Submission
No 722

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

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Date received:	19/04/2010

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19 April 2010

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Director,

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

Please find enclosed the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association's response to the *Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.*

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these issues. If you require further information about this submission, please contact me on (02) 9891 6400 or email diana.qian@mdaa.org.au

Yours faithfully

Diana Qian
Executive Director

Submission to the
Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

MDAA

April 2010

Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW
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About MDAA

MDAA is the peak advocacy body in New South Wales (NSW) for people from non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability, their families and carers. It is the *only* advocacy service in NSW available specifically to people from NESB with disability, their families and carers.

Our aim is to promote, protect and secure the rights of people from NESB with disability, their families and carers in NSW. We work to ensure fair access to services and fair policies in the government and non-government sectors.

We receive funding from Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Department of Human Services (ADHC) and the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to provide advocacy services.

MDAA is also a registered training organisation, providing support to government, non-government and private agencies to increase their cultural competence.

Our Submission

This submission is based on MDAA's experience of providing individual advocacy to people from NESB with disability and specific research into education. In 2008-2009 we provided individual advocacy support to 399 people with all types of disability. Education continues to be one of the top five issues for which advocacy assistance is sought and provided.

In October 2005, MDAA published *All I want is what's best for my child (the School Report).* It documents the experiences of 25 families with students from NESB with disability in NSW schools. Participants lived in both metropolitan and regional areas of NSW (Newcastle, Wollongong and Griffith). It was initiated because of the lack of knowledge about the educational experiences of students from NESB with disability. A summary and the full report are attached as appendices.

Our submission highlighted some of the findings of the School Report as well as a number of additional case studies arise from our recent advocacy work. However, it is important that the Committee considers the full School Report as the issues raised are still current. Please note that all identifying details in these case studies have been modified to preserve individual privacy.

Comments on the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

This submission focuses on Terms of Reference 1, 3, 4 and 6 of the Inquiry.

TOR One: The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability

Low Expectations: Research informing the School Report indicates that despite concerns raised, many parents were simply delighted that their child was at school. A child being given a place at school is seen by many as an achievement in itself, with many families not focusing on or expecting any substantial educational gains. Approximately forty percent of those interviewed were happy with the situation and reported that they had no significant problems. However, sixty percent of the parents interviewed, raised varying concerns about the quality and adequacy of their children's education.

Future Options: When asked what they believe the future holds for their children leaving school, parents' responses varied depending on the level of support the student required. Parents of students who attended a School for Specific Purpose (SSP) expected nothing more than an increase in the level of their child's independence and hoped that after they completed school some other source of 'respite care' would be available. Some parents of students who attended Support units or mainstream classrooms expressed a desire for their child to participate in further training or employment. Families wanted to maximise their child's capacity in the areas they enjoyed. They either assumed the school would offer suggestions about ways to access further training or did not know what to do.

Khalil's mother did not know what he would do when he left school in a few weeks time but thought the school might tell her what would happen. When asked how she thought he would spend his time she replied that, even though his spina bifida made it difficult, he liked working on the computer and was very good at it. Maybe he could study the computer. (p.47)

For parents of students from NESB with disability, knowing what they can expect from the education system and beyond is critical to the educational and vocational outcomes of their children. There are significant cultural and linguistic barriers in understanding what options are available and what those options mean yet there are no designated support made available to these families. The parents who were happy with their child's schooling did not indicate whether they were aware that there were other education options or whether they had received any assistance to make informed choice about what's best for their child.

Limited Regional Resources: In rural areas, access (or lack of access) to trained staff and resources appears to dictate the choices available. The inability of the education sectors to provide the support needed can result in families relocating to larger urban centres. Families were frustration to having to move and justify such disruptive moves as being the best option available. They did not question the failure of the education sector to provide the resources the student needs to reach their learning capacity.

Alex's mother explained that her son who has very high support needs had been integrated into a mainstream country school. He was the only student who uses a wheelchair and who can't communicate verbally. The school did not have trained staff and ultimately the family moved so he could attend an SSP in a larger town, where there were trained staff and other students who had similar support needs. (p.48)

Funding: Parents interviewed expressed their concern with being required to apply for funding for support services every year for their child. The changing eligibility for funding was also raised. Parents struggle to understand why funding for their child's special education needs is constantly reviewed and, as in Hao's story below, can suddenly change. The criteria used to allocate funds are complicated in all sectors, especially when funds come from a variety of sources including both Commonwealth and State governments.

TOR Three: The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system

Finding the Right School: As indicated on page 50 of the report, a number of parents interviewed reported difficulty finding the right placement for their child. In some cases this was because there were no appropriate facilities in the area where they lived. Often their only educational choice was the local government school, where staff may lack the appropriate training and facilities were not accessible. Their child might be the only child with high support needs in the school and there may not be any staff available to provide for the child's personal care needs let alone their educational needs.

As the case study below highlights, families have difficulty finding a school which can provide the appropriate level of support to their children.

As a 3 year old Robert's family moved to Canberra so he could access an early intervention program recommended for children with Cri-duchat syndrome. The family moved again and Robert's primary schooling was in a Support unit in a NSW north coast Public School but the staff did not have adequate training to meet his high support needs.

When the family moved to Sydney DET suggested a placement in a Support unit. The family did not believe the unit could provide the appropriate support. They believed that the Principal also had doubts about the suitability of the placement. Someone suggested that an SSP would be more appropriate as Robert is non-verbal, immobile and has epilepsy. The family had to persuade DET to offer him a place at an SSP that has a long waiting list, however, with the help of the DET District Office he was offered a place after 6 weeks. Robert's mother believes that because she was educated in Australia and worked in the disability sector she knew what services were available and whom to contact to get what her son needed. (P. 51)

The Waiting Game: Many of the parents interviewed or surveyed for the School Report reported experiencing long periods of exclusion while waiting for an appropriate placement.

Some families who have waited for a diagnosis then have to wait for a place in a suitable school. Some also experience further delays waiting for transport arrangements. Many families from NESB lack the knowledge and confidence to navigate the various eligibility criteria and waiting lists. These periods of waiting can be extremely confusing for families. For those with low levels of English language proficiency, each new piece of correspondence comes with angst and confusion as they have to wait for someone to translate the letters/documents.

Cha initially attended a school for the blind. His family were worried that he was not progressing but didn't know how to alleviate their concerns. Eventually the teachers suggested he be tested and only then was the extent of his intellectual disability realised. With DET assistance an appropriate school placement was found but Cha had to wait for 6 months before he could start. Cha also has physical disability and needs transport to and from school. It was another 6 weeks before the bus could start taking him to and from school. (p.51)

Limited Regional Resources: The following case study highlights the limited options available to students living in regional and rural areas.

Six year old Isabella lives in regional NSW with her parents Alberto and Gabriela who migrated to Australia from Spain 15 years ago. Isabella was diagnosed as having a speech and language disorder when she was four years old. She has difficulty putting words in the right order when she speaks making it difficult for her to be understood by others.

After undergoing an assessment by a community health speech pathologist it was recommended that Isabella commence kindergarten in the language enrichment class at her local primary school. Students in this class are taught by a trained teacher in special education and receive intensive speech therapy daily from kindergarten to year 2.

At the end of last year, Alberto and Gabriela applied to DET for a place for Isabella in the Learning Assistance Program (Language Enrichment Class). Students must apply yearly and be assessed for their eligibility for the Learning Assistance Program. Isabella's parents were verbally informed by DET that they were not accepting any kindergarten enrolments for the Language Enrichment Class as it was viewed that the class would most likely be closed at some stage in 2010. This was due to observations made by DET that children who complete kindergarten to year 2 in language enrichment classes often can not sustain the increased level of language skills that they acquire in those classes once they are placed in a mainstream class in year 3. As a result of this change of direction by DET, Isabella's application was rejected.

Alberto and Gabriela were very disappointed that DET had made a decision which would have a significant impact on their child, without consulting parents; particularly as there are limited options for special school education in rural and regional areas.

DET has offered Isabella 30 minutes support a day from a teacher's aide in a mainstream classroom. This person may or may not be trained in special education or speech therapy. In addition, Isabella's teacher would only be relieved two days per term to create a learning plan specifically for Isabella.

Alberto and Gabriela are not satisfied with this offer as it will severely limit the level of intensive special education that their daughter receives and is likely to increase her disadvantage.

TOR Four: The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms

Support Available: A key theme throughout the report was the difficulty parents had in understanding the education system and the options available to their children. Some families are not given any choice, or offered explanations about the differences between integration in a regular classroom and attending Support units.

Some parents reported having to take the initiative to change classes when their children experienced difficulties and this was extremely difficult when language was a barrier to communication and cultural understanding was lacking on both sides. Parents from NESB often rely on the experiences of other parents as a source of information to guide their own actions.

'Recently the school told me that the funding for Hao's teacher's aide time has been cut for next year. He has a language delay and mild autism but has been doing well so I want him to keep the funding so he continues to do well because after next year he goes to high school. I tried to make an appointment to see the Principal but I couldn't get in to see him. I went home and rang the TIS (telephone interpreter service) and rang the school to speak to the Principal. Through the interpreter I explained why I wanted to speak to him. He said he knew and he couldn't do anything about it. He wouldn't discuss it any more…I don't understand why this is happening and who's going to help him'. (P. 54)

TOR Six: Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physio therapy and school counsellors

Cultural and linguistic Barriers: Parents acknowledged that they often lacked language skills and/or knowledge of the 'system'. They reported experiences of limited support and assistance from the education sector when trying to understand not only their child's disability, but also the NSW education, health and disability systems, in an effort to make the best decisions for their child. They found that officials lacked knowledge and understanding about their cultural background and language needs, and frequently lacked any understanding that many parents are alone when negotiating a system they do not understand. Parents believe that their difficulty with communication means it takes extra time to solve problems and they worry that their child is missing out on a service they desperately need. The high percentage of students from NESB in Support units (32.5% compared with the 26.2% of students from NESB in the total school population)[1] indicates that one of the outcome of the system's inability to deal with the diversity of its target population is that children from NESB with disability are more likely to receive lower quality or more restrictive education.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below are drawn directly from the School Report. Whilst the report was published in 2005, the recommendations still remain relevant for students from NESB with disability and their families. If implemented they will greatly improve the access and quality of outcomes for families and students from NESB with disability in the school system.

Recommendation 1: All education systems appoint community based workers that are trained in cultural competence and disability awareness. Their role would be to coordinate, facilitate and liaise with different service providers, agencies and families from NESB to ensure that services are accessed equitably by students from NESB with disability and their parents.

Recommendations: 2. All education systems provide cultural competence training for **all** staff to ensure that cultural competence is core business in practice and policies, in all schools, classrooms and within curricula.

Recommendations: 3. Funding criteria across all education sectors are consistent for providing support to students with disability and students from NESB. The criteria for access to support services must be based on individual student needs, using assessment tools that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, and must take into account:

- the student's migration/ refugee history;
- the student's English language skills;
- the impact of the disability on the student's learning;
- the student's school results;
- the student's geographical location;
- socio-economic indicators; and
- demographic profiles and trends.

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[1] Note: these figures are based on 2003 enrolments see page 31-39 of 'All want is what's best for my child report' for more information on how these figures were derived.

Recommendation 4: Once a diagnosis is obtained, support funding is ongoing and does not require annual re-application.

Recommendation 5: All policy and procedural documents, school newsletters and correspondence are translated into relevant community languages and made available in print and electronic formats.

Recommendation 6: Interpreters are made available to all schools and families.

Recommendation 7: Both the State and Federal governments provide ongoing funding to ensure adequate training in early identification, diagnosis, service provision and cultural competence for General Practitioners (GPs), specialist service providers, e.g. speech pathologists, trainee teachers and for the professional development of current teachers.

Recommendation 8: Government departments and non-government organisations develop (or continue) memorandums of understanding with each other, whole of government planning groups, professional networks and interagency protocols to ensure equitable access to education and training.

Recommendation 9: Education providers implement advice from organisations that raise specific issues from community groups such as the Parents and Citizens Association and multicultural community organisations.

Recommendation 10: Schools put in place mechanisms to:

- develop effective communication with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds;
- include parents in student review and reappraisal processes;
- deliver professional development that incorporates cultural diversity; the impact of immigration; anti-racism education; managing conflicts; the needs of refugee students; and communication with parents and community members from diverse backgrounds;
- deliver extensive training in disability education for teachers of students with disability integrated into regular classrooms;
- ensure adequate numbers of English as Second Language (ESL) teachers are available to provide language programs in all schools; and
- demonstrate for parents from NESB how policies are implemented and how families and students can comply with these policies.

Recommendation 11: Post school options are communicated to and discussed with students and parents before their final term at school. This information must be provided in relevant languages, and opportunities made available for parents and students to ask questions.

“All I want is what’s best for my child.”

SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH REPORT ON THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS FROM A NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND WITH DISABILITY IN THE NSW SCHOOL SYSTEM

MDAA

Huyen is in Year 2 at her local school. She has an intellectual disability and receives integration funding to support her enrolment in a regular classroom. Her mother believes she needs more support than the teacher can provide and wants her to attend a Support Class at a school in a nearby suburb. She has requested the move at two parent interviews: nine months later nothing has happened. Huyen's mother doesn't know why she has not been moved and worries that she is falling further behind, has no friends and is very unhappy.

"All I want is what's best for my child."

Key Issues:

- Ensuring early diagnosis of disability and access to early intervention programs for students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability and their parents.
- Ensuring co-ordination and communication between different service sectors, such as health, education and disability is facilitated and accessible to all students from a NESB with disability and their parents.
- Ensuring that all families from a NESB are aware of the educational choices available for their child with disability.
- Ensuring clear, informative communication between the school system and parents from a NESB.
- Ensuring the development of good educational practice, including effective implementation of multicultural perspectives across the curriculum of all classes, including support classes, SSP and for students with disability in regular classrooms.
- Ensuring education is provided in a culturally competent way.
- Ensuring that waiting lists for support classes, Schools for Special Purposes (SSP) and support services for students with disability integrated into regular classrooms are reduced and managed equitably and transparently.
- Ensuring policies and procedures are accessible to parents from a NESB.
- Ensuring parents from a NESB who wish to change current arrangements for their child's education are aware of and able to participate in the student review and reappraisal process that the school has in place.
- Ensuring equitable distribution of funding for all students with disability, including students from a NESB with disability.

Ensuring that the options available to students after completing their school education are effectively communicated to parents and students from a NESB.

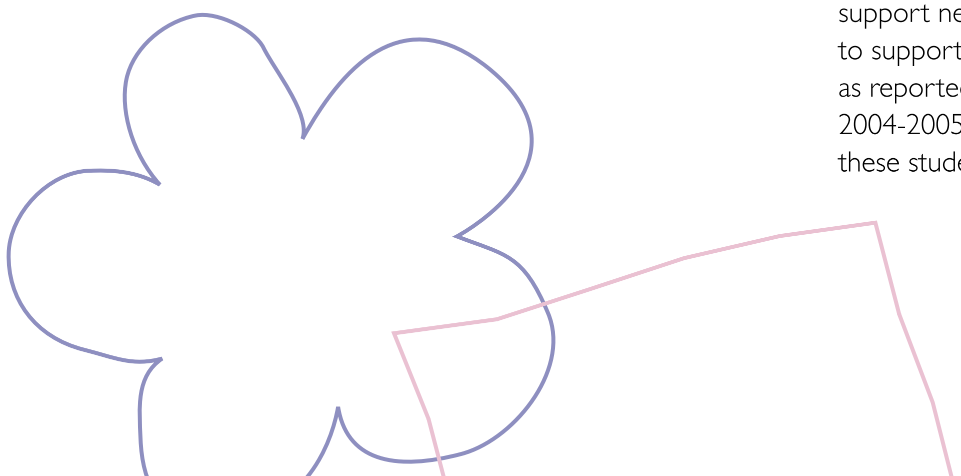
For all key issues and recommendations, a full report is available at www.mdaa.org.au

"Recently the school told me that the funding for Hao's teacher's aide time has been cut for next year. He has a language delay and mild autism but has been doing well so I want him to keep the funding so he continues to do well because after next year he goes to high school. I tried to make an appointment to see the Principal but I couldn't get in to see him. I went home and rang the TIS (telephone interpreter service) and rang the school to speak to the Principal. Through the interpreter I explained why I wanted to speak to him. He said he knew and he couldn't do anything about it. He wouldn't discuss it any more...

I don't understand why this is happening and who's going to help him."

Key recommendations:

1. All education systems appoint community based workers who:
    - Are trained in cultural competence.
    - Are trained in disability awareness.
    - Are trained in communication skills and conflict resolution.
    - Are based in local schools.
    - Know about the health, education, community and government services sectors and how these link.
    - Coordinate, facilitate and liaise with different service providers, agencies and families from a NESB to ensure that services are accessed equitably by students from a NESB with disability and their parents.
    - Facilitate links between local communities and school.
    - Develop ongoing relationships with students and their families as a source of information and support.
    - Participate in all information sessions for the school community.
2. All education systems provide cultural competence training for all staff to ensure that cultural competence is core business in practices and policies, in all schools, classrooms and within curriculum.
3. Funding criteria across all education systems are consistent for providing support to students with disability and students from a NESB. The criteria for access to support services must be based on individual student needs and take into account the student's migration/ refugee history, English language skills, impact of the disability on their learning, their school results, geographical location, socio-economic indicators, demographic profiles and trends, using assessment tools that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.



Some facts:

- 41.3% of people in NSW were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas.
- 24.3% of people in NSW speak one of 144 languages other than English at home.
- 16.6% of young people in NSW between the ages of 5-17 years speak a language other than English at home.
- Over 26% of all students enrolled in DET schools in 2004 were from a NESB.
- Over 16,000 students with disability (2.1% of the total DET enrolment) in 2004 were enrolled in Support classes or Schools for Special Purposes, and over 26% of these students were from a NESB.
- Over 16,000 students with disability or learning support needs were receiving integration funding to support their enrolment in regular classrooms, as reported in the DET Disability Action Plan 2004-2005. It is not known what percentage of these students are from a NESB.

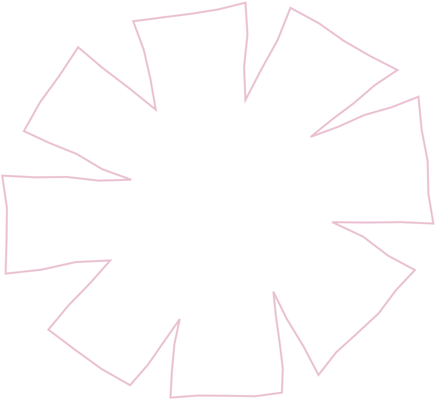
What you can do:

- Celebrate important cultural days and festivals at school - invite parents and members of local communities to bring food to share - have fun.
- Take part in cultural competence and disability awareness training.
- Identify student language and learning needs as early as possible by communicating with early childhood centres, pre-schools and child health service providers.
- Appoint a school staff member to coordinate student access to all available support and services and to explain to parents any changes to policy and funding criteria.
- Ensure that families from a NESB are aware of all enrolment options when they are deciding where their child with disability will attend school.
- Find a way to HEAR parents from a NESB who come to ask questions or raise concerns.
- Use telephone interpreter services.
- Translate information into relevant community languages.
- Use community based workers wherever they are available or create networks within your local community to help distribute information and assist communication between the school and families from a NESB.

About MDAA

The Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW (MDAA) is the peak body in NSW for people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability and their families and carers.

MDAA is the only advocacy service available in NSW specifically for people from a NESB with disability, their families and carers.



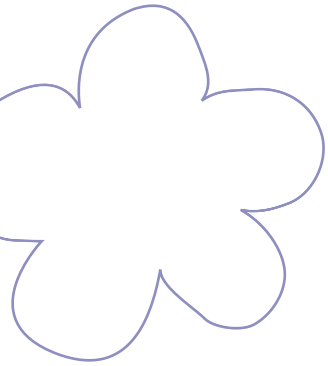
Our mission

MDAA aims to promote, protect and secure the rights and interests of people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers in NSW.

Our objectives

MDAA is working towards:

- Promoting, protecting and advocating for the rights of people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers in NSW.
- Access & Equity for people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers in NSW in the government and non-government sector.
- Improving the quality of life for people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers.
- Increasing the participation of people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers in community activities.



Our services

MDAA has four main services:

- Individual Advocacy
- Systemic Advocacy
- Advocacy Development
- Industry Development

How to Contact Us:

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"All I want is what's best for my child."

SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH REPORT ON THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF STUDENTS FROM A NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND WITH DISABILITY IN THE NSW SCHOOL SYSTEM

MDAA

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Acknowledgments

MDAA would like to thank all those who made this research possible, especially our consumers and their families; our members; and members of the Sunlight Children Disability Support Group for Parents. This report is based on the comments, ideas and experiences of the parents of twenty-five students who participated in this project and so generously shared their stories and time.

Thank you also to the staff of the Vietnamese Women's Association and the Individual Advocates and staff of MDAA, who facilitated the meetings and discussions with consumers and members.

MDAA is grateful to those who provided comments and suggestions on the interim report, including:

- Timothy Hart, Disability Coordination Officer, Northern Central and Southern Sydney. Hosted at University of Sydney, Faculty of Medicine, The Centre for Developmental Disability Studies
- Sally Robinson, Disability Studies and Research Institute
- Athena Kandris, Cultural Diversity Trainer, Royal North Shore Hospital and Community Health Services
- Belinda Epstein-Frisch, Institute of Family Advocacy and Leadership Development
- Staff from the Disability Programs and Multicultural Programs, Department of Education and Training
- Amanda Calwell-Smith, member Disability Community Consultative Committee

MDAA also gratefully acknowledges the support of the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

Summary

This project aimed to investigate the experiences of students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability in New South Wales (NSW) schools. It was initiated because there is a lack of knowledge about the educational experiences of students from a NESB with disability. There is no research available or systematic identification of issues specific to these students.

Parents of children from a NESB with disability associated with the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW (MDAA) were asked questions about their experiences of having a child with a disability in the NSW school system. Despite concerns raised, it was apparent from our discussions that many parents are simply delighted that their child is at school. A child being given a place at school is seen by many as an achievement in itself, with many families not focusing on or expecting any substantial educational gains. Approximately forty percent of those interviewed were happy with the situation and reported that they had no significant problems. The majority, however, sixty percent of the parents interviewed, raised concerns. While many of these concerns are common to the experience of all students with disability regardless of ethnicity, it is the apparent inability of individuals within the system and the system itself, to deal with the cultural and linguistic diversity of students, which makes the experiences of parents from a NESB and their children with disability unique.

The issues raised range from difficulties receiving information, lack of awareness about cultural and religious needs related to appropriate dress and food, to long periods of exclusion while waiting for an appropriate placement. For a number of parents, getting access to information and school staff proved difficult. Others are concerned about the type of education being offered and the effect it will have on their child's future employment options. Many were concerned about schools focusing on limiting the problems and challenges the students presented to the school rather than on improving the educational capacity of students. There was a difference in the type of problems reported, depending on whether a student had high or low support needs. Families of students with high support needs reported that students were generally happy at school and most of their concerns related to waiting for a place in a School for Specific Purposes (SSP) or accessing support services such as transport. Some children with lower support needs had experienced bullying and exclusion from the mainstream school community.

Parents acknowledged that they often lack language skills and/or knowledge of the system. They reported experiences of limited support and assistance from the education sector when trying to understand not only their child's disability, but also the NSW education, health and disability systems, in an effort to make the best decisions for their child. They found that officials lacked knowledge and understanding about their cultural background and language needs, and frequently lacked any understanding that many parents are alone when negotiating a system they do not understand.

MDAA acknowledges that all providers in the education sector attempt to do the best for all their students and have put in place a range of programs to support students with disability and to support students from a NESB. However students who require support for their disability **and** their cultural and linguistic diversity frequently experience problems accessing one form of support, let alone both.

While a failure in communication may account for some of the problems, parents from a NESB need assistance to know when, how or where to access support. It is reasonable for these families to expect teachers and education administrators to be adequately trained in disability and cultural competence to assist them. Education providers must put in place procedures to ensure that there are no barriers stopping students from a NESB with disability and their families from getting access to the programs and support services they need.

With the implementation of the *Disability Standards for Education* in August 2005, education providers are now under a positive obligation to make changes reasonably necessary to accommodate the needs of all students with disability, including students from a NESB, and to put in place strategies and programs to prevent harassment and victimisation of students with disability and their associates.

The issues identified by interviewees are:

- Ensuring early diagnosis of disability and access to early intervention programs for students from a NESB with disability and their parents.

- Ensuring the co-ordination and communication between different service sectors, such as health, education and disability is facilitated and made accessible to all students from a NESB with disability and their parents.
- Ensuring that all families from a NESB are aware of the educational choices available for their child with disability.
- Ensuring clear and informative communication occurs between the school system and parents from a NESB.
- Ensuring the development of good educational practice, including the effective implementation of multicultural perspectives across the curriculum of all classes, including Support classes, SSP and for students with disability in regular classrooms.
- Ensuring that education is provided in a culturally competent way.
- Ensuring that waiting lists are reduced and are managed equitably and transparently for Support classes, SSP and support services for students with disability integrated into regular classrooms.
- Ensuring policies and procedures are accessible to parents from a NESB.
- Ensuring parents from a NESB who wish to change current arrangements for their child's education are aware of and able to participate in the student review and reappraisal process that the school has in place.
- Ensuring equitable distribution of funding for all students with disability, including students from a NESB with disability.
- Ensuring that the options available to students after completing their school education are effectively communicated to parents and students from a NESB.

