INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

Organisation: Family Advocacy

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family

A D V O C A C Y

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A New South Wales association concerned with the rights and interests of people who have developmental disability

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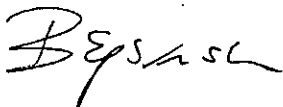gpscno2@parliament.nsw.gov.au

17 February 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

Enclosed please find the submission from Family Advocacy to the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

Family Advocacy is keen to discuss our submission more fully with Inquiry members. Unfortunately we will be unavailable on Monday 22 March 2010 but will leave Tuesday 23 March available if required.

Yours sincerely

Belinda Epstein-Frisch

About Family Advocacy

Family Advocacy is a state-wide advocacy organisation which promotes and protects the rights and interests of children and adults with developmental disability. The organisation has a high presence and profile across the State:

- building the capacity of families to undertake an advocacy role;

- developing leadership skills in families;

- making representations to Government regarding legislation, policy, funding, monitoring and practice and the extent to which they reflect the needs of people with developmental disability;

- providing advocacy related information and advice.

Education has always been an issue of vital importance to Family Advocacy and we have worked with families and with the Department over the past 17 years with a view to enabling all students to be welcomed and educated in the regular class of their local neighbourhood school with support.

Introduction

"Interacting with the education system is a very frustrating and confusing experience for parents of a child with a disability or special needs". This lead statement of the Parliamentary Inquiry is almost universally true for parents of children with disability as they seek to understand and negotiate the plethora of contradictory information provided by a system supposedly designed to assist their child to reach his/her potential.

Parents are not interested in the 'spin' about the different options. They want to understand in real terms what different options REALLY provide in terms of opportunities and barriers to enabling their child to fulfil his/her potential.

This Inquiry has conceptualised the key issues as:

- approaches to the allocation of funding;
- the level and adequacy of special education places;
- the adequacy of support in the regular class;
- the availability of suitable curricula;
- access to professional support services, and
- the adequacy of teacher education.

These issues are important, but Family Advocacy believes they fail to address two underpinnings that have a most significant impact on the future opportunities of children and young people with disability.

The first key issue concerns the organisation of schools and the education system to respond to the increasingly heterogeneous student population in ways that enhance mutual understanding and address disadvantage. The second issue relates to the relationship between schools and parents.

Key Issue 1

The organisation of schools and the education system

"One of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities. Such a society is neither efficient nor safe."

This is the lead paragraph to the UNESCO Paper on Overcoming Exclusion through Inclusive Approaches in Education (UNESCO:2001). The paper explores the role of education in political socialisation and in facilitating active democratic citizenship. It challenges education to take on the difficult task of turning diversity into a constructive contributory factor of mutual understanding between individuals and groups.

The UNESCO paper argues that current strategies and programs have largely been insufficient or inappropriate with regards to the needs of children and youth who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. Where programs targeting various marginalised and excluded groups do exist, they have functioned outside the mainstream through special programs, specialised institutions and specialist educators. Notwithstanding the best intentions, too often the result has been exclusion: second rate educational opportunities that do not guarantee the possibility to continue studies, or differentiation becoming a form of discrimination, leaving children with various needs outside mainstream school life and later, as adults, outside community, social and cultural life in general (UNESCO:2001).

The solution, promoted by UNESCO: "regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO:1994).

So, whilst the Committee identifies adequate support and funding as pivotal to providing an education that enables each child to fulfill their potential, UNESCO suggests that the organisation of an education system and what happens to the additional money.

Importance of inclusive education in redressing social disadvantage

Education is widely recognised as a strategy critical to addressing issues of disadvantage. Many, however, question why education needs to be inclusive, especially for students with the most significant disability. Aren't there some students who are better educated in disability specific classes not distracted by the hurley burley of everyday school life?

The assumption that segregated education is developed specifically to meet the needs of the identified students is not borne out in the history of special education. In NSW for example, the 1957 Wyndham Report, lauded as the guide for the education of a generation, recommended the establishment of "special schools for special children". Wyndham was not referring to the uneducable students for whom the state made no provision, but rather students who "should not be left in the ordinary class to impede the progress of more able children and to embarrass the class teacher" (McRae:1996:38). Wyndham recommended the establishment of "institutions for their care".

Given the intrinsic value of education both in gaining knowledge and skills and in enabling participation and respect by society, the question of who belongs in general mainstream education is fundamental.

Segregated provision says that some students are too different to belong. A child's 'special needs' outweigh their childhood status. And since there is typically very little upward mobility out of the special school system into regular education environments, being placed in a special school or class can become a form of social exclusion, compounding other forms of exclusion. The data on educational outcomes suggests that segregation and differentiation are often associated with poorer results for the 'lower' or 'special' branches and thus appear not to succeed in developing these children to their highest potential.

NSW moved from totally segregated provision in the late 1980s. Students who could fit into existing classes were permitted to 'be integrated'. Whilst this represented a positive step from segregation, its fundamental premise was: children who are different needed to earn the opportunity to be educated with their peers. The threshold question rested on whether the individual could fit in with the minimum of disruption. Slee describes this as "the normalisation of difference: (the school) stabilises the newcomer in an environment that provides a buffer to enable schools to remain the same" (Slee:2001:173). Under a system of integration, most students who are different do not 'belong'.

Those who are different of course do not necessarily have a disability label. The everyday experience of Australian teachers tells them that although students with diagnosed disabilities may attract differential funding, they are not the only students for whom they need to adapt their teaching (Bartak & Fry:2004). Typical Australian classrooms contain students with unique individual needs that may reflect influences derived from culture, class, ethnicity, language of origin, behaviour and/or other factors, i.e. disability is only one of many possible sources of need that once would have been considered 'special' (Shaddock:2007:16).

It is only in inclusive education that students who are different are part of the regular school system from the start. The issue for an education system is how to transform education in order to respond to the diversity of learners. Inclusive education views diversity as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem.

Inclusion is essential if students with the most significant disability are to have the opportunity to be valued members of their communities as adults. When students with disability are bussed to schools distant from their communities, they are deprived of social relationships in their own community. Strategically however, the best long term safeguard for individuals with disability is a large number of intimate relationships between people with disability and other citizens.

Segregated education also robs families of the day to day contact associated with school and local friendships, robbing those who most need neighbourhood support from the possibility of its development. And in logical progression, it is impossible to engender a pluralist society when those who are different are removed from the typical, day to day experiences.

