools received significantly less support than students with the same level of disability in special schools.⁴

Committee view

5.11 The choice of which school to enrol a child in is one of the main decisions parents have to make, and the committee notes that different families will have different preferences and opinions on what environment will best suit their child, especially if that child has a disability. For all students, whether they have a disability or not, a 'one size fits all' approach is not necessarily the best. Differing views from parents and carers about the best options for their children should always be respected.

5.12 The committee also notes that all schools in Australia are obliged by the Standards to make reasonable accommodations to students with disability to assist their access to education. The committee notes that the evidence presented by witnesses and submitters demonstrated that far too often, this was not the experience for students with disability.

3 Dr Kathy Cologon, *Submission 278*, p. 1.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Submission 228*, p. 4.

Professional development for school staff

5.13 A key theme highlighted by multiple submitters and witnesses to this inquiry was the importance of teachers and all school staff receiving training in teaching practice for students with disabilities. As discussed in chapter 2, many submitters and witnesses to this inquiry believed that too many teachers were inadequately aware of issues surrounding the education of students with disability, including the rights of students to an education and the necessity of additional adjustments and support for some students.

5.14 While teacher preservice education standards differ from state to state, the AEU's submission notes that many teachers report feeling underprepared when it comes to educating students with disability: 37% of teachers thought that the level of training and professional development they had undertaken gave them the skills and knowledge to teach students with disability, while 63% said it had not.⁵

5.15 The AEU's nationwide survey of preservice training revealed that, while most universities include a course on education of students with disabilities in their teaching courses, only New South Wales requires accredited teaching courses to include a stand-alone unit on special education.⁶

5.16 To address this, the Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group, for instance, recommended that both pre-service and in-service training and development for teachers should include information on 'identifying and supporting the range of learning differences in a classroom', 'the importance of early identification and early intervention for students 'at risk' and 'the implementation of appropriate adjustments for students with learning difficulties'.⁷

5.17 The Autism Collective Research Centre's (Autism CRC) survey of parents, teachers and specialists of students with autism found that the top two barriers to students with autism's access to education identified were a lack of funding for additional support and the lack of 'suitable education and training for staff'. Noting, therefore, the benefits of additional training and professional development for educators, they argued:

The capacity of Australian schools to deliver a quality education to students with autism will be enhanced by better training and professional development for teachers and other school staff. This will lead to a more inclusive and accepting school community where diversity is recognised and actively embraced. Teachers will have enhanced coping mechanisms and will feel more satisfied and confident that they can manage and relate to the needs of students with autism with access to more appropriate resources, training and tools. They will feel more empowered to make a

5 Australian Education Union, *Submission 206*, pp 31-32.

6 Australian Education Union, *Submission 206*, p. 32.

7 Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group, *Submission 21*, p. 15.

difference in children's lives as better facilitators of children's learning. The educational approaches utilised to enhance the learning of students with autism will also have a broader application and will be able to be successfully applied and utilised with all learners in classrooms using universal design for learning principles.⁸

5.18 People with Disability Australia made some specific recommendations for the types of additional education and development areas for teachers that would benefit both teachers and students:

- an emphasis on improving [teachers'] knowledge and understanding of disability-related issues and suitable curriculum design, skills assessment, positive behaviour support and instructional strategies;
- all training courses and professional development programs for teachers and integration aides be subsidised and compulsory, undertaken regularly and incorporated into general education training rather than by way of separate disability-specific sessions;
- increased resources to support teachers; and
- ensuring teaching programs include exposure to direct and structured interaction with students with disability in addition to formal instruction.⁹

5.19 Mr Michael Ward, principal of Aspley East State School in Brisbane, argued that professional development for teachers needs to be a priority, but also that it needs to be done well and as an ongoing practice:

What I have discovered is that you cannot just send your teachers to the latest autism workshop that is on down the road for half a day and have them come back with the same two or three strategies that we have all heard many, many times before. They need something on a different level to that altogether. They need professional development that exposes them to the top thinkers in this area in the country and even internationally. They need to be challenged as professionals, engage in that higher level professional dialogue, understand what the research is saying and really, I guess, be treated like professionals, but engage as professionals who have something credible to say themselves too. I think teachers have been treated quite badly over the years in that regard, and their skills, knowledge and everyday experience of this need to be included in the discussion, but they need to be exposed to that much higher level discussion and research.¹⁰

5.20 Teachers, of course, are not the only staff employed in the school system, and therefore the committee regards it as important that this focused professional development be made available and obligatory for all staff in schools, including teachers' aides, administrative and support staff and anyone else whose work brings

8 Autism CRC, *Submission 227*, p. 11.

9 People with Disability Australia, *Submission 253*, p. 4.

10 *Committee Hansard*, 25 September 2015, pp 56-57.

them into contact with students on a regular basis. It is vital that all those in the school system recognise the needs and rights of students with disability and have the opportunity to develop their professional skills in this way.