Recommendations

These recommendations were developed after considering the responses from a range of relevant education and service providers to whom MDAA had distributed an interim report. We have sought to make recommendations that will assist in resolving the main issues identified by our interviewees.

MDAA recommends that:

1. All education systems appoint community based workers who:

- are trained in cultural competence;
- are trained in disability awareness;
- are trained in communication skills and conflict resolution;
- are based in local schools;
- know about the health, education, community and government services sectors and how these link;
- coordinate, facilitate and liaise with different service providers, agencies and families from a NESB to ensure that services are accessed equitably by students from a NESB with disability and their parents;
- facilitate links between local communities and school;
- develop ongoing relationships with students and their families as a source of information and support; and
- participate in all information sessions for the school community.

2. All education systems provide cultural competence training for **all** staff to ensure that cultural competence is core business in practice and policies, in all schools, classrooms and within curricula.

3. Funding criteria across all education sectors are consistent for providing support to students with disability and students from a NESB. The criteria for access to support services must be based on individual student needs, using assessment tools that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, and must take into account:

- the student's migration/ refugee history;
- the student's English language skills;

- the impact of the disability on the student's learning;
- the student's school results;
- the student's geographical location;
- socio-economic indicators; and
- demographic profiles and trends.

4. Once a diagnosis is obtained, support funding is ongoing and does not require annual re-application.

5. All policy and procedural documents, school newsletters and correspondence are translated into relevant community languages and made available in print and electronic formats. (Over 144 different languages are spoken in NSW homes – *Community Relations Commission for a multicultural Australia 2002*)

6. Interpreters are made available to all schools and families.

7. Both the State and Federal governments provide ongoing funding to ensure adequate training in early identification, diagnosis, service provision and cultural competence for General Practitioners (GPs), specialist service providers, e.g. speech pathologists, trainee teachers and for the professional development of current teachers.

8. Government departments and non-government organisations develop (or continue) memorandums of understanding with each other, whole of government planning groups, professional networks and interagency protocols to ensure equitable access to education and training.

9. Education providers implement advice from organisations that raise specific issues from community groups such as the Parents and Citizens Association and the NSW Ethnic Communities Council.

10. Schools put in place mechanisms to:

- develop effective communication with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds;
- include parents in student review and reappraisal processes;
- deliver professional development that incorporates cultural diversity; the impact of immigration; anti-racism education; managing conflicts;

the needs of refugee students; and communication with parents and community members from diverse backgrounds;

- deliver extensive training in disability education for teachers of students with disability integrated into regular classrooms;
- ensure adequate numbers of English as Second Language (ESL) teachers are available to provide language programs in all schools; and
- demonstrate for parents from a NESB how policies are implemented and how families and students can comply with these policies.

11. Post school options are communicated to and discussed with students and parents before their final term at school. This information must be provided in relevant languages, and opportunities made available for parents and students to ask questions.

Overview

MDAA is the only advocacy organisation available specifically to people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability, their families and carers in NSW. People from a NESB with disability make up about 5% of the total population of NSW, or about 25% of all people with disability [334,350 (*Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004*)]. MDAA aims to promote, secure and protect the rights and interests of people from a NESB with disability and those of their families, through individual advocacy, advocacy development, industry and community networking, research and systemic advocacy work.

MDAA believes that:

- all institutions must acknowledge, reflect and respond to the multicultural and multilingual diversity of Australia;
- all people from a NESB with disability and their families are entitled to the opportunity to participate fully and be included in society and in the decisions which directly affect them;
- all people from a NESB with disability and their families are entitled to enjoy equal opportunities and have equitable access to, and an equitable share of, resources;
- all people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers are entitled to the support required to achieve their maximum potential as members of the community;
- all people from a NESB with disability and their families and carers are entitled to be valued, respected and portrayed in positive ways; and
- all relevant programs and services must be tailored according to the person's needs and goals in a way that results in the least restriction of the person's rights and opportunities. (*MDAA Constitution, 2001*)

MDAA undertook this project to gain information about the experiences of school age children from a NESB with disability. The project focuses on the experiences of these students and their families in the NSW school system. The findings have been used to compile this report and formed the basis of our submission to the Department of Education and Training's public review, '*The Futures Project – Excellence and Innovation: Consultation with the community of New South Wales on public education and training*'.

The impetus for this project grew from MDAA's individual advocacy work. Our work identifies that people from a NESB with disability and their families often experience marginalisation, exclusion, neglect, exploitation and abuse due to systemic barriers created by cultural incompetence. This is also true for the education systems. Many families are grateful that their child is at school and this is seen as the most important achievement, an end in itself. The family's focus is not necessarily on the type or quality of education gained but on their child being included in the system. MDAA believes that being included is, in itself, not enough. We decided, based on our individual advocacy work and the lack of other more systemic research available, that it was time for us to ask parents about their experiences in a more structured way.

We recommend that readers familiar with the background and history of the education and community service sectors in NSW skip the sections covering these areas (pp. 15 – 26) and start at the section on '*The Future Direction of Education in NSW*'.

Aim of the project

In June 2001 Professor Tony Vinson as Chair of the NSW Public Education Inquiry called for submissions from all stakeholders about the state of public education in New South Wales. MDAA considered responding but felt restricted by time and a lack of solid information about what happens to students from a NESB with disability in the education system. At the time there was only anecdotal evidence available to suggest that students from a NESB with disability and their families experienced additional barriers in the NSW education system.

MDAA decided we needed to document the broader experiences of these students and their families and in July 2004 we initiated this project. In late 2004 the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) set up a public review, *'The Futures Project – Excellence and Innovation: Consultation with the community of New South Wales on public education and training'*. That review served as a timely platform for MDAA to submit our findings to DET and place them on the agenda for discussion and consideration as DET plans the future direction of public education.

The key issues identified and the questions they raise are the basis of this report. MDAA distributed an interim version of this report for comment to associated peak bodies and stakeholders, including DET, the NSW Catholic Education Commission and the NSW Association of Independent schools. We have incorporated their feedback in this final report, which will be distributed to the key stakeholders, policy makers and relevant organisations.

Background

History of education for students with disability in NSW

As part of their submission to the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education in 2001, the Institute for Family Advocacy and Leadership Development outlined the history of education for students with disability in NSW (*'So near and yet so far', 2001*). In summary, it was not until the 1980s that government, rather than parent groups or voluntary organisations, took any significant responsibility for the education of students with disabilities in NSW.

The establishment of Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) provided the first opportunity for children with disability to receive government funded education. These schools separated children from their peers of the same age in their local community to be grouped together with a wide age range, from a wide geographical area with their only connection being that they had the label of disability.

As education theory evolved, there was a realisation that special education facilities needed to resemble the regular classroom. The concept of the support unit or class developed. Classrooms for students with disability were placed in the grounds of regular schools. While they shared facilities such as the canteen, it was common to find that these classrooms were in a fenced off area within the larger school grounds. In their report, Family Advocacy described this as a '…serious form of segregation and congregation of students with disability. The devalued students are visible to the rest of the school community without any viable way of forming real relationships' (*'So near and yet so far', 2001* p. 6).

As 'integration' has become more popular, some students with mild intellectual disability or low support needs are judged as being able to access the main curriculum with limited support, and are invited to join regular classrooms.

Integration represents a positive move away from segregation: it is about assisting some students to fit into the regular classroom. Under the DET Integration Program children have the right to be enrolled in their local government school regardless of disability, so long as they can access the main curriculum. When the student is required to fit into the system rather than the system adapting to meet student needs (as any 'for profit' system would, in theory, fit around the needs of its customers so that the business can meet the customers’ needs and make its profit) then, at best, only students with mild disability will ever be considered suitable for integration. Equally, in such a ‘best fit’ model, being culturally different from the ‘mainstream’ will create another barrier, especially if students from a NESB with disability have limited English language skills.

Inclusive Education

The call for inclusive education is based on the principle that all children, irrespective of their ability, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. should be part of the regular school system which must fit the needs of the individual.

An inclusive education system would make a significant difference to the lives of people with disability and their families. Currently, students with disability are frequently taken by bus to Support classes and special schools (Schools for Specific Purposes – SSP) away from their local community. When children attend these segregated schools they are often with other children of various ages and disabilities and their only common link is their disability. They do not have the opportunity to form social networks and relationships with children their own age or who live locally. This segregation can complicate the lives of families, particularly when siblings go to the local school and the child with a disability attends another school some distance away. It can create a nightmare for families coping with child-care, transport and other day-to-day logistics related to family life. Children who spend their school days away from their family and community do not develop local connections and links and are more likely to lose what little security and safety local communities offer. This can be a significant loss as many of these children already struggle to make friends, are already more isolated and marginalised and experience far greater levels of abuse and violence.

MDAA sees an inclusive education system, one that accepts the enrolment of all students into the regular class at the local school, with appropriate support, as the fundamental step towards an inclusive society. For example, Arthur Phillip High School (located at Parramatta) describes itself as having a diverse school population with more than 80% of students coming from a NESB, representing over 40 different cultures. They promote the school as ’proud of its strong multicultural tradition and the values students learn about tolerance of diversity.’ (*Arthur Phillip High School website*).

In '*One of the kids; educating children with and without disabilities together in the same classes and schools*', Wendy Stroeve discusses how the broader community gains 'tolerance of diversity' when children with disabilities are included in regular classrooms. MDAA agrees and believes inclusive education gives '…the wider community the opportunity to discover that many of the long held beliefs about people with disability are wrong. The idea that people with disability cannot learn, are disruptive in regular classrooms, time consuming for teachers and will never hold a job, are common and will not change until people experience daily, ordinary activities with people with disability in their local community, school or workplace' (*Stroeve, 1998*, pp. 23-25). A truly inclusive education system is one that would promote the values extolled by both Stroeve and Arthur Phillip High School.

Cultural competence and social cohesiveness

A number of authors have concluded that the processes involved in cultural competence - introspection, self-awareness, respectful questioning, attentive listening, curiosity, interest, and caring - are skills required in a range of human services (*Harris 2004*). In a recent review of international and Australian literature on cultural competence, Harris suggests that the shift to culturally competent practice should be easy, as all that is needed is greater understanding of the influence of culture and greater confidence and comfort in working with people from different cultural backgrounds. Harris suggests that while competence is usually about mastering a skill, when added to the broad and ever changing definitions of culture, it becomes an evolutionary practice based on continued learning and deepening understanding. It is critical for our understanding of the education system to be clear that cultural competence ought to occur at a number of levels involving individuals, programs, organisations and systems. Our primary concern in this research is about the cultural competence of the education system as a system, however, we also argue that cultural competence must play a greater role in teacher training.

MDAA promotes cultural competence across the human services sector. We work with ethnic communities to advance their knowledge about people with disability. We have researched and published works on a wide variety of issues, including attitudes towards disability within different ethnic communities (see *Ethnicity and Disability Fact book: Advancing Cultural Competence, 2000*; and *Opening Doors, 2004*). All our work indicates that within and across different ethnic communities attitudes range from being protective and loving towards a family member with disability to stigmatising, isolating and punishing people with disability.

An education system that is culturally competent needs NOT to make assumptions about people and NOT to label people according to some preconceived ideas about country of origin, ethnicity, gender or class.

We encourage the education system to embrace fully DET's mission, that schools '…support students in striving for academic success by focusing on individual learning needs and cater for students from all backgrounds and draw strength from the rich cultural diversity of communities in New South Wales' (*Our Vision, NSW Public Schools Strategic Direction 2002 – 2004*).

Because MDAA holds inclusiveness as one of its core principles, we would like to encourage education providers to offer experiences of 'inclusiveness' to all involved in the system - educators, students, families and the community at large, as a path to a cohesive wider community.

NSW Education Sector

There are three providers operating education systems in NSW. The NSW Government's Department of Education and Training (DET) enrols approximately 70% of all school students, while the various NSW Catholic dioceses and Independent schools enrol approximately 20% and 10% respectively (*Independent Schools Council of Australia 2004*).

The NSW Board of Studies was established in 1990 to serve government and non-government schools in developing school education for Years K-12. It provides educational leadership by developing curricula and awarding secondary school credentials, the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate. DET and all non-government schools in NSW must be registered and accredited by the Board of Studies to teach students and be able to enter them for the Board's external exams. As part of the registration and accreditation process all schools must produce policies and procedures that demonstrate how they comply with the *Education Act 1990* (the Act). The focus of the Board's registration and accreditation process is not only on the curriculum and its delivery but also on evidence of the provision of good corporate governance; qualified teaching staff; and broad, inclusive student welfare programs; as well as using Board of Studies syllabuses; and, where required, operating the appropriate boarding facilities. As well, schools must participate in annual, public reporting against core educational and financial measures (*Board of Studies 2004*).

Education Policy

Government Sector

DET states that the '…values in NSW Public Schools include respect, care, cooperation, fairness and democracy'. The key priorities of public schools relevant to this project include the commitment '…to provide children and young people with the foundations for lifelong learning so that they become literate, numerate, well-educated citizens with the capabilities and confidence to make a positive contribution to our society. Public schools deliver a curriculum that meets students' needs and aspirations, is relevant to today's world and is responsive to community expectations' (*NSW DET 2004*).