But the inclusion of students with significant disability is not just a social exercise. An increasing amount of research attention is being directed toward the educational experiences of students with profound and multiple disability. In an Australian study of matched pairs of students with profound and multiple disability in segregated classrooms and inclusive classrooms (Arthur-Kelly et al:2004), behaviour states, communicative behaviour and social grouping were observed. The students involved in general classrooms were involved in significantly higher levels of communicative interaction than their matched peers in special classrooms. Whilst teachers in special school classrooms were observed to be more involved as communication partners than their colleagues in general education classrooms, in contrast

aides and peers in general education classrooms were observed significantly more often in the role of communication partner compared with the special school classrooms.

These results are consistent with other research that indicated that the level of engagement of students with the most severe disability was higher in general education programs than in special programs (Hunt:1994) and that peer support provided by the students without disability had no negative effect on those who provided the support, in fact, the opposite was observed (Cushing & Kennedy:1997). These studies "raise issues well beyond social justice or human rights arguments related to the optimal placement of students with the highest support needs. It may be that the factual position is counter-intuitive, and that the higher levels of disability are associated with measurably higher benefits for general class placement" (Arthur-Kelly:2004).

For those who believe that there are currently too many problems in our education system to attempt full inclusion, Sapon Shevin (1996) argues that full inclusion is the disclosing tablet. Attempting to include students with significant educational and behavioural challenges tells us a lot about the way in which our schools are unimaginative, under-resourced, unresponsive and simply inadequate. Full inclusion did not create these problems, but it shows us where the problems are. It reveals the manner in which our educational system must grow and improve to meet the needs of all students.

This view is reflected in the national *Project to improve learning outcomes of students with disabilities in mainstream classes in the early, middle and post compulsory years of school*, which reported to the Australian Government in 2007 (Shaddock:2007).

Shaddock argued that students with disabilities and their families are at the forefront of educational reforms that focus on changing mainstream educational structures and processes so that they accommodate the naturally occurring diversity within the school population. "Indeed the needs of students with disabilities may be a proxy for those of all other students who experience mainstream schools as unresponsive or even alienating" (reported in Shaddock:2007). Similarly, Pearce and Forlin (2005:103) observe that, "the inclusion of students with disabilities will, undoubtedly, highlight inadequacies in education systems".

The *Project to improve learning outcomes of students with disabilities in mainstream classes* concluded that approaches to the education of students with disabilities in the past were based on normative assumptions that positioned these students as having 'special' educational needs, in turn implying that their education was not the responsibility of mainstream education. However the heterogeneity of Australian society, the diversity of school enrolments and the expense and limited evidence of the efficacy of separate services, make it difficult to argue that students with disability should be educated separately. What has occurred in Australia has been a gradual shift from 'assessment, classification and placement' of students with disability into specialised facilities (where it was presumed their needs would be better met), to an exploration of the ways in which mainstream education can reasonably adapt to meet the needs of student population that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous.

These influences have produced an educational context in which educators require new ways of thinking about their roles and new skills to respond to the challenges of inclusive education (Shaddock: 2007:17).So if we are serious about best practice ways of enabling students to fulfil their potential and redressing social disadvantage, we must ensure that education does not become another form of exclusion. Inclusive education is the only approach that is about all students. In this context, Family Advocacy believes that a significant issue for the Inquiry is how to support schools effectively to support all learners.

Key Issue 2

Partnerships with families

A second fundamental issue is the nature of the partnership between schools and parents. DET policy and literature talk of partnerships with parents, but in practice schools take an expert view of education that encourages teachers and school executive to know best and pay lip service to the contributions of parents.

The Learning Support Team is supposed to exist in every school and around every student with additional needs in learning. It is an appropriate vehicle to value and utilise the knowledge of parents.

Family Advocacy believes that education would be more effective if the education system and schools implemented the rhetoric about partnerships with parents.

A serious commitment to partnerships with parents would include:

- acknowledging that in general, parents are there for the long term, know more about their child than anyone else and care more about the child's wellbeing and future;

- developing a state wide policy framework to ensure consistency in inclusion of parents and carers in decision-making about their child;

- implementing strategies to equalise information, genuinely value parent contributions and support joint decision-making;

- strengthening the operation of School Learning Support Teams;

- authorising families to use advocates if they wish;

- ensuring that pre service training provides skills in working in empowering relationships with parents, particularly with people with lower levels of education, understanding and literacy.

"Whether a student's funding allocation should be based on their functioning capacity rather than their disability?"

Background

In the past, special class placement and funding for integration was based on a categorical approach that pigeonholed students by a disability label. This approach has been significantly discredited over time.

The 1996 *Integration/Inclusion Feasibility Study,* described "the current allocation of support according to categorisation by type and degree of primary disability as a most inadequate funding mechanism" (McRae:1996:105). The study found a great deal of general opposition to this categorical approach and little informed support. It quoted the NSW Teachers' Federation analysis that "Special Education is plagued by a multiplicity of categories many of which have dubious relevance to the type of education service required by students" (McRae:1996:105).

This critique of a categorical approach to placement and resource allocation was reflected by Quin in 1994 in his *Review of the Allocative Mechanisms for Commonwealth Equity Funds for Schools,* by the South Australian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities in 1995 and by the Yeatman review of the Commonwealth State Disability Agreement in 1996.

Quinn et al observed: *"No matter how carefully groups are defined and located, boundary disputes occur. The problem is that groups are constructs not facts. There is much variety within each group, and "outside" each group are many who have much more in common with those "inside". There is therefore an arbitrariness about who does and does not get money. ..... To assume that educational need can be ascertained across disability factors is to confuse the medical definition with the educational task. (reported in McRae:1996:105)*

The Integration/Inclusion Feasibility Study went on to recommend resourcing based on the "support needs of individual students in an educational setting" as both an efficient and equitable procedure. The term was chosen very deliberately in contrast to 'educational needs' to reflect the fact that need relates to factors in the student as well as factors in the environment.

The move away from a categorical approach has been strengthened in the NSW education system in recent years. Its application to students with low support needs, recommended by the Parkins Review in 2002 was wholeheartedly supported by most stakeholders in the Reflective Study on the Learning Assistance Program carried out by Martin in 2006. Martin reported that the removal of assessment that identified and categorised some groups of students was described by the representative of the Primary Principals' Association as *"Non categorisation is fabulous".* Other comments included *"In the past, if our kids don't fit into boxes, you can't support them"* (Martin:2006:23).

It is generally agreed that a categorical approach is inequitable and expensive. When student support resources are allocated on the basis of label, those who do not have access to specialists to confer a label are disadvantaged. And when resources are allocated though assessment by school counsellors (as occurred prior to the reorganisation of the Learning Support Program as a result of the Parkins' Review) almost half of the resources targeted for support needs are taken up by assessment.