Committee view

5.21 The committee was impressed to hear from witnesses that examples of strong educational practice do exist in Australian schools, and commends those individuals, schools and specialists who have prioritised these practices.

5.22 It is important to ensure that everyone in the school environment is equipped with the best knowledge to meet the needs of students with disability. For that reason, the committee notes that there is a clear need for teachers and all school administrators to receive more-focused education on the rights and needs of students with disability as part of their qualification process, along with continued professional development throughout their career.

Research-practice gap

5.23 The committee heard from numerous witnesses that a problem in the education of students with disabilities is the gap between research in the field and practice in schools and classrooms. In short, while much research exists on the best-practice approaches to teaching students with disability, many of these practices have not yet become widespread in their use in Australian schools.

5.24 The Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) made this case based on research they undertook:

Research carried out by MUSEC with special education teachers in Australia to determine the level of use of evidence-based instructional strategies found that some evidence-based practices were used regularly, but many practices that have been shown to be ineffective were also used weekly or more by about half the teachers we surveyed. We also found a substantial minority of teachers reported that they never or rarely used some effective strategies. Other research we have carried out shows that schools may often use practices that have no research support and that such practices may be supported or passively condoned by education authorities. As long as schools and teachers continue to waste time and resources on interventions that are known to be ineffective, in preference to those likely to be effective, the education of students with disability will be compromised.¹¹

5.25 Similarly, Professor Rodger of the Autism CRC noted to the committee that the 'complexity' of the issues raised by educating students with disability, along with the time pressures on all teachers, leads to a 'research-practice gap'.¹²

11 Macquarie University Special Education Centre, *Submission 52*, pp 3-4.

12 *Committee Hansard*, 25 September 2015, pp 36-37.

5.26 Professor Rodger also highlighted the extremely well-developed modules and teaching resources developed through the Positive Partnerships program¹³ which is funded by the federal government and provides:

- professional development for teachers, principals and other school staff to build their understanding, skills and expertise in working with children and young people on the autism spectrum
- workshops and information sessions for parents and carers of school-age children and young people on the autism spectrum
- a website providing online learning modules and other resources.

5.27 The consequence of this research-practice gap is that sub-optimal teaching practices are still widely used in Australian schools. Education for all students, but especially for those with disability, could be substantially improved by a greater application of research findings and practical teaching strategies demonstrated to lead to better educational outcomes.

5.28 The committee heard from multiple witnesses that the teaching methods supported by research as being best practice for students with disability are based on solid pedagogical evidence as being beneficial for all students. For this reason, there should be a greater utilisation of these methods in all classrooms.

5.29 As an example, MUSEC noted that:

There is considerable overlap between effective school practices generally and the practices that improve the academic performance of students with disability. Research-based tiered approaches such as Response to Intervention (RTI), particularly for literacy instruction and Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (<http://pbis.org/research/default.aspx>), provide a framework that supports all students. In these tiered approaches, all students are screened and their progress towards clearly defined goals is regularly monitored so that under-performance is identified and addressed early. Research-based assessment and teaching strategies are in place for all students, and are implemented with fidelity.¹⁴

5.30 The Autism CRC, discussing their universal design for learning approach, noted that the practices it entails are intended to be of benefit to all school students:

Many of Autism CRC's research projects are underway and utilise universal design for learning approaches to address writing, transitions, classroom structure and more enabling environments. Our research projects aim to support all children in mainstream classrooms, not just those on the autism spectrum. Many students need assistance with getting organised, writing stories and making friends—again, not just those on the autism spectrum.

¹³ *Committee Hansard*, 25 September 2015, pp 36.

¹⁴ Macquarie University Special Education Centre, *Submission 52*, p. 4.

Hence, aids to learning form a part of a whole-of-classroom approach rather than an additional responsibility for teachers directed to a few.¹⁵

5.31 A parent and representative of the Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group spoke about some of the techniques they had encouraged teachers to adopt:

Less reliance on text. For example, in the high school, in a history class, the normal way of delivering a particular piece of information would be for the class to get a 15,000-word article and read it, summarise it and hand it in. So when we spoke to the history teacher, who was on side, instead of doing it that way, she gave the article to the children in groups. Each of them read and discussed a paragraph of the article, then they all discussed the whole article as a class and then they mind-mapped it. This was just a suggestion from me; that all came from her. It is not a radical change, really, and the children are still getting the same information, plus it is more interesting for them. All the kids love being in that class.¹⁶

5.32 Ms Karen Ross from the Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group also mentioned the DVD *Outside the Square* and described it as a great resource which 'every school and teacher should have'.¹⁷

5.33 Evidence therefore suggests that educational outcomes could be improved for all students, regardless of whether or not they have a disability, by greater application of research findings to classroom practice. Many of the teaching strategies found to be helpful for students with disability would benefit all students, and therefore should be encouraged.