Non-Government Sector

When the Board of Studies considers the evidence of compliance provided by a non-government school for registration and accreditation it recognises that these schools vary in philosophy, ethos and practice. The Board ensures that the requirements of the Act are met but accepts that the policies and procedures a school has in place will vary and the content will reflect the context and philosophy of the school. Added to this is the reality that some systems have their own education structure that can make the unravelling of school and system documentation a challenge.

Catholic Schools

There are eleven dioceses in the NSW Catholic education sector. Each diocese develops its own values and mission statements in response to the National Catholic Education Commission. Of the Commission's Terms of Reference, its directive most relevant to the aims of this project states, '…the Church has and must be seen to have a deep and systematic concern for the quality of education available to all Australians. It shall maintain the Church's traditional special regard for the spiritually, culturally, physically, and financially disadvantaged or deprived' (*Terms of Reference, National Catholic Education Commission 2004*). This is reflected at individual diocesan level by statements such as '…working with those who experience disadvantage: rejoicing in our cultural diversity' (*Catholic Education Office Sydney 2000*); and 'Schools have a clear commitment to making principles of justice central to policies and practice where the lived experiences of school communities and the common good are affirmed and the world around calls us to action on behalf of the poor and marginalised' (*CEO Parramatta 2001*).

Independent schools

Some Independent schools operate within a common framework such as religious affiliation (eg, Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation; Australian Association of Christian Schools; Islamic Council of NSW) or educational principles (eg, Montessori schools). Regardless of whether these alliances offer operational guidelines, the schools have to develop policies and procedures to gain registration. Most are available to the public as part of the marketing material each school uses.

They include statements such as 'Our vision is for Rissalah College to be the provider of the best, comprehensive education program…linked with a strong Islamic school spirit for all who attend the school. Hence our mission is to be an active member of the community, committed to providing a supportive environment in which all members will attain their full potential through the provision of appropriate teaching and learning opportunities. The school will work in harmony with parents and the community to produce students who are able to function within a changing society…Through class programs in Human Society and its Environment and Personal Development, students explore and discuss issues of prejudice, ethnic pride and respect…Being an example of an Islamic educational option' (*Rissalah College 2002*). Arkana College '…aspires to add positively to the cultural diversity of Multicultural Australia and prepare students for effective participation, as Australian Muslims, in community life' (*Arkana College 2002*).

Another school declares 'Barker College provides education within a caring, ordered Christian family environment…where each member of the College community is affirmed, valued and challenged;…where students and staff are encouraged to strive for excellence in all areas of endeavour to the best of their ability…' (*Barker College 2003*).

Programs available to support students with disability

Our understanding of the support programs available in NSW, based on publications and website information, is as follows.

Government Schools

In its Disability Action Plan 2004–2006 DET reports spending over $72 million in 2003 to integrate 16,000 students into regular classrooms. This assistance could be:

- learning programs developed by teaching staff;
- mobility;
- personal care;
- safety;
- health care procedures;
- liaison between the school and its community;
- special provisions, such as a 'reader' or 'writer' for an examination;
- itinerant support teachers for hearing and vision impaired students;
- Braille and large print services;
- building modifications;
- transport;
- resource support unit;
- supportive adaptive technology; and
- a complaints procedure.

(*DET Disability Programs, 2004*).

DET also provides Schools for Specific Purposes that '…cater for students with disabilities for whom regular schools are not the preferred option' and Support classes '…established within regular schools for students with a common need' (*Disability Action Plan 2004* p. 13).

Non-government schools

After extensive consultation and development the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* were introduced on 18 August 2005. They establish national standards in education for people with disability which now apply to government and non-government schools (see p. 29 below for details). While these standards were not the focus of this project it is worth noting that parents are taxpayers and irrespective of which school they choose for their child, the child has a right to equitable access to education services that help maximise their learning potential. Standards and the funding to implement them should apply to both government and non-government schools. Parents have the freedom to choose the school their child attends and they have the right to expect that the school will provide the education services their child needs.

There are claims that "…students with higher support needs are moving out of non-government schools. There are different eligibility criteria; different range of options available between sectors and states…Students exit non-government schools because of a lack of resources in private systems or a lack of options; pressure on parents for their child with additional needs to conform to school expectations encourages them to change systems. Some Government schools are becoming schools for the 'disadvantaged'" (*Australian Association of Special Education 2003*).

Catholic Schools

Catholic schools offer mostly mainstream class enrolment, with support, for children with disabilities. Integration funding is provided according to the child's particular needs and upon application to the Commonwealth Strategic Assistance Program or the Students with Disability in Regular Classrooms Support Funding.

In the major metropolitan areas schools might have part time or full time special education teachers. These teachers provide individualised assistance to children with special needs both in small groups, away from their classrooms and through helping the class teacher to adjust programs to meet the student's needs.

There is also a very small number of independent Catholic Special Schools, most of which have at least informal links with the Catholic Education Offices which administer the parish (systemic) schools. These schools cater mostly for children with either a visual or hearing impairment (with or without additional disability). One is for children with mild to moderate intellectual disability and another for children who are 'emotionally disturbed'. Catholic Special Schools generally run independently. Enrolment of children with disabilities into the Catholic system is primarily through the schools themselves with the support of the Special Education Officer within each diocese. The distribution of staffing resources, especially lacking in rural areas, reflects the availability of trained staff and individual school recruitment policies rather than the failure of a centralised staffing and resource allocation policy based on equity and need.

Independent schools

The provisions made for children with disability in mainstream Independent schools vary widely, but all are eligible to apply for Commonwealth integration funding to assist the enrolment of students with special needs. There are a number of independent Special Schools, including two Steiner schools catering for children with special needs, and others run by non-government disability organisations and foundations, for example, the Autistic Association; and the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children. The range of disability catered for across these schools includes autism; sensory disability (hearing/ visual impairments); intellectual disability; emotional disturbance/ behaviour disorders and multiple disability. Enrolment is through direct contact with the school.

It is difficult to establish exactly which Independent schools are willing to provide for students with disability. Buried in some of the values and mission documents of Independent schools are statements that begin to explain some of the experiences reported by the interviewees. 'However, it is of the utmost importance to us that each student is able to gain maximum benefit from the programs we offer, and it may simply be the case that the programs at (Barker College 2003) do not suit your child'. Similar statements are found in a number of school prospectus documents. These schools are clearly advising families that they will not differentiate their curricula to meet the needs of individual students. In these schools students are expected to match the program. There is an implied selection criterion and it is likely to exclude a range of students, including students with disability.

Programs available to support students from a NESB

Similarly, both the DET and Catholic education systems provide services to support the learning of students from a NESB. These include Intensive English or New Arrival programs for students who come to Australia with little or no English. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs provide students from a NESB with ongoing individual or small group instruction. DET has a number of advisory groups such as the Advisory Group on Multicultural Education and Training or, as in 2003, the ESL in Schools Advisory Group. In addition, through its 'Ethnic Affairs Priorities Statement' (EAPS) DET reports annually to the NSW Parliament on its performance in this area. The EAPS provides a framework through which the needs of students from a NESB are identified and strategic developments within the system are planned.

An example of this is the Priority Action Schools Program developed to support schools in communities with 'deep needs'. 'Deep needs' include socio-economic disadvantage; low student education outcomes; poor student behaviour and attendance; high staff turnover; and fragmented interagency and community support. While 'deep need' is not always associated with a NESB or disability, most of the schools involved have significant NESB populations.

DET provides access to free interpreter services to parents and places a wide range of policies on its website, with a majority translated into a variety of languages. These provisions for students from a NESB are also available to various degrees through the Catholic education offices across the state. Available information suggests that the Independent school sector provides similar services to students and families from a NESB. The level and type of service varies from school to school, with some running bi-lingual programs and others making no reference at all to the level of language support they offer to students from a NESB or their families.

As discussed above, some Independent schools use entry tests in the selection process. Unless the test is monitored for cultural bias, or is offered in the home language of all applicants and modified to meet ability levels, these tests are an effective way for schools to exclude students who may not

’benefit’ from their programs. It greatly reduces the probability of a child with poor language skills and disability being selected for that school.

The Future Direction of Education in NSW

Many issues were highlighted in Tony Vinson's *'Public Education Inquiry 2002'*. The final Vinson report made 86 recommendations explicitly framed as a ten-year plan. The report recognised the fundamental strengths of the system while offering a way to restore public education to the standard the government and public expect.

A number of recommendations have been taken up or are under consideration by DET. Others are yet to be addressed. The most significant recommendation made in MDAA's area of concern was the inclusion of students with disability in regular classrooms, with extra funding and resources to facilitate the changes required to achieve this. Other recommendations that would impact on students from a NESB with disability include reduction in class sizes; developing a range of responses to disruptive behaviour; employing mental health liaison officers; greater preparation time and funding for professional development of teachers in standard classes that integrate students with disability; streamlining the procedures for applying for integration funding; a professional incentive scheme to attract experienced, able and local teachers to disadvantaged and remote rural schools; mentor support for beginner teachers; and monitoring and reviewing building and refurbishing programs. These recommendations to improve the quality of education in NSW would benefit all students including those from a NESB with disability.

The 2003 report, *'Knowing Makes a Difference: Learning from the NSW Priority Action Schools Program'* (*PASP 2003*) was designed to support a number of NSW schools in communities with 'deep needs'. The recommendations were that funding should continue; a team of senior officers should manage the program; and programs offering local solutions to local problems should continue to be conceptualised, managed and evaluated. The report also proposed that DET implement procedures establishing differential and flexible staffing for schools meeting the PASP criteria and procedures that foster stability in staffing for schools in communities with 'deep needs'. It proposed that program managers ensure that the learnings of PASP schools are shared with like schools and focus on changing pedagogies (teaching methods) and student engagement (strategies to keep students interested and learning) to improve student learning outcomes; that staff mentoring is a core component; and that staff in PASP schools participate in interagency and community development forums to familiarise themselves with the initiatives available to support families and young people in communities with 'deep needs'.

In a submission to the Productivity Commission's '*Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992*' the Communication Project Group (*CPG submission 2004*) observed that '…the mainstreaming of children into the regular school system is seen as financially beneficial to the overall education system as well as socially and educationally beneficial to the child with the disability.' For children from a NESB with disability the '…lack of language skills…can be confused with intellectual impairment or degrees of intellectual impairment. The mainstreaming of children with disabilities into regular classrooms where the teachers have no specialist training has resulted in an increase in the number of children whose abilities are being underestimated. Even where a problem is recognised teachers lack the time and skills to provide the extra assistance many of these children need. The result is that at least some children with disabilities who come from non-English speaking backgrounds are failing to reach their potential. In some cases it can even have an impact on the type of schooling the child with a disability receives and the school which the child is able to attend, e.g. the parents may be advised to seek enrolment in one school rather than another or in the private rather than the state system'.

The information quoted above has been available to the education sectors' policy makers and strategic planners since 2001, yet similar concerns were reported to MDAA by interviewees in 2005. This indicates that the many recommendations put forward by these reviews, commissions and programs, have so far not been taken up or implemented to effect the desired changes they all highlighted.

For this report, once we had conducted all interviews, we researched the policies and practices of the three education sectors to gain a better understanding of the context of MDAA consumers' experiences. Our initial inquiries to DET, Catholic and Independent schools for access to policy statements and procedural documents were met either by referring us to the relevant website or by the response that they were unavailable because they were currently being reviewed or updated. A number of the education systems appear to have a five-year cycle of strategic planning. The Sydney Catholic Education Office recently completed an External Review to be used to develop its next strategic management plan and DET currently has *'The Futures Review'* under way to inform its strategic development.

Disability Standards for Education 2005

At the Commonwealth level, the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* came into operation on 18 August 2005 after ten years of development involving extensive consultation with education, training and disability stakeholders and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The standards are formulated under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA), with the main aim of clarifying the obligations of education and training providers under the DDA and the rights of people with disability in relation to education and training.

The standards are intended to give students with disability the same rights as other students, based on the principle that all students should be treated with dignity and enjoy the benefits of education and training in an educationally supportive environment which values the participation of all students. They aim to overcome discrimination based on stereotyped beliefs about the abilities and choices of students with disability.

The standards apply to education and training of people with disability by education providers including the Commonwealth; a State; a Territory; and private sector organisations. They apply to enrolment; participation; curriculum development; accreditation and delivery; student support services; and prevention of harassment and victimisation.

NSW education providers are therefore now required to take the views of students and their associates (e.g. parents, advocates) into account concerning enrolment, participation, curriculum, support services and any reasonable adjustments required to ensure that a student with disability receives an education on the same basis as other students. Students with disability now have a right to participate in education and training unimpeded by discrimination. Education providers are under a positive duty to put in place strategies and programs to prevent harassment and victimisation of students with disability or their associates.