Shaddock summarised the issue thus: Although disability is usually one of the more obvious factors that may impact on learning, each student experiences that disability in a unique way. Consequently, there is

a limit to the validity and usefulness of generalisations about disability. A disability diagnosis may tell teachers something about a student in a general sense but it is an imprecise indicator of specific educational needs. Consequently, one of the 'take-home messages' of this review is that successful Australian teachers in today's mainstream will be those who attend and respond to the wide range of individual needs in their class, and *some* of these individual needs may be related to disability (Shaddock:2007:12).

Current situation

In Family Advocacy's experience, the DET Funding Support process works reasonably well.

- The domains and focus areas used to profile students as the basis for the determination of funding level provide a useful description of issues of educational support need;

- The process for planning and review involving parents, and the Learning Support Team, chaired by a member of the school executive provides the 'right' forum;

- The identification of approved uses of funds as training and development activities, additional teacher time, School Learning Support Officers time (formerly Teachers Aide (Special)), teacher release, transfer of duty and program coordination time is appropriate;.

Issues of concern

- The continued use of IQ as a proxy for intellectual capacity is demeaning and its use has been criticised on the basis of validity and relevance (DET:2005:27). Student profiling is argued to provide a more useful and accurate platform for measurement of education need and planning for educational provision.

- Some schools do not have Learning Support Teams and others continue to treat the Learning Support Team with little regard. In these situations, parents are seldom fully involved in identifying support needs and contributing to the planning of their child's education.

- The process of determining funding support takes no account of the level of knowledge, skill and experience of the teacher which will have a significant impact on the educational experience of the student.

- Some school overemphasise the level of Funding Support to the exclusion of other supports in the school and the system.

- Schools are reluctant to access specialist support at the regional and state level.

Recommendations

- That student funding is allocated on the basis of support need in an educational setting.

- That Funding Support processes include an additional instrument that takes account of knowledge, skills and experience of the teacher.

- That IQ is replaced by student profiling.

- That strategies are implemented to ensure that all school take the Learning Support Team processes seriously.

- That expert support is located in schools rather than district or regional offices.

Level and adequacy of current special education places

Background

Source of demand

The demand for additional special education places comes from many quarters. It comes from the low expectations and vision connected to the deficit lens of assessment. Without alternative information and vision, it becomes natural for parents to develop a lock step belief that there are inherent requirements to participation – that their child has to 'be ready' to go to preschool / to go to school / to have a friend. In this readiness approach, a significant proportion of children in early intervention will never be able to enjoy life with their peers because their mastery of skills will always be less developed than their peers and they will never be deemed 'ready'. An alternative to the 'readiness' model is the inclusive approach that guarantees membership of the regular class for all and asks 'what will it take' to enable this particular child to thrive.

Demand for special education places also comes from parents of young children whose experience from early intervention has led them to believe their child can only learn in one to one situations with a skilled adult. This leads to demand for a special class or school, the closest analogue to the one to one experience of early intervention.

The demand for special education places also comes from a lack of choice. Often parents are not provided with information about the possibility of a regular class enrolment for their child. Only the support class and SSP options are offered.

Parents who have 'battled' teachers and schools that are unwelcoming of their child can also increase demand for special education places. In the current environment where inadequate support is provided to regular class teachers, many parents seek 'refuge' in a support class or SSP which can be less demanding for parents. In general, membership of the regular class tends to require greater parental involvement than membership of a special education place. Once a student is enrolled in a support class or SSP, there is less encouragement and requirement for parents to be involved in planning, funding, transport etc.

Demand for special placement will also come from teachers and their associations. Where a support class exists, regular class teachers feel able to indicate that there is a 'better' place for students with different learning needs. This belief may be a product of a number of factors including historical practices. In addition, unions and professional associations often call for additional special education places which help to build an administrative hierarchy that provides leadership opportunities for more teachers and maintains current industrial frameworks. The inclusion of students threatens existing structures.

In these competing interests, the individual child or young person is the least influential and their interests are often sacrificed to the interests of the others.

Research evidence

When parents seek a school or class for their child, the very vast majority are seeking the option that they believe will be 'best' for their child. Most of the information provided to parents is, however, of a glossy simplistic nature with little access to the evidence of research.

The 2008 Australian Government funded a review of research comparing inclusion with segregated provision of education for students with intellectual disability (Jackson:2008). The review found little evidence that separate provision in a special education place provides a higher quality of education for its students.

In this meta-analysis, Jackson compared inclusion with segregation for children with intellectual impairment including an examination of research that looked at the impact on other children and teachers. The review found that children with an intellectual impairment benefit from inclusion academically and socially. While in some studies the advantage of inclusion over segregation was non-existent or small, in the larger samples and meta-analyses significant benefits were found for inclusion, with children who were segregated losing percentile ranks in comparison with their peers. No review could be found comparing segregation with inclusion that came out in favour of segregation in over forty years of research.

The research on the impact of pulling children out of regular education for special classes strongly favoured full inclusion for students with intellectual impairment. There was some evidence for benefits for a pullout approach for children with learning disabilities rather than an intellectual impairment.

Research examining the impact of inclusion on other children found a positive or neutral impact academically. The likelihood of a clear positive impact on the academic skills of other children increased when cooperative teaching approaches such as peer tutoring were implemented.

Studies examining the social impact of inclusion were consistently positive and widespread. Students without disability gained a range of positive benefits such as increased tolerance, acceptance of difference, friendship with a person with a disability and higher self esteem.

Philosophical underpinning of special education places

The educational philosophy which underpins the existence of support classes stems from a belief that schools operate for a specified and highly normative band of students and those outside that band do not belong. *"The problem for the school is one of working out how to fit different kids in with the minimum of disruption. The research imperative is the normalisation of difference by stabilizing the newcomer in an environment that provides a buffer to enable schools to remain the same"* (Slee: 2001:173)

Support classes become an important feature of the school system if the aim is to enable schools to stay the same. In other words, schools may remain impervious to changing needs of students and the changing conditions of the labour market through creating a residualised educational provision for different and difficult students.

Support classes are built on the assumption that:

- the differences between students are much greater than their commonalities;

- the regular environment is not the natural environment for children who are different;

- children who are different must earn the privilege to be allowed to participate with their 'normative' peers but in reality they belong with other students who have a disability;

- many children are not worthy to learn with their 'normative' peers;

- children with disability need teachers with special education qualifications in order to learn;

- any question of adjustment must fall to the child who is different – their worthiness to participate is judged by the extent to which they can fit in with the system as it stands.

