

## **A Comment on the Recommendation to Phase Out Special Schools Made by Three Commissioners in the Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability**

From our perspective, the focus should not be on an arbitrary date, sometime in the future, for closing special schools or ceasing new enrolments but should be on providing the resources needed to improve the quality of school education for all students, but particularly for students with disability and learning difficulties. If full inclusion is the end goal then the resources required to enable this should be provided prior to students with complex needs accessing the mainstream setting.

Special educators are not anti-inclusion, just pro evidence-based intervention, the quality of instruction being more important than the place of instruction. Of course, the ideal is full inclusion but it should not happen at the cost of quality instruction. One of the difficulties we face in Australia is initial teacher training courses that generally have a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, an approach that does not work with students with disabilities. Also, many of these courses do not include evidence-based approaches to the teaching of literacy and numeracy nor to the management of challenging behaviour. Add to that a lack of specialist teacher expertise in supporting inclusion and we fear that the outcomes for students with disabilities would be negatively impacted.

As a special education teacher and early interventionist I strived to have my students/young children with disabilities/developmental delay included in generic education services wherever possible. From my perspective, our greatest achievement towards inclusion was the closing down of institutions for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, and the acceptance by departments of education of their responsibility for educating children with the full range of disability. When children with disabilities live in the family home, they are exposed to a normalised environment and engage in community activities with family members. In recent years, more and more infants and young children are accessing generic child care and preschools services and many more students with disabilities are accessing mainstream classes.

In 2006, an article I had written about the placement of a young girl with Down syndrome in a mainstream class in a state primary school in New South Wales was published in a popular magazine. Emma, had attended an inclusive preschool program in the year before she began school. That program was inclusive in the true sense of the word in that not only did it include four and five-year-olds with typical development, advanced development and mild to severe intellectual disabilities but children received a program that catered for their individual needs. Emma had a very successful transition from that program to school and subsequent successful inclusion in the primary school. Following the publication of the article, I received an email from a parent of a young child with autism challenging much of what I had written. The following email exchange is presented as written in 2006. The identity of the parent and child have been concealed to respect their privacy.

*I have a little boy who will be five next month. He is autistic and has been doing ABA. For 16 months now. I know every child is different, and so is every ABA therapist, but fortunately for us I managed to find, mostly, extremely gifted therapists and [my son] has made very noticeable progress. It is extremely expensive and very time consuming. However, in our case, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.*

*I read with interest your views on mainstreaming children and I must say the ABA therapists would thoroughly agree with you. I have been very involved in checking out every schooling option for [my son's] Kindy placement in 2007 and have agonised over what to do. He has been offered a place in a satellite class at a primary school. Two teachers and one teacher's aide to ten students and I have accepted. I recognise that he will be in an environment without typically developing children to model appropriate behaviours but have decided to take the risk because of what the alternatives were for him and the quality of the satellite class teaching staff.*

*The bit you don't make clear in your article is that for mainstreaming to work for the child you need a mainstream environment that is not scared of the child, is not scared of other selfish parents whining*

*and is committed to the rights of all children to an education. On top of this, then you need to have extra resources and teachers that have some sort of experience or are open to some sort of training and guidance in their interaction with the child. This I have learnt through my experience with [my son] at mainstream pre-school is a matter of pot luck. Some teachers take this sort of support (which was funded by ourselves) as a threat or an insult, rather than something from which all can benefit.*

*When you are writing your papers in future you should keep in mind that most parents do not have the extra time or resources to cope with all of these extra issues when trying to help their child make a transition to full-time schooling which is problematic enough for normally developing children anyway. Just be aware that the world is not the fuzzy warm lovely accepting place you seem to inhabit. Good on you – I am pleased that you have been able to create that environment around yourself and the children you help to integrate into mainstream. In a perfect world that is where I believe they should be too. However, this is a gentle reminder to you that the real world has not yet caught up with the one you have created when you are dispensing advice about the best educational settings for children with special needs.*

I responded to this email by agreeing that there were difficulties associated with inclusion, the prime among these being the lack of skills of mainstream teachers to support children with disabilities in mainstream settings. I also sent the parent another article I had written to balance the one she had accessed in the popular press. Her gracious response was as follows:

*Thank you for getting back to me. I really appreciate that you have taken the time to respond and I couldn't agree more with your attached article. Parents of children with disabilities are called upon to deal with incredibly complex situations when deciding what is best for their children. Often we are looking for well-informed, non-biased information from credible sources, of which there is simply not enough. Eventually you learn to judge why certain people are promoting certain things, eg. For financial gain, because of financial constraints, ideological blindness, traumatic personal experience that they think is pertinent to each child (usually isn't), ignorance and, lastly, pure unadulterated fear, disgust and prejudice.*

*Once again, thank you for your response. It is great to hear that your views on inclusion are more closely aligned to the concrete experience of those with a disability and not some fabulous notions of social justice that make sacrifices out of the innocents when they are pushed into circumstances that cannot/will not make allowances for their needs, however much we all believe/lobby/legislate that they ought to.*

The points that this parent makes in relation to inclusion are just as relevant today as they were in 2006:

- The difficulties that parents face when making decisions about the education of their child with a disability, particularly when that child has very complex needs
- The need for:
  - Unbiased objective information
  - Resources including having mainstream teachers with the skills required to educate students with disabilities with support from experts in the field
- The importance of putting the needs of children with disabilities and their families before personal ideologies.

**Coral Kemp**