One of the future challenges for education providers will be to provide appropriate information to students and parents from a NESB as they put the standards into practice. Unless parents and students from a NESB with disability are appropriately informed about the existence of the standards it is unlikely that they will have any immediate practical effect in redressing the current difficulties these parents and students experience.

Statistics

Definition of NESB

The Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW (CRC) is the NSW Government's advisory body whose stated objective is leading and facilitating the equal participation of all communities within a harmonious, cohesive and multicultural New South Wales. The CRC's mission is 'through continuous improvement, innovative and efficient management to be the central reference point providing leadership and partnership to the Government, the communities and the private sector enabling maximum benefit from our cultural diversity to all the people of New South Wales' (*CRC Annual Report 2004* p. 2).

The CRC's website has a section on the terminology to be used by NSW government departments in their Ethnic Affairs Priority Statements. This states that the term 'non-English speaking background' is only appropriate when it accurately describes the person or group it refers to. In the education, health and disability sectors NESB refers to:

- the clientele of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs;
- clients who need, or may need, the service of interpreters, bilingual workers, etc;
- a person whose first language is not English, when that is relevant to the issue at hand, for example, when there are communication difficulties.

(*CRC http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/eaps/terminology.htm*).

We believe it is essential to acknowledge the ethnic background of parents, as many students rely heavily on the support provided by their parents. At MDAA we therefore believe it is important to take into account not just the ethnic background of the children, but also the ethnic background of their parents. We have developed a definition that includes both first and second generation people from a NESB. This definition includes a person who was:

- born overseas and whose language or culture is not English or Anglo-Australian;

- born in Australia and who has at least one parent whose first language or culture is not English or Anglo-Australian;
- born in Australia with linguistic or cultural background other than English or Anglo-Australian who wishes to be identified as such.

Definition of Disability

DET defines disability to include students who have intellectual or physical disabilities; hearing or vision impairments; emotional disturbances; or a significant language disability.

The educational needs of students are assessed in the following areas:

Domains	**Focus Areas**
Personal care	Hygiene Eating and dietary procedures Medical procedures Safety
Mobility	Movement Posture
Communication	Expressive communication Receptive communication
Key learning areas	General understanding Academic needs Motor skills
Social skills	Behaviour Participation

As well, students with learning difficulties, language delays or difficulties in behaviour are included in DET statistics on the number of students receiving assistance to support their learning in DET schools (*Students with disabilities in regular classrooms 2000*).

The Figures: what we know

National figures on disability

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Review of the *Disability Discrimination Act* 1992 (*Productivity Commission Inquiry Report on the Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992*) states that over the past decade there have been three noticeable trends in participation in school education by students with disability. The first trend is that the total number of full-time equivalent (FTE) Australian school students identified as having a disability (for government program purposes) almost doubled between 1995 and 2002. The report is unclear about the reasons for this increase but suggests that earlier diagnosis and changes in the range of conditions recognised as a disability may help explain the increase. MDAA considers these factors could account for some of the increase in the number of students being identified as having a disability, but we recognise that the increased incidence of diagnosis also supports the growth of an industry dedicated to applying a label to a child, which in turn gives schools the opportunity to access increased funding.

The second trend identified was the increase in the number of students with disability entering mainstream schools in both the government and non-government sectors while the number enrolled in special schools has remained relatively static. The third trend is that while the majority of students with disability attend mainstream government schools, an increasing number are attending non-government mainstream schools. This movement from government to non-government schools for students with disability, while at a slower rate, reflects the same trend for students without identified disability.

The Report's figures show the type of schools Australian students with disability attend. The majority, 68%, attend a government mainstream school. Another 15% attend a government special school. A further 12.6% attend a Catholic mainstream or special school and 5.4% attend an Independent non-government mainstream or special school.

The Report does not give figures for metropolitan, rural or remote regions. Nor does it attempt to break the figures down by State or Territories. For this project the most significant findings are the three major trends outlined.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics disability data (*ABS 2004*) identifies that **10%** of all children aged **5-14 years** have a disability, with **7.5%** of all children in that age group having some schooling or employment restrictions (*ABS Table 6. All persons disability status by age and living arrangements 2004* pp. 20-21).

NSW figures on ethnicity

CRC statistics show that in 2001, 23.3% of the NSW population was born overseas and that of the 70.6% born in Australia 18% had at least one parent born overseas. Therefore **41.3%** of the NSW population were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas (*CRC, Table 2.5 Generational Components of the Population – NSW: 2001 and 1996 Census*).

Other CRC statistics show that in 2001, **24.35%** (1,534,834) of the NSW population speak one of 144 languages other than English at home (*CRC Table 2.6 Languages Spoken at Home in NSW: 2001 and 1996 Census*).

In NSW there are 1.155 million young people between **5 and 17 years** of age. Of those, **16.6%** (191,886) speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home and **7.5%** were born overseas (*ABS 2001, Population and Housing Census*).

This is consistent with the CRC statistics that in 2001, **15.5%** (913,640) of people who identify themselves as poor or non-English speakers and speak a language other than English at home are aged between **0-12 years** (*CRC Table 2.7 Languages spoken at home by persons who speak English not well or not at all – NSW: 2001 Census*).

Table 1: NESB student full-time enrolments (*DET Annual Report 2004)*

Full time enrolments	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Primary and secondary	176,429	182,884	187,506	191,818	196,651

NSW figures on ethnicity and disability

The DET Disability Action Plan 2004 - 2006 reports that '…the number of students with disabilities, more than 16,000 are enrolled in regular schools and supported by integration funding in excess of $72 million in 2003 (*Disability Action Plan 2004 – 2006* p. 17).

Using MDAA's definition of NESB which includes second generation Australians, people from a NESB with disability make up about **5%** of the total population of NSW, or about **25%** of all people with disability (NSW population = 6,326,579 with **5%** of that total being people from a NESB with disability = 314,335) (*ABS, Disability, Ageing and Carers: 1998*).

As there are no indicators which suggest that the rate of disability among children from a NESB is higher or lower than their ESB counterparts, we can extrapolate that **10%** of all children who speak a language other than English at home (LOTE) have a disability (19,188) and that of all LOTE children **7.5%** (14,395) have some school or employment restrictions (*NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2003, Kids Stats: School and Work*).

Table 2: Total student enrolment in NSW DET schools, SSP and Support units compared with enrolment of students from a NESB in NSW DET schools, SSP and Support units. Mid year 2003

Type of School	Total enrolment	% of total enrolment	No. of NESB students enrolled	% of total enrolment
Primary & Secondary schools	749,880	100%	196,651	26.2%
SSP	3,938	0.5%	974	24.7%
Support classes	12,184	1.6%	3,964	32.5%
SSP & Support classes	16,122	2.1%	4,911	2.5%
% of population enrolled in SSP or Support classes	16,122	100% of SSP and Support class enrolments	4,911	30.4% of SSP and Support class enrolments

Table 2 shows that students from a NESB make up **26.2%** of the total school population while they account for **30.4%** of the school population enrolled in SSP and Support classes.

Funding

Within DET, other programs that support students from a NESB and that could be a source of support for students from a NESB with disability, are reported in the *Ethnic Affairs Priority Statement Report 2003*. For that period the DET budget included:

- $85 million for ESL and New Arrivals programs for school students from a language background other than English;
- $2.7 million for the Community Languages Board, Community Languages Schools Program;
- $806,418 to support Links to Learning program projects aimed at assisting students from a NESB at risk of disengaging from education and training to access and participate in education or accredited training; and
- $3.9 million to support multicultural education strategies in schools including support for anti-racism education, multicultural perspectives to the curriculum and refugee education strategies to support positive community relations and build links with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

This total of over $92 million spent on students from a NESB appears impressive until it is considered against the total DET school budget. It represents approximately **1.4 %** of the total NSW school budget for 2002/2003 which was $6.5 billion for Education Services in Government schools (*NSW DET Annual Report 2003* p. 3).

The Disability Action Plan 2004 – 2006 (*DET 2004* p. 2) states that of the total $7.192 billion NSW education budget 10% ($719 million) was spent on providing support for students with disabilities. Of this $719 million, over $72 million was spent on integrating 16,000 students with disability into regular classrooms. Added to the number of students attending SSP and Support classes, over 32,000 students receive additional support. We already know that in 2003, 4,911 students from a NESB were in SSP or Support classes and this accounts for over **30%** of the enrolments in these special facilities.

The Figures: what we don't know

The trends outlined in the Productivity Commission's Review of the *Disability Discrimination Act* 1992 show that the enrolment of students with disability is increasing in the non-government school sector. MDAA has not, however, been able to gather statistical information on the number of students from a NESB or the number of students with disability enrolled in non-government schools in NSW. The source of that information for the Independent schools, the Association of Independent schools, does not collect statistics on students' ethnic background or disabilities. The NSW Catholic Education Commission collects information on the Catholic sector. They have data on a range of factors and are currently disseminating collection formats across the eleven dioceses to collect data on numbers of students from a NESB, numbers receiving ESL or New Arrivals funding and numbers receiving funding for special needs support. As Table 2 shows, up to **30%** of the students enrolled in NSW schools attend non-government schools and we have very little information about what happens to those who are from a NESB with disability.

Table 3: Enrolment in NSW Schools by sector in 2003 (*Independent Schools Association of Australia 2003*)

Sector	**Numbers**	**Percentage**
Government	751,185	67.9%
Catholic	236,577	21.4%
Independent	120,802	10.7%
Total	1,108,564	100%

Other information that would have benefited this research relates to funding. While we could access information on DET allocating funds and offering programs for students with disability or students from a NESB, it is difficult to establish where those programs intersect and how they are used to meet the needs of students from a NESB with disability.

No figures are available to indicate clearly the percentage of students from a NESB with disability in integrated, regular classrooms. As the DET figures (see *Table 2* above) indicate that students from a NESB make up over **25%** of the total school population, 25% or over 4,000 students of the 16,000+ students receiving integration funding in regular classrooms should be from a NESB (*Disability Action Plan 2004 – 2006* p. 17).

Points to consider

Statistical data published by DET for 2003 show that students from a NESB account for **26.2%** of the total school enrolment. The *Ethnic Affairs Priorities Statement Report 2003* shows increases of 4.35% and 3.22% in the enrolment of students from language backgrounds other than English in the years 2001–2002 and 2002–2003 respectively. These figures are reflected in the DET statistics for full-time enrolment from 1999 to 2003 shown in Table 1. If these increasing enrolment figures continue, we can conclude that students from a language background other than English make up a significant proportion of the student population.

Students from a NESB with disability make up **32.5%** of the total enrolment in Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) and **24.7%** of total enrolment in Support units, or **30.4%** of the total enrolment in SSP and Support classes (Table 2). This means that students from a NESB with disability currently represent approximately a quarter to a third of the students in Support units or SSP, and by inference, a similar percentage of the students with disability or learning difficulties in regular classrooms.

Another viewpoint is that students from a NESB with disability may be over-represented in SSP and Support classes and under-represented in integrated, regular classrooms.

To clarify this issue more detailed research and data collection need to be undertaken.

Either way, this group of students by sheer weight of numbers deserves a strong focus from the education systems. Strategic planning must consider the delivery of services to support them. The services for students with disability and students from a NESB must intersect and be transferable across the diversity of ethnicity and ability.

The Research

Design and implementation

An initial search for references on the subject of students from a NESB with disability found that there is little material available relevant to these students and none in the NSW education system. We realised that we needed to collect information and stories direct from people involved. We intended originally to interview students as well as their parents, however, due to a range of circumstances (see below) we spoke predominantly to parents of children from a NESB with disability. To gather as wide a perspective as possible we intended to interview parents in metropolitan and rural schools with children with various disabilities. The information collected included age; gender; ethnicity; diagnosed type of disability; enrolment in school; type of school attended; what support the family received when making decisions about schooling; level of parental involvement in schools; difficulties experienced and how they were resolved; parents' expectations for their children; and what the students liked and disliked about their school (see *Appendix 2* for survey questions).

We identified possible interviewees in consultation with MDAA's Individual Advocates (IA). The IAs contacted parents by telephone or letter to introduce the project and researcher. Of the 25 participants interviewed, the researcher interviewed 17 parents: 10 face to face and 7 by telephone; a bi-lingual IA interviewed 2 other parents who spoke the same language; 3 students completed the survey in discussion with a regional IA; another 3 surveys returned by mail were completed by students in one family who were assisted by a sibling. Of the 25 participants, 4 lived in regional areas (Newcastle, Wollongong and Griffith) and 21 in Sydney. The students attend State, Catholic and Independent schools (see Appendix 1 for student profile).

As mentioned above we intended initially to interview students as well as their parents. In reality accessing students proved difficult. At the times parents were available for interviews, the students were at school and permission to enter schools for research purposes is a complicated process and was unlikely to be approved in the timeframe of the project. In many situations parents indicated that they were not available outside school hours. In 15 of the interviews the parent said that their child could not 'talk enough' to respond to the questions, suggesting that parents of children who are classified as 'high support needs' are well represented in this research.