Purpose of support classes

Support classes have been developed for 3 purposes:

1. To meet the special needs of children with different learning needs

However,

- A support class is not a homogeneous group of learners. Every class has students of mixed ability and hence if all are to gain maximum benefit from education, the learning, even in a support class must be individualised.

- Support classes tend to have low expectations of students and this leads to low outcomes. The concentration on life skills rather than immersion in a rich and varied curriculum, and the requirement of mastery of a particular skill in order to go on to higher order skills, leads to a narrow and limited experience rather than the full range of age appropriate experience available in the regular class. In consequence, students spend years on the balance beam rather than the soccer field, in speech therapy rather than drama, with early readers rather than listening to good literature via audio tapes for example.

- Support classes lack effective peer models. Verbal communication cannot be enhanced in a class filled with students with poor or no language. Unhelpful and unnecessary behaviour responses are also commonly acquired in these classrooms for the same reason.

- In support classes, many children spend long periods 'marking time' while the special needs of everyone else are met.

- Support classes are often restricted to the discipline specialities of the support teachers. Hence students who are placed in these classes only have access to a restricted curriculum.

2. To provide a supported transition to the regular class

There are 2 main problems with the theory that support class membership provides a supported transition to the regular class. These are:

- **Problems of generalisation**

If students removed from the mainstream of society because of deficits in their learning are ever to return to the mainstream, they are required to learn more than the students without learning problems and are required to learn faster. Each transition to a new environment adds a new set of demands for the individual.

For example, a child moving from a segregated to a regular classroom after 3 years of school must demonstrate the ability to work in groups. The students in the regular class without disability have learnt these skills gradually over 3 years of experience, but the student coming from the special class who has not had those experiences is expected to learn the same skills in a matter of days or weeks. Thus we are expecting the student with disability to learn faster than non disabled schoolmates, and consider them to be failures if they cannot do so. It can be seen that the longer a child is in a special environment, the less likely it is that the child will be able to successfully move to the none segregated environment.

Thus we see that the most restrictive environments do not give students the opportunities to learn the skills necessary to learn in the least restrictive environments. The skills necessary to function in a world of people of mixed abilities cannot be taught in a segregated setting with only other students with disability.

It is often argued that the support class provides an important place to promote integration: the student can spend some time with their peers with disability and 'be integrated' into specific classes 'as appropriate'. The experience of most students in support classes, however, is that joining a regular class is at the invitation of the regular class teacher. A significant number of students in support classes spend years without ever receiving an invitation. As full membership of their peer group at school is denied to them, their devalued status is confirmed.

- **Problem with the perception that students need a certain level of skill to be members of the regular class**

The support class is part of a continuum model of education in which students with the highest support needs are grouped in the most restrictive placement and those with lesser support needs are deemed eligible for less restrictive options. This 'continuum of care' model, confuses segregation with intensity of service.

Where membership of the regular class is believed to be contingent on a certain level of skill, it is deceptive to argue that support class placement provides a transition path into the regular class. Many students will never have the requisite level of skill. These students will never be integrated into regular provision. However, Family Advocacy knows many students with very significant disability, being included in the regular class of their local school. They were never measured against the 'readiness' test and in fact, after years of successful inclusion, if measured today, would definitely ' fail' yet their regular schooling experience has been a very positive one.

In addition, the transition argument assumes that students can move easily from one placement to another, whereas in reality, parents are most actively discouraged by teachers, principals and often also by district office staff from moving from a support class to the regular class.

3. To provide choice

Those in favour of support classes and SSPs argue that their existence provides parents with choice of placement. There are two points of rebuttal:

- Most children and young people who are eligible for special class or SSP placement are not offered the full range of choice. They are guided firmly to the restrictive option and little reliable information is provided about the regular class option.
- Wherever support classes and SSPs exist, children will be found to populate them since the absence of students will be perceived as threatening staffing levels and the availability of options for others

Problems of support classes from the perspective of students with disability

The message sent to the school and community is one of not belonging

- When children attend support classes and units, they attend a different school from that attended by their siblings and neighbours, being bussed to schools distant from their communities. This separation from community sends the message to that community that this child is too different to belong. This child's 'special' needs outweigh their childhood status and we remove them from what they need most ... the friendship and support inherent in relationships with neighbourhood children and siblings.

Support classes reinforce negative stereotypes

- Membership of a support class reinforces, rather than challenges, negative social stereotypes of people with disability. Some common stereotypes that are strengthened in a support class include that children and young people with disability are 'better off with their own kind', are 'special and in need of protection', are 'not like us' and therefore not of equal value.

- It encourages students to be labelled by their difference and identified as one of a devalued group. This puts them at high risk of carrying all the historical (mostly unconscious) negative stereotypes about the group.

- It brings together children with disability beyond the natural proportions one would find in a school community. This has the dual effect of removing children from their own local community and grouping them in such numbers that the opportunity to develop relationships with children without disability is reduced.

Support classes lack the richness of experience that comes from the regular class

- Support class experience lacks coherence and comprehensiveness. It can never provide the richness of experience that comes from the diversity of a class made up of all children in the community.

- Support classes lack positive peer models. It is virtually impossible to encourage communication in a group of students in which few have good verbal skills and some may have alternative communication skills.

- Support classes reinforce low expectations which lead to poor outcomes for students.

Support classes deny children the safeguard of peers without disability

- In support classes, students with disability lack the safeguard of relationships with other students who do not have a disability. When things go wrong, as they inevitably do, students with disability may have no-one to tell or no-one to indicate that what has happened is not right or appropriate. Indeed, the absence of peers without disability means that there will be no-one to notice and no-one to alert others that things have gone wrong.

Current situation

- In recent years there has been a growth in support classes particularly for students with autism and for students with behaviour disorders.

- The research comparing inclusion with special class placement for students with intellectual disability indicates that a special education place does not provide a 'better' education for students with disability, nor is it more effective in meeting the special learning needs of children with intellectual disability.

- Many families who want their child educated in the regular class are actively pushed toward special class placement. A support class or special school is not seen as a choice but as the option designed for their child.

- Many families of children in special education classes are concerned that:

  o their children appear to be 'marking time' with little access to stimulating, age appropriate curricula;

  o the promised integration and transition to the regular class does not occur;

  o they are not welcome to contribute to planning their child's education and that their feedback is discouraged.

  o Many schools with support units are reluctant to enrol students in the regular class, particularly where a student has a profile that would deem them eligible for a special class within the school. This means that the opportunity for inclusion is in part dependant on where a family lives.

Conclusion

Family Advocacy believes that the demand for special education places will subside as DET provides more effective support for all learners in the regular class.

Recommendations

- That the education system works with parent groups to develop more informative and balanced information about all options that is then provided to all parents.