Committee view

5.34 The committee accepts the evidence presented to this inquiry which suggests that the education of students with disability in Australian schools could be substantially improved by closing the research-practice gap which currently exists.

5.35 The committee further notes that good teaching strategies for students with disability are often equally useful for all students, and therefore encourages teachers and others in the school environment to recognise that some practices currently considered adjustments for students with disability may in fact become standard teaching practice for all students.

15 Mr Andrew Davis, Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC), *Committee Hansard*, 25 September 2015, p. 33.

16 Ms Jane Woodley, Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 September 2015, p. 43.

17 Ms Karen Ross, Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group, *Committee Hansard*, 29 September 2015, p. 46.

Committee view

5.36 The committee notes that additional funding for support for students with disability is a key aspect of education access and attainment. While additional funding is necessary to improving educational outcomes, it is also important to monitor and account for how that funding is used.

5.37 The committee recognises that the majority of research and evidence presented to this inquiry supports the proposition that mainstream-based inclusive education leads to the best outcomes for students. However, the committee also notes that choice is important and that some families prefer, for a variety of reasons, to enrol their children into special schools.

5.38 Following on from concerns raised earlier in this report, the committee notes that providing teachers, both as part of their qualification process and throughout their career, with additional education on the education of students with disability would benefit both the teachers themselves and the students. Improving access to such training and development should be made a priority.

5.39 The committee accepts that currently a substantial research-practice gap exists in Australia. It commends those researchers seeking to improve the educational outcomes of students with disability, and encourages all educators to ensure that their teaching strategies are grounded in evidence-based practices.

Recommendation 6

5.40 The committee recommends that a dedicated Disability Discrimination Commissioner be reinstated to the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Recommendation 7

5.41 The Committee recommend that the government works with states, territories and school systems to:

- (a) Establish a national approach to ending the bullying of students with disability. This should be supported with programs and resources for schools, teachers and students.**
- (b) Make it mandatory for all initial teacher education courses to ensure beginning teachers enter the classroom with best-practice skills in the inclusion of students with disability. The government should also work with states and territories to ensure current teachers, principals and support staff are supported to develop inclusive education skills in areas such as universal design for learning, differentiated teaching and cooperative learning.**
- (c) Investigate the establishment a national qualification standard for teacher aids and assistants to ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to support learning for all students. States and**

territories should also provide guidance on the role of support staff in inclusive classrooms.

- (d) **Prioritise the development of a national approach to modifying the curriculum for students with disability. This should include implementation tools and professionals development support for teachers to ensure that all students are supported to learn to their fullest potential.**
- (e) **Better support school systems, teachers and principals to continually improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability program.**

Recommendation 8

5.42 In light of the limitations of the evidence presented, the committee recommends the government work with states and territories to establish a process for the collection and publication of information about levels of access and attainment for students with disability. This should include information about:

- (a) **whether students attend school part or full time;**
- (b) **rates of home schooling and distance education;**
- (c) **educational attainment;**
- (d) **rates of restrictive practices and seclusion;**
- (e) **suspension and expulsion rates;**
- (f) **school completion;**
- (g) **availability of specialist support for teachers and principals;**
- (h) **workforce skills and the availability of professional development in inclusive education for teachers and principals;**
- (i) **access to allied health and interdisciplinary support; and**
- (j) **bullying and wellbeing.**

Recommendation 9

5.43 The committee recommends the government work with states, territories, experts, stakeholders, school systems, parents and students to establish a national strategy to improve the education of students with disability. The strategy should aim to:

- (a) **recognise all students with disability as learners and drive the cultural change required to achieve this, particularly at a school leadership level;**

- (b) define the goals and priorities for improving the educational outcomes of students with disability, set clear timelines for their achievement and report publically on progress;
- (c) increase school participation and access rates for students with disability;
- (d) close the gap in Year 10 and Year 12 completion;
- (e) ensure all students with disability can access adjustments and interdisciplinary support that will maximise their learning potential;
- (f) ensure all students with disability benefit from evidence-based, best practice programs which lead to improvements in access and attainment;
- (g) improve the accountability at a system and student level for ensuring better learning outcomes for students with disability;
- (h) support schools, teachers and principals to close the gap between research and classroom practice;
- (i) establish best-practice ongoing professional development for teachers, principals and others who work in the school system;
- (j) include students with disability and their families in the development of the educational plan for their child, and encourage the meaningful ongoing engagement of parents;
- (k) establish a national inclusion measure for schools; and
- (l) establish independent review and complaints mechanisms so parents, teachers and students can have full confidence in the system.

Recommendation 10

5.44 The committee recommends the government works with states and territories to end restrictive practices in schools, consistent with the recommendations of the 2015 Senate Inquiry into violence, abuse and neglect against people with disability in institutional and residential settings, including the gender and age related dimensions, and the particular situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse people with disability.

Senator Sue Lines

Chair