When all 25 interviews were completed and all 6 surveys collected, the information was analysed and a number of issues emerged, as discussed below.

Interview methods – impact on the information collected

A significant number of parents we interviewed (40%) were happy with their child's placement in the education system and reported no major issues. When we analysed the interview records it became clear that the common factors within this group were:

- the way they participated in the project;
- their experience before entering the education system; and
- whether their child had high or low support needs.

The majority of respondents who reported being happy completed the written survey form or were interviewed by telephone. These two methods did not collect as much information as face-to-face interviews. Six of the surveys were completed by students who were assisted by a family member or an advocate. All of these students have an intellectual disability and their families have limited experience of the education system. Written responses to the survey were short, often one-word answers and more information could have been gained if the researcher had been able to ask for clarification or seek more information. Some telephone interviews elicited similar incomplete information, because the interviewee had very little time or limited English but refused an interpreter or was not really interested and participated perhaps from a sense of wanting to assist the interviewer or MDAA.

Three students included in this 40% had spent a long time in an Immigration Detention Centre (5 years) and their responses were overwhelmingly about the freedom to attend school and not be behind bars. They completed the survey with the assistance of an older sibling and there was no information about diagnosis of disability or whether the family had received any information about other education options available for the children. All three attend Support classes and they and their family were happy because the children were finally able to attend a school like other children.

Other interviewees expressed this same sense of gratitude that a child was part of the education system and they were grateful to have a place. These families did not **expect** to have a choice nor consider that there might be a better education option available for their child. They simply accepted what the professionals said was best for their child.

Who was interviewed

We interviewed 25 parents of 17 boys and 8 girls. Of these, 21 lived in Sydney and 4 lived in regional NSW. We interviewed people from 12 different ethnic backgrounds and the students ranged in age from 5 to 21. For more details see the interviewee profiles in Appendix 1.

Issues raised by participants

The challenge of raising children can be overwhelming at any time. When your child has a disability those challenges can seem insurmountable. For a parent, coming to terms with the reality that your child is different, has a disability and all that entails, is most likely to be a long process. Although not often considered, culture and cultural perceptions play an important role in how individuals respond to disability, as well as how a society responds to people with disability. Ethnicity and the experience of being 'different' add more barriers and complexity to a path through the education systems and disability service system. These systems are often difficult for people from an ESB to negotiate. People dislocated from their families by migration may have lost one of their strongest and most effective support systems and often feel alone as they try to do what is best for their child. Navigating through the health, education and disability services of a new country is difficult. In the culturally diverse environment of NSW both service providers and service users experience challenges.

MDAA's work on ethnic communities' attitudes towards disability reveals that while a culture's history and religion is a source of influence, there is no single perception about disability in any community. Within each community there are many different ways of making sense of disability and of responding to people with disability. Responses to disability are as varied as explaining disability through superstition or blaming a mother's behaviour during pregnancy. Some see disability as an act of God and some value an acquired disability as an honour. Some consider those with disability a loved family member to be protected, while others consider they are the government's responsibility. There are many reasons for the attitudes individuals and groups have towards disability and this diversity of attitude adds to the circumstances in which families try to gain help for their children irrespective of their background.

All parents want what is best for their child. For some parents achieving this is significantly harder because of systemic barriers placed in their way.

General issues

Many of the parents interviewed or surveyed for this project reported issues that were not specific to students from a NESB with disability.

Issues common to students with disability about the system and how it works include:

- Time spent on waiting lists: 'waiting' was a recurrent theme of interviews. Parents reported that they wait to get appointments to see doctors and specialists for diagnosis; they wait for reports to go from one service to another; they wait for access to therapies and special programs and, if their child is at school, they wait for a place in a special school or Support class, and for funding for support teachers. Some parents and students reported waiting to see if the funding would be available next year to continue the support they were receiving. If English is not your first language you struggle with every explanation and are confused and worried by the arrival of each new piece of correspondence, which you may then have to wait for someone to translate or explain to you.
- The lack of interagency communication and networks which add to the waiting problem.
- Applying for funding for support services every year and the changing criteria to receive the funding.
- Students with high support needs are faced with an uncertain future due to constant reviews and changes to government programs.
- For students with mild or moderate intellectual disability, accessing the appropriate education option and changing between options are difficult.
- Bullying and teasing.
- There is a continuing need for good educational practice that focuses on maximising the learning potential for all students rather than focusing on reducing the problems associated with teaching students with disability.

Issues specific to students from a NESB with disability

For students from a NESB with disability and their parents these difficulties are exacerbated by the inability of the systems and individuals within the systems to deal with their specific linguistic and cultural needs. When the parties involved cannot talk to each other and have limited understanding and appreciation of the effects of cultural diversity, these differences become major barriers to resolving difficulties. Parents believe that their difficulty with communication means it takes extra time to solve problems and they worry that their child is missing out on a service they desperately need. The high percentage of students from a NESB in Support units (32.5% compared with the 26.2% of students from a NESB in the total school population) indicates that one of the results of the system's inability to deal with the diversity of its target population is that children from a NESB with disability are more likely to receive lower quality/ more restrictive education.

This suggests that parents have not been advised that their child can be enrolled in regular classrooms. Families are not being given clear information about the alternative curricula on offer and schools are failing to recognise that these families need greater support to understand the options available to them.

Some of the difficulties interviewees raised that are specific to people from a NESB with disability relate to communication and cultural diversity, including:

- not knowing where to get a diagnosis from and what that diagnosis means;
- not being advised about how the health, education and disability agencies work;
- not knowing what education options are available for their child;
- not being advised of the policies and daily practices of schools;
- parents not being able to access staff who understand their situation and can guide and advise them on accessing the services their child needs; and
- not being provided with a 'culturally competent' education service.

Early experiences, mixed expectations, misunderstandings

Students from a NESB with disability and their parents are enthusiastic participants in the NSW education system. They want to be there and they want to belong. Parents want their children to be happy and to experience some level of success. Parents recognise that their own levels of language skills, knowledge and understanding of the system are barriers to their participation, however they expect, just as other families do, that the system will offer the assistance needed for their children to succeed.

Habib is 9 years old and attends a special school (SSP). He lived in an immigration detention centre for six years and was 8 years old before he could go to school. Habib is excited and happy to be making new friends and his family is happy that he is finally able to go to school.

MDAA's individual advocates also report that some parents reject a child's diagnosed disability and believe their child can achieve anything. Other reports are of parents asking when a child with a diagnosis such as autism will be cured. There are many possible reasons for these reports, from cultural perspectives to misunderstanding the diagnosis and its implications. These reports raise serious questions about the level and quality of assistance and support provided at the early stages of diagnosis and early intervention.

Probably due to the nature of this project, the parents interviewed were aware of and accepted their child's disability. Their children all had experience of the education system ranging from currently being enrolled in pre-school all the way to the post school system.

In NSW, as in all Western societies, the label of having a disability is given to someone once they have undergone a medical examination (see page 32 above for the definition of disability used by DET). This means disability is associated with and defined by a deficit, an inability, something a person cannot do. Partly as a result of this, the expectations professionals have about what a person with a disability can achieve are based on what they cannot do.

This medical view of disability is held not only within health services but also within education and disability services. If a child has a physical, sensory, intellectual or psychological disability, it is defined as a deficit, and this is the basis on which they enter the education system and from which expectations of their educational outcomes develop.

Families from a NESB, like any other family, want to be part of the system, yet this Western perspective does not always match a family's own cultural perspective of disability and this mismatch of explanation and expectations is perhaps one of the barriers restricting access to services and support for children with disability. Overall it appears that many parents we interviewed have absorbed the deficit model and adjusted their expectations downwards.

Students who spend a significant amount of time in this system, which essentially responds to their deficits, do not easily develop their potential.

When asked what they believe the future holds for their children, parents' responses varied depending on the level of support the student required. Parents of students who attended an SSP expected nothing more than an increase in the level of their child's independence and hoped that after they completed school some other source of 'respite care' would be available. Some parents of students who attended Support units or mainstream classrooms expressed a desire for their child to participate in further training or employment. Families wanted to maximise their child's capacity in the areas they enjoyed. They either assumed the school would offer suggestions about ways to access further training or did not know what to do.

Khalil's mother did not know what he would do when he left school in a few weeks time but thought the school might tell her what would happen. When asked how she thought he would spend his time she replied that, even though his spina bifida made it difficult, he liked working on the computer and was very good at it. Maybe he could study the computer.

For parents of students from a NESB with disability, knowing what options are available and what those options mean can be a problem. The parents who were happy with their child's schooling did not indicate whether they were aware that there were education options or whether they had received any assistance to decide which choice was best for their child. Some parents were positive about their child being with others with similar support needs. They believe their children are more content when they '…see other kids who have similar problems'.

In rural areas access (or lack of access) to trained staff and resources appears to dictate the choices available. The inability of the education sectors to provide the support needed can result in families relocating to larger urban centres. Families respond with frustration to having to move and justify such disruptive moves as being the best option available. They do not question the failure of the education sector to provide the resources the student needs to reach their learning capacity.

Alex's mother explained that her son who has very high support needs had been integrated into a mainstream country school. He was the only student who uses a wheelchair and who can't communicate verbally. The school did not have trained staff and ultimately the family moved so he could attend an SSP in a larger town, where there were trained staff and other students who had similar support needs.

Before the child starts school

A number of difficulties raised by the parents of children from a NESB with disability involve the diagnosis of disability and the lack of connections between the health, education and disability services. There is a large body of research about the cost-benefit analysis of early intervention programs. It suggests that for every dollar spent on early intervention pre-school programs the community gains between $7 to $10 in future programs (*Issues and trends in crime and criminal justice No. 147T, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2004*). This research suggests that children with disability need access to early intervention programs as soon as possible, making early diagnosis essential.

The situation for pre-school aged children from a NESB with disability is further complicated. As noted above, in the Communication Project Group's submission to the Productivity Commission's *Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, lack of language skill can be confused with intellectual impairment or degrees of intellectual impairment. This is exacerbated by the fact that pre-school children from a NESB with disability are often cared for at home by adults for whom English is a second language and are less likely to attend pre-school, day care or play groups. This can limit the child's language, physical, sensory and social development. Early diagnosis and access to early intervention programs is fundamental if children from a NESB with disability are to maximise their learning potential.

Parents having their concerns taken seriously

Family and friends had suggested to Bien's mother that her son might have some problems. At 18 months his mother took him to the local doctor who was Vietnamese and with whom she could communicate easily. He told her that she was worried about nothing as children all develop at different rates. Still concerned she finally went to the Baby

Health Clinic who sent him for tests that indicated he had a language delay problem. His mother was grateful that he was finally diagnosed as she could send him to an early intervention program 2 days a week and a regular pre-school for the other 3 days. Next year Bien will start school and receive extra support in the regular classroom.

Bien’s mother believes doctors need to be trained to identify problems early and that it is inappropriate to make the mother feel she is silly to worry about her child.

When Dong was 2 years old his mother asked the local doctor if he had a problem because he was not doing things other children his age did. When he went to pre-school she talked to other Vietnamese mothers and kept asking the teacher and doctor if there was a problem. Finally they sent Dong for a hearing test. He will have an operation soon to help his hearing and after that the doctor will send him to a specialist to see if there is any other problem. Dong is now 4 and his mother is worried because he has missed two years of support for his hearing loss and language delay. She is very worried that he might have autism but she won’t know for some time. He will be 5 and ready for school before he gets any help and that will make everything harder for him.

For some families the links between health, disability and the education systems, if they exist at all, don’t work. Parents with little or no English and no knowledge of these systems, have difficulty finding the right people to ask for assistance, especially for pre-school age children. Some parents reported having greater success when they approach Baby or Community Health Centres. For some families it was not until the child went to pre-school or school that they found someone who would listen to their concerns and direct them to the services they needed. Even then they experienced difficulties accessing appropriate services, difficulties in communicating information and in understanding and being understood. The system can fail as easily as it did for one parent who, when attending an appointment at a Dental Clinic, did not recognise her name when she was called for the consultation because of how it was pronounced. She had to make another appointment and wait another 6 weeks.

The referral system from doctor to specialist service is both confusing and time consuming. The transfer of information is not automatic and some parents from a NESB struggle constantly to explain their difficulties to professionals. As discussed earlier, while the frustration of long waiting lists when referred to specialists or services such as speech pathology is common to all students, parents from a NESB worry that because it takes longer for their child to be diagnosed with a disability they will be older before they get access to the help they need. As the mother of a 5 year-old Vietnamese boy with language delay expressed so simply 'if they help them now they won't have as big a problem later'.

In the DET school system the percentage of students from a NESB in Support units (32.5%) is disproportionate to their representation in the general school population (26.2%) (see *Table 2*). The concerns outlined in this section help explain these figures. They reflect the perception that lack of language skills can often be interpreted as a lack of intelligence. This also explains why parents are concerned that if their child does not receive early intervention such as early speech therapy, their development is delayed. The amount and quality of information families from a NESB receive about their child's diagnosis and the educational choices available to them help to explain these figures further. Knowledge and understanding are a source of power as they allow parents to make informed choices about their child's education.