- That parent choice of placement is respected and implemented.

- That DET provide more effective support for all students in the regular class so that teachers are more skilled at providing best practice education. – see recommendations in the next section.

Adequacy of support services for children with disability in mainstream classes

Background

For students with moderate to high support needs, targeted Funding Support was implemented in the late 1990s. It has been largely a demand driven instrument so that resources have increased as student numbers in the regular class have increased. Today, over 60% of students with moderate to high support needs are educated in the regular class. A functional assessment is used to determine educational support need and Learning Support Teams provide the local mechanisms to plan, review and monitor progress.

For students with low support needs, the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) was established in 2004 to assist students enrolled in regular classes K-12 who are having difficulty in literacy, numeracy or language. LAP also focuses on building the capacity of classroom teachers to provide effective support to students experiencing difficulties in these basic areas of learning, including students with mild intellectual disability and language disorders (Martin:2006:4). The LAP Reflective Study (Martin:2006) found that all stakeholder groups were in support of the many benefits that flowed from the reorganisation of the LAP program including:

- the allocation of Support Teachers Learning (STLA) positions based on BST, ELLA and SNAP results ie state wide assessment scores;

- the non categorical approach whereby support was provided to students with learning needs and school counsellors no longer had to spend most of their time assessing students to determine eligibility for support;

- the flexibility of program delivery with the most positive consequences in schools that focused on building the capacity of teachers to support their students in the classroom.

Current situation

A significant proportion of students with disability in the regular class are physically included but teachers and schools are struggling with curricular and social inclusion[1]. There are many reasons for this situation:

- Teachers lack the knowledge and skills to teach *all* students.

- The vast majority of integration funding (the Funding Support Program) is used to employ Teachers' Aides Special. They are valuable members of staff but are the least skilled.

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[1] Wills and Jackson describe inclusion as having three components: 1. **Physical inclusion**-attending the local neighbourhood school, playing in the same playground, being in the same classrooms as well as having access to opportunities offered by the school at the same time as same aged peers without disability. 2. **Curricular inclusion** -involvement of the student in the regular curriculum of the school. 3. **Social inclusion** - a welcoming social environment for ALL students including promoting personal friendships, caring for one another, discouraging and addressing teasing and all other forms of social isolation of students. At http://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/educationpp.html

- Staff who have the knowledge and skills to assist teachers to plan, modify curriculum and support behaviour are not based in schools. Their heavy case load means that weeks and months may pass before assistance is provided.

Under current arrangements, specialist support is not provided in a timely fashion. This has detrimental impacts for all concerned: Students with disability experience poor progress educationally, may be marginalised socially and face increased suspensions. Parents experience increased frustration and poor relationships at school and teachers experience decreased job satisfaction and increased stress.

Assistance currently available for students with disability in the regular class

Schools that have enrolled students with moderate to high support needs under the Funding Support program use most of their resources on Teachers' Aides Special who provide a valuable contribution but are the least skilled members of the teaching team.

Specialist staff located in area and regional offices provide some assistance, but the delay in accessing support can be great leading to:

- increased frustration on the part of the student and the teacher;
- missed opportunities to develop capacity in the teacher;
- the consolidation of poor practice in the classroom;
- increased likelihood of the student being suspended.

Part time, school based experts are only available to assist students with low support needs in literacy and numeracy. Area and regionally based itinerant staff assist in targeted areas of student need. This silo effect produces artificial barriers and reduces the opportunity for timely support for teachers and students.

What is needed?

For support to be effective it must be available in a timely fashion and increase the knowledge, skills and capacity of teachers. In fact, research confirms that teachers do not change their teaching practice without exposure to:

- what teaching actually looks like when it is done differently; and
- someone who can help them understand the difference between what they are doing and what they aspire to (Ainscrow:2005).

The use of coaching and mentoring by skilled school based colleagues is a highly valued professional learning strategy.

In 2006-7, Family Advocacy ran a campaign advocating for at least one skilled and experienced specialist teacher in every school in NSW to provide direct support to students with additional needs and simultaneously build the capacity of teachers to support all students. The campaign argued for the repositioning of the 1,650 school and area based positions supporting students with low support needs and adding a further 590 positions to provide expert support in every school.

School Learning Support Program

In 2009 the DET developed the School Learning Support Program as a strategy to increase the availability of consultancy support in schools. Family Advocacy believes that this is an important strategy that would build the capacity of teachers. Serious misinformation seems to have taken the proposal off track.

Key directions of the School Learning Support Program supported by Family Advocacy

1. Providing expert consultation and support in every school

However, the level of support on offer to schools through the School Learning Support Program was insufficient to provide the timely support that would be desirable.

2. Merging the disparate consultant roles into a more generic expert

However, it is essential that School Learning Support Teachers are supported by an additional layer of expertise (probably based at regional office) to advise on matters beyond their competence and to provide ongoing training and development for school based personnel.

3. Allocating resources on the basis of population based data rather than individual assessment

However, it is essential that additional funds/ positions are held at regional or state level to be allocated to schools that attract students with disability from out of area leading to the enrolment beyond the numbers that would be anticipated in population based planning.

4. Reducing the administration required to enable students to access support

However, it is essential that Learning Support Teams and Individual Learning Plans become mandatory around all students with additional needs in learning and that families are part of this Learning Support Team. This provides a strategy to consult with and inform parents and teachers of the scaffolding and support available for particular students and provides a strategy to review progress.

5. Increasing flexibility as to how positions and funding will be used

However, it is essential that an identified proportion of the resources are used for skilled teacher / consultant positions.

6. Significant professional development

Tension between seamless support and visible resources and processes

There is a tension between providing seamless support for all students and providing visible processes and resources that demonstrate an investment in supporting students with additional needs in learning.

In principle, a fully inclusive school that welcomes all learners does not need to flag additional resources for students with additional needs. The support would be seamless. It is unlikely however, that any school in NSW could be described as fully inclusive. In NSW at this time, when specialist resources are not tagged for students with disability, parents are fearful that they will not be used for their appropriate purposes. When resources and processes are not visible, teachers and parents fail to 'see' the additional resources that are available to support the inclusion of a particular student. Some will also be concerned about a perceived lack of accountability.

Learning Support Teams around each student provide the vehicle to enable parents and teachers to 'see' the resources in an inclusive school. Learning Support Teams provide the strategy to consult with and inform parents and teachers of the scaffolding and support available for particular students and provides a strategy to review progress.

Family Advocacy believes that much of the negative feedback currently directed to the School Learning Support Program reflects a lack of confidence that resources will actually be made available.

General recommendations in relation to support for students with disability in the regular class

- Provide at least one specialist teacher in each school to work directly with students with additional needs in learning and to support their classroom teachers.
- Implement the School Learning Support Program with the safeguards identified previously and below.
- Make learning support teams mandatory.
- Build partnerships with parents to tap into their knowledge of their child to provide effective quality education for each student.
- Where a teacher has a student with moderate to high support needs in their class, provide that teacher with consultancy support and teacher release time for planning.
- Provide targeted funding for students with moderate to high support needs that is demand driven.
- Support the school to evaluate its policies and practices that facilitate or inhibit the development of an inclusive school community.
- Provide significant training and development.

Specific Recommendations in relation to the School Learning Support Program

- Increase the allocation of School Learning Support teachers with no school receiving less than .4FTE.
- Make Learning Support Teams and Individual Learning Plans mandatory around all students with additional needs and ensure families are included in these Learning Support Teams. This provides a strategy to consult with and inform parents and teachers of the scaffolding and support available for particular students and provides a strategy to review progress.
- Create an additional layer of expertise (probably based at regional office) to advise School Learning Support Teachers on matters beyond their current level of expertise and to provide ongoing training and development for school based personnel.
- Hold additional funds/ positions at regional or state level to be allocated to schools that have enrolments of students with disability beyond that anticipated by population based planning. These funds can be used to ensure the schools are not disadvantaged, both as a result of enrolments beyond anticipation and to respond to changes within the triennial funding period.
- Require that an identified proportion of the resources are used for skilled teacher/ consultant positions.
- Encourages schools to invite parents to participate in the new online training modules, thereby strengthening partnerships with parents and making schools genuine communities of learners.
- Remove the cap for funding for students with moderate to high support needs so that resources are demand driven and thereby better able to respond to need.

- Develop case study material to allay fears and help people to assess the implications of a proposal from their perspective.
- Provide clear and specific written information about the proposed changes to schools and families to enhance understanding of what support will be available.

Suspension

Suspension is often a consequence of students with disability not being properly supported. Family Advocacy believes that the *DET Procedures for the Suspension and Expulsion of Students* (2004) are in need of serious revision.

This is an issue that Family Advocacy has taken up with Ministers Refshauge, Tebbutt and Firth as well as with Departmental staff. This section is taken from our most recent advocacy on the issue.

Procedures for the Suspension and Expulsion of School Students

Positive aspects of the procedures

1. The procedures are prefaced with proactive contextual statements that seek to ensure that no student is discriminated against on grounds that include disability (s4.0.4) and that account is to be taken of factors such as age, individual needs and any disability or developmental level of students (s4.0.5), in implementing the policy.

However, Family Advocacy believes that schools do not have sufficient guidance as to the ways in which they can meaningfully implement the contextual statements of non discrimination and accommodation.

Recommendation: That DET

- develops and implements guidelines to demonstrate the appropriate considerations required in applying the policy to students with disability;
- provides training and development for principals in implementing these procedures for students with disability;
- monitors the implementation of the procedures for students with disability, with appropriate corrections if detrimental impacts are experienced.

2. The procedures require that *"the principal, in conjunction with the parent(s) or carer(s) should utilise the school, the school education area, regional and other available resources in seeking a means to assist the student to modify his or her behaviour."(s6.2.3)*

However, the experience reported by families across NSW has not seen proactive action to support changed behaviour. Too often, students are required to return to a school situation in which nothing has changed and therefore the behaviour that caused the suspension is likely to recur. It is the student and his/her family who bear the painful and stigmatising consequences of such lack of planning and provision of appropriate support. In addition the long term reputation of the student is tarnished as information about suspensions remains on record.

Family Advocacy believes that where behaviour is a result of disability, the school has a responsibility not only to assist the student to modify his/her behaviour but also has a responsibility to examine its own policies and practices that may contribute to the unacceptable behaviour of the student.

Family Advocacy is pleased to see the theoretical commitment to assist the student ti modify behaviour. If however, timely assistance is to be provided additional resources are likely to be required. In addition, if Government is genuine in providing support, this should be reflected in the proforma letters appended to the policy.

Recommendation: In situations in which a student with disability is suspended or likely to be suspended that DET:

- ensures the provision of skilled consultation and support within 2 working days of the incident. The specialist support should be consider factors such as the appropriateness of individual learning plan, teacher training and other supports with the aim of more effectively support student learning and participation;

- actively involves the family in planning for the safe return to school;

- amends the standard letters to parents to reflect the commitment to providing immediate support to prevent recurrence of behaviour.

Issues of concern with the procedures

Concern: Mandatory suspension

Under s6.1.5, the procedures require immediate and mandatory suspension where a student is physically violent. No distinction is made as to whether the behaviour is intended or unintended.

The terms violent is subject to variation in meaning and can be used to demonise a student whose difficult behaviour results from his/her disability. The blame is placed entirely on the student with no policy requirement either to look at antecedents of the behaviour or to take a systemic approach to deterrence or management. For example, in an unwelcoming school, the kick of a frustrated student with autism in response to playground bullying will lead to suspension. This places all blame and punishment on the student and family (who must miss work for the duration of the suspension) and does not encourage an examination of the responsibility of the school and the system.

Recommendation: that DET:

- amend the procedures to remove the requirement for immediate and mandatory suspension where the behaviour is a result of disability;

- revise the guidelines to require the school response to take account of :
    - o   whether the behaviour is intended or unintended;
    - o   contextual factors that may have contributed to the behaviour, for example the absence of the usual teacher or TAS.

Concern: Lack of advocacy support in meetings in relation to suspension

The procedures prevent students and parents having advocacy support in meetings with the school (Appendix 3). Whilst we understand the desire to prevent legal representation, in a situation of unequal power as exists between the student and parent and the school executive, the availability of advocacy as a feature of procedural fairness is critical.

This is particularly evident where parents face additional disadvantages of disability, poor education, language or culture.

Recommendation: that DET:

- authorise the use of advocacy support in meetings associated with suspension.

Concern: A formal disciplinary interview can be held without a parent or carer

Many students with disability experience limitations in reasoning and decision making. Without the presence of an adult, any notion of procedural fairness is without substance. Even for students with disability who do not have a cognitive impairment, the power imbalance significantly reduces their capacity to be heard and can only be made fair through the support of an active advocate.

Family Advocacy understands the importance of enabling teachers and principals to speak firmly to students as required, however, a formal disciplinary interview is a discussion of particular status that should not occur without the presence of a parent or carer.

Recommendation: that DET:

- ensure that formal disciplinary interviews do not occur without the presence of a parent or carer.