Entering the school system

To access SSP, Support unit or funding for support within regular classrooms, a student has to be diagnosed with a disability. As outlined earlier DET uses a deficit model based on what a student cannot do, to determine funding for support programs. As DET administers the allocation of Integration Funding to the non-government sector, the same deficit model applies to all students with disability in all schools.

Within the DET sector a number of parents reported difficulty finding the right placement for their child. In some cases this was because there were no appropriate facilities in the area where they lived. Often their only educational choice is the local government school, where staff may lack the appropriate training and facilities are not accessible. Their child might be the only child with high support needs in the school and there may not be any staff available to provide for the child's personal care needs let alone their educational needs.

As a 3 year old Robert's family moved to Canberra so he could access an early intervention program recommended for children with Cri-du-chat syndrome. The family moved again and Robert's primary schooling was in a Support unit in a NSW north coast Public School but the staff did not have adequate training to meet his high support needs. When the family moved to Sydney DET suggested a placement in a Support unit. The family did not believe the unit could provide the appropriate support. They believed that the Principal also had doubts about the suitability of the placement. Someone suggested that an SSP would be more appropriate as Robert is non-verbal, immobile and has epilepsy. The family had to persuade DET to offer him a place at an SSP that has a long waiting list, however, with the help of the DET District Office he was offered a place after 6 weeks. Robert's mother believes that because she was educated in Australia and worked in the disability sector she knew what services were available and whom to contact to get what her son needed.

Some families who have waited for a diagnosis then have to wait for a place in a suitable school and may experience further delays waiting for transport arrangements. While transport, together with waiting lists, is a problem for all students with disability, for families from a NESB this is confusing and complicated. Much of the system appears to be delivered, not in an orderly fashion based on clear criteria and waiting lists, but on 'who screams the loudest'. Many families from a NESB are *not* aware that there are options for their child's education and those who *are* lack the cultural awareness and/ or the confidence to 'scream' and the knowledge of where best to apply pressure. This adds to the delay in students receiving appropriate schooling.

Cha initially attended a school for the blind. His family were worried that he was not progressing but didn't know how to alleviate their concerns. Eventually the teachers suggested he be tested and only then was the extent of his intellectual disability realised.

With DET assistance an appropriate school placement was found but Cha had to wait for 6 months before he could start. Cha also has physical disability and needs transport to and from school. It was another 6 weeks before the bus could start taking him to and from school.

The stories above highlight the problems families from a NESB can face before their child starts school. If they don't know how the health system works and whom to approach for advice, they have no alternative but to accept professional advice without question.

Getting access to non-government schools for students from a NESB with disability depends on the resources available for students with special needs. As these schools tend to have individual school recruitment policies the schools' willingness to apply for integration funding and employ staff with the appropriate qualifications influences the choices parents can make for their child. Changing schools or education systems often means seeking experienced help and waiting long periods for a place to become available or appropriate resources to be found.

Sylvia's parents wanted her to stay in a Catholic school for high school. They knew she would have to go somewhere that could offer her ongoing support as she has a moderate intellectual disability. They did not know how to find the school she needed.

The Special Education teacher from Sylvia's primary school had always been very helpful explaining how Australian schools work. She contacted a lot of schools and took Sylvia to see the school and meet the teachers before they decided where to send her. The family felt they were lucky that the teacher was willing to help because they didn't know what to do, where to start or what questions to ask to get the information they needed.

Some students' needs cannot be met in the Catholic or Independent school sectors. Parents reported problems when the school said they couldn't modify the curriculum or classroom environment to cater for their child's needs. When this happens, making the move to another school may mean that parents have to abandon the sector they chose for religious, cultural or academic reasons. It may mean relocating a child to a school a long distance from their home and friends. These changes affect the whole family as daily routines may have to be changed and may become more complicated. There is no systematic process to initiate these changes and it is often left to the goodwill of teachers to help families navigate their way from one system or school to another.

George was always in trouble and his mother didn't know what to do. She knew her son was very unhappy, often crying and not wanting to go to school. His younger sister was in the same class and doing well and he was already repeating Year 2. When the school suggested he go to another school that offers curriculum for children with moderate intellectual disability, she was anxious and because she grew up in Lebanon and her English isn't great she worried that she wasn't understanding what she was told. She wanted him in a Catholic school but none offered the type of class he needed. George's siblings were already at two different schools and the daily delivery to and from school was already complicated.

The Special Education teacher managed to get George into a Support unit at a school close to home and free transport solved the problem of getting all the children to where they should be at the right time.

George had to stay at his old school for 3 terms, however, before a place was available in the new school. His mother reported that she sometimes kept him home during that period as he was so unhappy and often in trouble. She said he is happy at his new school and has friends he doesn't fight with.

Some families need assistance once they have found a school for their child. Delays in accessing the free transport arrangements for students attending SSP or Support units is common, however when language is a barrier some families need assistance to understand the problem and find solutions. Both government and non-government sectors do not necessarily offer assistance that all parents can access. While DET does employ Community Information officers - NESB (CIO) they are not available in all schools or districts (there were only 7 CIOs in regional areas in 2003) and not all parents know they are available or can access these workers if they are not from the same cultural or linguistic background.

Dahab has an intellectual and physical disability and started school at a Support unit some distance from her home. Her family was advised that she would be transported to and from school daily. When the bus didn't arrive they had no alternative way of getting her to school. Because they could not speak English they asked MDAA to find out what had happened. Dahab could not go to school until MDAA arranged for the bus to take her.

In the school system

Having finally secured a place within the system does not solve all the difficulties faced by students from a NESB with disability and their families. For some the problems are ongoing. The overriding difficulty is communication.

Communication

Many problems identified are about the system not clearly communicating with parents. This is a failure of both the mechanisms already in place, or the mechanisms not being implemented, and the need to incorporate cultural competence within the mechanisms. This breakdown of communication is at the core and makes it hard for parents from a NESB to understand what and why difficulties occur and to participate in finding solutions.

Approximately half the parents reported that communicating with teachers was generally good. Most classroom teachers operate a communication book that the student takes home each day and teachers and parents communicate with each other by writing messages in the book. Problems occur when the parents are not fluent readers or writers of English and the difficulties are even greater when the parent has limited or no spoken English. The use of interpreters overcomes some problems but their availability and the skill of the interpreter impacts on effective communication. While DET provides interpreter services and free telephone interpreter services for parents, the system can fail. When sudden or unexpected difficulties arise, parents with limited English language skills are expected to know the procedure and how to make best use of the interpreter service. Using an interpreter, however, does not always mean that information is clearly communicated or that problems are resolved to everyone's satisfaction, as the following story highlights.

'Recently the school told me that the funding for Hao's teacher's aide time has been cut for next year. He has a language delay and mild autism but has been doing well so I want him to keep the funding so he continues to do well because after next year he goes to high school. I tried to make an appointment to see the Principal but I couldn't get in to see him. I went home and rang the TIS (telephone interpreter service) and rang the school to speak to the Principal. Through the interpreter I explained why I wanted to speak to him. He said he knew and he couldn't do anything about it. He wouldn't discuss it any more…I don't understand why this is happening and who's going to help him'.

DET also publishes a majority of their policies and procedures in other languages. All are available on their website, but where parents do not have access to computers or the skill to navigate the site, they rely on the school printing copies. Not all documents are available in all languages and while this is an ongoing DET project none of the parents we talked to reported accessing the translated information.

The non-government sector does not have systematic arrangements in place. It is left to individual schools, or in the Catholic sector, dioceses, to make their own arrangements. Information on whether and how the Catholic dioceses operate a service, such as the Telephone Interpreter Service, was not available to the researcher. The impression gained was that providing these services is expensive and beyond the sector's capabilities. This may be an area where the Government should be proactive and move to ensure equity by providing a free service to all students and their families to access these services.

Funding

Parents struggle to understand why funding for their child's special education needs is constantly reviewed and, as in Hao's story above, can suddenly change. The criteria used to allocate funds are complicated in all sectors, especially when funds come from a variety of sources including both Commonwealth and State governments (i.e. the Commonwealth Strategic Assistance Program for Primary schools with Support classes or the NSW DET Students with Disabilities in Regular Classroom Funding Support Program). In the Catholic and Independent schools, parents, churches and other organisations as well as governments fund programs for students with disability.

While the demand on schools to provide more can lead to budgets being redirected, the need to communicate these changes, especially when funding is reduced or stopped, is paramount. Students and families, as well as staff, are all affected by this and the administrators of all the education sectors need to work more effectively to reduce the stress and anxiety this causes.

Community Information Officers and Community Liaison Officers

DET has a number of Community Information Officers – NESB (CIO) located across NSW. In 2003, 20 CIOs were based in 14 districts and supported schools across 34 districts to strengthen links with parents and community members from language backgrounds other than English. We found that where CIOs are employed in a school, parents recognised that they provide an important service, not just as language interpreters but also as 'system' interpreters. These workers give the parents explanations of what is happening, explain available choices and generally assist the parents to understand how the 'system' works. Some parents, however, reported circumstances where community language workers who offered great help and support were suddenly losing funding for their position.

The Priority Action Schools Program (*Knowing Makes the Difference,* p. 82) reports the successful use of Community Liaison Officers (CLO) to inform parents about school matters. Some schools in the program employed CLOs from local ethnic communities to help the school facilitate school – parent relationships and parent participation in the project.

From the information we collected about the role of CIO (NESB) and CLOs, it is clear that the experiences of families and students from a NESB with disability would improve if these roles were combined and their numbers increased. Having a worker in place to facilitate community and school interaction and cultural competence would be of great assistance to families from a NESB.

> 'We have a worker at the pre-school who speaks Vietnamese and Chinese. She has been helping with Bien's enrolment for school next year because his language delay means he will need extra support. I needed help completing all the forms to get funding for the extra support. She also helps us write letters and take up petitions for changes in the school. We just got told that next year there is no more funding for her to be working there. We think the Principal doesn't like us being able to say what we want; now we are too powerful.'

Trying to change the child's school situation

Parents reported difficulties when they wanted to change their child's school. Some parents needed to move from rural areas to urban centres to find an appropriate school. Parents also reported that it is harder to find the resources required for students with high support needs in rural areas. Both of these difficulties are illustrated by the following story.

Alex started school when he was 4 years old in a regular classroom in rural NSW. He has autism, spina bifida, intellectual disability, can't speak, and has high support needs. The school employed a good, though untrained teacher's aide and it was OK. But it didn't work as well in high school because he had a different teacher for each class and none of the teachers had the necessary training to cope with his physical needs and change the work for him.

Alex was the only one in the high school using a wheelchair let alone having other support needs. As they got older the other kids teased him, he had no friends and was very unhappy. His mother said 'I knew we had to get him into a Special School where he would get the support he needed, have the trained staff and facilities. I had to get my husband to sell his successful business and move the family to Newcastle where there are some Special Schools. These schools are better for students with Alex's high support needs and he is happier.'

For parents of all students with low support needs such as language delay, milder forms of autism or low to moderate intellectual disability, decisions about schooling and trying to change from one situation to another can be difficult. Some families are not given any choice, or offered explanations about the differences between integration in a regular classroom and attending Support units. Some parents reported having to take the initiative to change classes when their children experienced difficulties and this was extremely difficult when language was a barrier to communication and cultural understanding was lacking on both sides. Parents from a NESB often rely on the experiences of other parents as a source of information to guide their own actions.

When Hao was at pre-school he was diagnosed with language delay and the assessor suggested he attend an SSP. His mother wanted to see how he would go in an ordinary school and she finally persuaded DET to agree. After 3 years she felt he was not doing well so asked the school to put him in a Support unit. By then Hao's mother had found out from other Vietnamese parents that there was a significant difference between an SSP and a Support unit. It took a long time before the school would agree to Hao changing classes. There was no place available for him and they waited 6 months for one to be available. He is nearly 10 and his family is now happy with his progress.

In other circumstances where parents were not happy with the placement recommended by DET or the school, they found it extremely difficult to communicate with the staff and to change the situation. When they did manage to organise a change of class or teacher, the student frequently experienced long periods waiting for the change to occur and at times didn't attend school during these periods. If parents work this means that other care arrangements have to be made. These difficulties take away from the child's educational experience and add to the stress and anxiety of all involved. Some parents are forced to go to extreme lengths to find solutions to their problems.

In 2003 Robert and his family were not happy with the class he was in at his SSP. His mother saw that his behaviour was changing; he was unhappy and had arrived home with unexplained bruising. The school could not explain what was happening and offered no solutions.

At the start of 2004 Robert was again placed with the same teacher and the family were told it was the only option. They decided to withdraw him from school until the problem was resolved and that meant he was out of school for 23 weeks.