Concern: Lack of published data

DET does not release data about suspension in a form that can be meaningfully analysed and hence it is impossible to identify the impact of the guidelines on students with disability.

Recommendation: that DET:

- publishes annual data about suspension in a form that enables meaningful analysis.

Transition

Family Advocacy believes that there is inadequate planning and support for students with disability at points of transition into school and between schools.

Current situation

Contact with families across NSW indicates that there is a lack of effective and timely transition planning into school and between schools. This increases the stress on families and inhibits the establishment of collaborative relationships between families and schools. Whilst formal DET processes are in place, they are seldom implemented in a timely way. The experience of families of children and young people with disability usually feature:

- unbalanced information favouring segregated options;

- a lack of respect for parent choice of inclusion even where the student has been included in the regular class in primary school;

- the expression of devalued attitudes and low expectations toward students with disability;

- significant delays in decision making (often leading to insufficient lead time for capital works);

- refusal to identify class teacher(s) for the year of entrance into school;

- inadequate preparation of teachers and increased anxiety and stress for families.

Recommendation

That DET reshape the transition processes to include:

- respect for, and implementation of, parent choice of inclusive option;

- genuine collaboration between school and family;

- timely decision-making, including approval of enrolment 12 months prior to commencement in infants and high school;

- timetabled action plans addressing all issues;

- opportunities for training and development for the whole school community as well as identified classroom teachers.

Provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students

Background

The National Project to Improve Learning Outcomes of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Classes in the Early, Middle and Post Compulsory Years of Schooling (Shaddock:2007) addressed curricular issues in general and whether mainstream curriculum is appropriate for all students in particular (Shaddock :2007:32). The National Project provided a review of the literature on the issue arguing for a common curriculum implemented through adjustments to content, instruction and materials.

Salient insights include the observation provided by Agran et al (2002) that limited expectations are often placed on students with disabilities because of biases and stereotypes, with many educators still believing that efforts to ensure access to the 'regular' curriculum are not relevant especially for those students with more significant disabilities (Agran, et al., 2002). Westwood (2003) argues strongly against 'alternative curricula' for students with disabilities from an educational opportunity perspective.

Giangreco, et al. (1998) and Wehmeyer, Lattin, and Agran (2001) contend that using the 'general' curriculum content has potential to provide a more stimulating curriculum, offering breadth while also encouraging higher expectations of students. Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley (2000) reported a survey of recognised experts who believed instructional goals for students with special needs should be based on the general education curriculum, with accommodations and adjustments made to enable students to achieve these goals and participate in class activities.

Universal design in curriculum

Shaddock draws on the principles of universal design to argue for a common curriculum implemented through adjustments to content, instruction and materials.

The following discussion draws heavily on the work of Shaddock.

"The principle of universal design, initially used in building design and planning to ensure physical access for people with disabilities, has proved valuable in the conceptualisation of an inclusive curricular approach. Universal design for learning has been described by Orkwis and McLane as "design of instructional materials and activities that allows the learning goals to be achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities" (reported in Shaddock:2007:33).

"The principle of universal design does not imply 'a one size fits all' approach, nor does it mean 'watering down' the curriculum whereby the curriculum activity must be narrowed to reach the broadest number of students (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw: 2003). Universal design implies that flexibility and responsiveness are built into the content, instruction and materials in the planning stage, i.e. the approach to individual needs is proactive, not reactive.

"Educators have begun to use the principle of universal design to guide curricular decision-making and planning. An example can be seen in the work of researchers such as Udari-Solnar (1996) and Wehmeyer, et al. (2001), who have developed curricular planning frameworks that use a series of

planning questions to determine what supports, adjustments and approaches are required to facilitate access and participation. These approaches also focus on the individual needs / goals of the students as part of the planning".

Examples of planning questions include:

- Is the general/regular curriculum appropriate without any adjustments?

- Has assistive technology been considered?

- Are adjustments required to the way the material is delivered / presented?

- Are adjustments required to how the student presents their work?

- Are adjustments required to the assessment task?

- Are additional different goals or student specific outcomes needed within the content area.

(Udari-Solnar:1996; Wehmeyer, et al.: 2001)

In Australia, all states and territories have curriculum frameworks which have at their core a standards–based framework. Terms such as 'inclusive curriculum' or 'curriculum for all students' have found their way into underpinning principles.

NSW Curricula

The curriculum framework released by the NSW Board of Studies is an example of curricula developed on principles of universal design. It is underpinned by a set of principles that reflect the notion of an inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. Features include:

- All students must be able to engage in, take responsibility for and continue their own learning.

- All students are entitled to a core of knowledge, skills, understanding and values.

- Explicit standards are established that allow recognition of student achievement and planning for further learning.

- Education must be inclusive of all students attending schools in New South Wales.

- Teachers, schools and school authorities will decide how to maximise students learning. (NSW Board of Studies: K-10 Curriculum Framework, 2002)

Board of Studies documents indicate that in the K–6 curriculum, students with special education needs are provided for in the following ways:

- through the inclusion of outcomes and content in syllabuses which provide for the full range of students;

- through the development of additional advice and programming support for teachers to assist students to access the outcomes of the syllabus;

- through the development of specific support documents for students with special education needs;

- by teachers and parents planning together to ensure that syllabus outcomes and content reflect the learning needs and priorities of students. (NSW Board of Studies English Years:2003:5)

The NSW 7-10 syllabus framework is an example of an inclusive approach where each of the syllabus areas has a continuum of outcomes designed to be accessible for the full range of learners. This curriculum framework reflects the principle of universal design by providing a continuum of outcomes within each of the subject areas. A curriculum planning process is embedded in the syllabus framework which allows for decisions to be made about adjustments to content, assessment and instruction, while also providing an option to identify learning outcomes within a Life Skills pathway for each subject. Most students with disabilities will participate fully in learning experiences and assessment activities provided by the regular syllabus outcomes and content, although they may require additional support, including adjustments to teaching and learning activities and / or assessment. However for a small percentage of these students, particularly those with an intellectual disability, the Life Skills outcomes and content in each syllabus can provide "a more relevant, accessible and meaningful curriculum option" (NSW Board of Studies:2004:6).

Life Skills

It is critical to understand that Life Skills content and outcomes are not a separate syllabus but are provided within the general syllabus framework. This provides the broad stimulating age appropriate curriculum, encouraging higher expectations of students while simultaneously providing guidance for teachers to enable students to work on outcomes related to their stage of learning.

The NSW Board of Studies has developed valuable resource material to help teachers understand key aspects of the Life Skills outcomes and content developed in conjunction with the new syllabi. These documents such as Life Skills Years 7-10: Advice on Planning, Programming and Assessment) provide guidance for initial implementation, read in conjunction with the relevant syllabus and support documents.

The Board of Studies resources aim to assist teachers to:

- clarify the process to access Life Skills outcomes and content and identify those students for whom this option may be appropriate;
- program from Life Skills outcomes and content in the new Years 7–10 syllabuses;
- design and implement appropriate assessment processes for students undertaking Life Skills outcomes and content by reflecting on evidence of learning in relation to outcomes.

The document contains sample units of work organised in key learning areas (KLAs). In each sample unit, a number of integrated teaching, learning and assessment activities have been prepared to assist teachers to become familiar with the Life Skills outcomes and content in the particular Years 7–10 syllabus. In addition, links to Life Skills outcomes from other syllabuses have been provided to assist teachers in developing integrated units. The sample units provide a basis from which teachers can develop their own programs to cater for the learning needs of the students in their class.

Life skills in action for a student with high support needs in the regular class

Shaddock provides a NSW example of how an inclusive curriculum framework has been used to assist with curriculum planning for a student with high support needs (multiple disabilities) in a comprehensive high school (Shaddock:2007:35).

This school enrolled a student with multiple disabilities in year 7 and used the collaborative planning decision making process within the 7-10 syllabus framework to assist with the identification of learning outcomes that are appropriate and relevant to the needs of the students within each of the syllabus areas.

This process involved identification of priority learning goals based upon knowledge of the student's current skills and strengths, family priorities and input from other teachers and therapists. From this knowledge of the student and the knowledge of the content to be covered in each of the subjects, each subject teacher was able to identify appropriate outcomes and content. For this particular student the outcomes selected in all subject areas were different from the ones for other students in the class – but the topic and content were the same.

This process brought together an individualised planning approach and a mainstream curriculum planning approach, with teachers using the knowledge of the student and the unit of work as the key determinants for the identification of the outcomes and content to be taught.

Current situation

Most teachers struggle in providing stimulating curricula that meets the real learning needs of students with disability. This seems equally the case for students in the regular class, support classes and SSPs. In support classes and SSPs, many families decry the low expectations placed on their sons and daughters and the limited curriculum provided to them. Other families whose sons and daughters are in the regular class report that they (the parents) are the ones who actually adjust the curriculum so that their children can achieve real learning goals in the context of the curriculum of their peers.

In this context of frustration, it is not surprising for many families to call for the establishment of a specific curriculum for children with intellectual disability. Similar to the problems of using a categorical approach to the allocation of funding however, a categorical approach does not work for curriculum since it would assume homogeneity of students with intellectual disability that does not exist.

In NSW, Board of Studies syllabus frameworks provide a continuum of outcomes to address the learning needs of all students. A curriculum planning process is embedded in the syllabus framework which allows for decisions to be made about adjustments to content, assessment and instruction, while also providing an option to identify learning outcomes within a Life Skills pathway for each subject. This provides a rich, age appropriate curriculum within which adjustments can be made to meet the real learning needs of each student.

The uneven experience in schools relates to the lack of understanding of the curriculum framework, the lack of skill and experience in curricula adaptation in relation to students with significant learning needs, the lack of time and support for planning and the lack of readily developed resource material to support teachers. These are issues of implementation, not curriculum design.

Recommendations

That DET take substantial steps to assist and support teachers to adjust the curriculum through:

- provision of training and development to acquire the knowledge and skills required;

- consultancy support to adjust curricula and develop appropriate pedagogy;

- teacher release time for planning;

- the development of units of study that provide examples of curricula adjustment for students with a wide range of learning needs in each Syllabus area.

Access to professional support services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

Current situation

Allied health services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy are seldom available to school aged students in NSW and yet these services are important to enable a number of children and young people to reach the potential.

Where therapy services are available, they tend to be provided to students in special schools.

Recommendations

That the NSW Government provide therapy services for children and young people with disability of school age. These services should be provided:

- equitably irrespective of educational setting;

- in a manner that is easy for families to access and that is consistent with inclusive practice.

Adequacy of pre service and post service training

Background

The average Australian teacher is approximately 49 years of age and was at Teachers' College or University in the seventies (Bond:2002). Trained in an era when students with disabilities were educated separately, many teachers are not prepared for inclusive practice, in terms of attitudes or skills. Some older teachers believe that it is not their responsibility to teach students with disabilities because they have not been taught the necessary skills for adapting the learning environment and teaching in ways that will produce positive learning outcomes for these students. Furthermore, although many younger teachers in some Australian states and territories have undertaken a 'mandatory subject' on students with disabilities as part of their undergraduate teaching qualification, there is evidence that they too find inclusive practice challenging (Shaddock:2007:16).

Current Situation

Pre service education

Whilst there have been improvements in pre service education for teachers, most new graduates need continued support to teach the mixed ability classes in which they are placed.

The essential requirements for pre service training (as documented by the NSW Institute of Teachers) provide an inclusive framework for the mandatory unit in special education. Its implementation, however, is variable across universities. In addition, many pedagogical courses do not address inclusive strategies for teaching the mixed ability of students present in every classroom. This is further confounded through the pracs that are an important part of teacher education which are often supervised by teachers who lack knowledge, skills and commitment to inclusive practice. The bottom line is that a significant proportion of students with disability continue to have teachers who feel they do not have the knowledge and skills to include them in their classes.

Post service education

DET often expects teachers to implement new developments following a half day briefing in areas in which serious training and development is required. This is the case with the implementation of the Board of Studies Curriculum Framework and strategies to differentiate curricula for students with significant needs in learning.

Very few teachers seem to take up opportunities for post service training. The new on-line modules have been very positively reviewed and hopefully provide an avenue by which teachers can upgrade their knowledge and skills

Post graduate training in special education

Many specialist teachers undertaking roles of Support Teacher Learning, Support Teacher Behaviour etc do not have post graduate degrees in special education.

Recommendations

If teacher training in NSW is to be serious about preparing teachers for the mixed ability classes they face, it is critical that those responsible for teacher education must:

- change the assumptions that underpin teacher education to recognise that
  o all classes have members who are of mixed ability; and
  o class teachers have a responsibility to work with special education consultants to teach pupils experiencing difficulties in learning;
- overhaul the mandatory units in special education to ensure the development of an inclusive framework;
- overhaul all pedagogical and subject courses to develop an integrated knowledge of a continuum of effective assessment, programming and teaching skills;
- provide teachers with knowledge and skills to be effective communicators, working as partners with parents, as part of an education team;
- support teachers to undertake the new on line learning modules;
- provide more scholarships for teachers to undertake post graduate degrees in special education.

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