The family approached the Principal, District office and the Disabilities Liaison Officer to help resolve the problems. They also sought help from MDAA and finally Robert was placed with a compatible teacher. As well, an explanation was found for the bruising and Robert's mother reports that he is happy and the family are satisfied as there is now better communication between all parties.

Communicating policy, procedures and their impact to parents from a NESB

Changes in policy and procedures do happen and these need to be fully explained to parents, even if there has been a lot of publicity on the topic. Parents who do not read or speak English fluently may not receive the message clearly.

One of the policy and procedural changes discussed by the parents interviewed involved access to classrooms. In the past parents were relatively free to enter their child's classroom at any time. The only restraints were those of courtesy, making appointments for detailed discussions, etc. For a long time it was accepted that parents could go to classroom doors to drop off forgotten lunches or deliver quick messages. The implementation of the *Child Protection Act* 1999 has led to restrictions on the movement of unauthorised people around schools. This has meant that in recent years schools have introduced procedures to monitor who is in the school at any time. Most schools now request that all parents sign in when they come into the school and often they are asked to wear a 'Visitor' badge. When such changes are implemented parents from a NESB can miss the explanations schools might provide because they are only delivered in English or the language used is too technical and confuses parents for whom English is a second language.

Parents' ability to participate - valuing diversity

Some parents believe that their inability to speak English fluently prohibits them from participating in classroom activities. Others believe they could not participate because they do not understand what happens in the classrooms. Parents said that nobody explained the classroom routine or helped them to understand the content of lessons. They were willing to help in their child's classroom but language and cultural differences were seen as barriers.

> 'Cha is nine and attends a Special school because he is blind, has severe intellectual disability and some physical disabilities. I cannot help in his class because my English is very poor.'

Including the whole school community is common to the mission and value statements of most schools. Inviting all parents to be part of the school community benefits all stakeholders and is an example of good educational practice. For this to be realised, however, schools have to be active in ensuring the inclusion of all parents and carers in the life of the school: in classroom support, canteen duty and participation in the Parents and Friends Association.

A number of parents interviewed expressed great delight in attending school activities. They felt they had contributed to special cultural days that celebrated different communities and had enjoyed cooking and craft activities with the students.

As part of its curriculum development role, the Board of Studies includes a multicultural perspective to be incorporated in the key learning areas. This calls for the inclusion and valuing of all groups within a community as a fundamental way of incorporating multiculturalism into school life. DET has special multicultural resources and programs that include a public speaking competition, multicultural calendar and handbook as well as teaching units and resources to be used to develop a multicultural perspective in the curriculum. All these resources are available to all schools in the government and non-government sectors. The experiences of people from a NESB who participated in this project indicate that the strategies for getting information about these resources to schools and to parents from a NESB may need to be re-assessed.

When the student leaves school

The experiences and concerns of parents of students from a NESB with disability about what happens when their child's schooling ends tend to be defined by the level of support the child needs. For those with low support needs the difficulties relate to accessing further training and employment. Parents of students with high support needs were mainly concerned about the support options and availability and security of funding.

Uncertainty creates anxiety

For a number of students with mild or moderate intellectual disability or with low support needs for a physical disability, access to further training and employment were the main concern. Parents wanted to know what was available and how their child could get a job or the required training. Some families from a NESB believe their children are receiving an education that will give them options similar to those available to their children without disability. They do not understand that children who attend a Support unit or SSP are receiving a modified or differentiated curriculum, and while they may receive their School Certificate or Higher School Certificate, they will not be able to participate in most tertiary education. Students and their families need to know what services and supports are available to them after they complete their secondary schooling.

Parents reported that their child had difficulties accessing support services advertised by the NSW TAFE system. One problem was getting and maintaining apprenticeships. When students did find an apprenticeship they experienced exploitation or discovered that they could not physically complete the daily tasks. When parents or students approached TAFE for support to explain the student's situation to employers, staff were difficult to contact and despite the use of interpreters they could not resolve the problems.

Francesca worked hard at school and got her HSC. She wanted to be a hairdresser so she completed a year at TAFE and finally got an apprenticeship through the Spanish community but her employer didn't teach her anything. She washed dishes and was always looking after her employer's grandchildren. After 3 months the employer said she hadn't learnt to do anything and was always tired, so they sacked her. As Francesca has epilepsy she does get tired, and when she tried to get the TAFE to talk to the employer, they said they couldn't do anything about the situation. Because she hasn't been able to get another apprenticeship she had to stop going to TAFE and now she will have to do something else.

Families of students with intellectual disability or multiple disability who have high support needs involving health, hygiene, mobility or communication, reported great anxiety about their child's future. Some parents we interviewed were aware of changes to the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) programs for school-leavers (ATLAS/ PSO programs were replaced by the Transition to Work and Community Participation Programs in 2004). These parents were very worried about their child's future. Such concerns are magnified when language and cultural differences make communication difficult. The process and practice of ever changing government policy are bewildering and the students appear to be at risk of losing services and support.

’ I’ve never used any services like Respite Care because I knew Alex would be picked up at 8:45 and arrive home at 3:30. I’ve pushed to keep him in school as long as possible by insisting he did ‘Pathways’ for his HSC. Now I don’t know what I’ll do because with the cuts in the PSO/ ATLAS funding nobody, not even DADHC, seem to know or be able to offer advice. I could be faced with caring for a 120kg, 20 year old who has to have his nappy changed regularly. I just don’t think I can do it 24/7. Just physically let alone looking after his 4 siblings.

I love the education system. I was smart enough to understand that the education system would fill the first 20 years of my son’s life. I don’t know what will happen in the future.’

Some parents were untroubled by the prospect of school ending. When asked what they expected their child would do in the future after leaving school, some responded that they expected the school to help them, while others had no idea.

In one discussion with a group of mothers of pre-school and primary aged children we asked about this. The conversation began with the researcher talking about her own son who has learning difficulties and by the age of 21 had completed two years at university.

This caused the mothers to ask a lot of questions. They were mostly interested in hearing what support he had accessed on his way through school and now at university. They asked if their children would have access to the exam readers and writers he had used. Could their children go to TAFE and use those qualifications to apply for university entry? What type of support did he get at university?

None of the mothers had any idea that these kinds of support may be available to their children.

This conversation highlighted the difference between the experience of parents of a student from a NESB with disability and that of a parent of a student from an ESB with disability. The researcher is from an ESB and has participated in the education and disability sector. All parents of students with disability need to be advised of all the options and services available for their child to maximise their learning capacity. For families from a NESB this information must be delivered in an appropriate way. Culturally competent staff with experience and understanding of the education, health and disability service sectors ought to provide these explanations.

Cultural competence

The concept of cultural competence was discussed above (pp. 17-18). For the purposes of this report, working in a culturally competent way involves individuals, groups and organisations recognising that cultural background influences a person's understanding and point of view. Information must be provided in a way that makes sense to the person, in light of their ethnicity and experience.

For parents, trying to accept and understand the nature of their child's disability is difficult. The cultural perspective on disability of parents from a NESB can be at odds with the dominant attitudes and approaches and as all parents do, parents from a NESB often find it an emotionally challenging time. This is made more difficult for parents from a NESB who do not know where to go for support. If they have no or little experience of the NSW school system their anxiety is increased. Parents from a NESB need access to an experienced worker who understands and does not judge their cultural perspective on disability. Parents need someone who knows the NSW disability, health and education systems and can assist them and their child to make decisions.

Many of the services families need are spread across various government departments. Service delivery can become fragmented and ineffective when there is no coordination. If you don't know where to go for help, if you don't understand that different groups and organisations offer different services and you have trouble explaining your child's needs and understanding what is said to you, your child is likely to miss out on the services he or she needs.

> 'Gopal was 22 months old when we came to Australia and it was not until I took him to the doctor that he said there was a problem. It was really hard accepting that your child has a disability and will never be like other children. We hadn't long come to Australia from India and we had no family here to help or support us.

The doctor sent us to the Autism Association. Gopal attended their pre-school for 3 years. In that time they kept telling us he couldn't stay there and it made us feel like our child was taking the place that an

Anglo child could use. Maybe they didn't mean it that way but we didn't understand that they meant that he could go to a special school. There was no-one to explain the options, no-one who knew what it meant to us to have a child with a disability.'

Parents related incidents where education officials had little knowledge or understanding of their circumstances or their point of view. Messages are delivered in such a way that they can easily be misunderstood as the messenger does not take into consideration that a parent, even if they are reasonably fluent in English, receives the message literally and does not always understand the Australian context. Parents reported that people they talk to use colloquial phrases. All these experiences lead to confusion, misunderstanding and resentment.

"I enrolled Gopal in a special school for Kindergarten and when I went to the school the teacher said she didn't know if they could look after an Indian child because they were used to having Chinese children. I didn't know what to say or do or what she meant. The teacher apologised later and said she should not have said that but it worried me.

The teacher had to tell me how to dress him when he went to school. I sent him in a woollen top and they seemed annoyed and told me that I had to put a singlet, a T-shirt and then a warm top. I felt foolish because I didn't understand the weather here.

During one Christmas period I got to the door of the school and the teacher said, 'Go home we can't look after him today'. I was really upset and just turned around and went home. Later I found out that they had staff off sick that day and because my son has high support needs they didn't have enough staff to look after him. But they didn't explain it to me. Why would they speak to me that way? They wouldn't speak to an Anglo-Australian mother that way."

Cultural competence training for staff would help reduce incidents such as those outlined above. Staff must be trained and given resources to use to help parents understand the system and the Anglo-Australian culture. Alternatively parents should have access to a worker such as the CIOs currently employed by DET, who understand and are open to discussing different cultural perspectives on disability and can explain the NSW education, health and disability service sectors to the parents. Such a worker could guide both parents and service providers (teachers, occupational therapists, etc.) to a greater understanding and appreciation of each other. Parents unfamiliar with the education system would benefit from a clear explanation of information about alternative options and their implications, when making decisions about the appropriate school choice for their child. Where problems occur these workers could offer families support in dealing with sensitive issues and assisting them to use appropriate complaints procedures where appropriate.

The effectiveness of parents from a NESB receiving clear advice and appropriate support is illustrated in Phuoc's story reported below where his parents had access to an organisation that guided them through the education options available. Having access to a worker who can help parents understand their child's disability and guide them in their decision-making benefited all parties. Receiving this type of support through such a stressful process benefits all families regardless of background but as we have found, for families from a NESB who cannot readily access support, it is a far more complicated and difficult situation. The issues identified by this research suggest that the support currently available frequently fails students from a NESB with disability and their families.

> 'When we came to Australia our doctor sent us to a specialist who told us to go to the Autism Association. Phuoc was in their school for 3 years and then when he was ready to leave the Autism Association School they helped find him a school near home. He went there for ½ day at first and they built it up until he was going every day by the end of the year. This year he is fully integrated into his class and is happy.'

Summary and Conclusion

This report describes the education sector in NSW and what opportunities it offers students from a NESB with disability to reach their learning potential.

We have presented information in a way that reflects the experiences of parents of students as they progress through the system, starting with what happens before students enter school, their experiences accessing the system, what happens while they are at school and some of their experiences and concerns about life after leaving school.

We noted the limitations in the way we collected information from the families we surveyed and that this affected the quality and quantity of information we obtained. Brief written or oral responses without the opportunity for discussion were inconclusive. Families who had experienced deprivation before entering the education system were happy just to have the chance to go to school and did not express any specific expectations of educational outcomes for their children. Similarly, if students had high disability support needs the family did not question the placement but were happy to access the system and the respite care it supplied. They did not question the failure of the education system to provide resources in rural areas that would help maximise their child's potential. They were more likely to find ways to justify the disruptions to the whole family's lifestyle than question the system that offered the only support they received.

Despite these limitations, within the broad areas we surveyed we were able to set out some of the difficulties parents and students experience in:

- obtaining a diagnosis;
- finding their way (or not) between the various education, health and disability services;
- knowing what options are available in the system for students with disability;
- getting funding for support services;
- dealing with waiting lists for vacancies in Support units or SSP;
- moving between education options; and
- communicating with schools and other parts of the education sectors.

We commented on the need for all education sectors to:

- implement a multicultural perspective in the curriculum;
- communicate policies and procedures clearly to all parents and students;
- explain clearly the post school options available to students with various levels of disability and support needs;
- train staff to be culturally competent; and
- provide guides through the system.

We discussed the fact that the issues identified in this project are relevant to all students with a disability in NSW schools. What makes them of major significance to students from a NESB with disability is that these students are not perceived as part of the cultural mainstream.

We noted that the education system has held a number of reviews and inquiries over the past five years and that the resulting recommendations offer many worthwhile suggestions that would support the learning of students from a NESB and students with disability. The most significant of these for this project was the Vinson Inquiry's recommendation that students with disability be integrated into mainstream classrooms. Other relevant recommendations include:

- reducing class sizes;
- developing a range of responses to disruptive behaviour;
- employing mental health liaison officers;
- providing for greater preparation time and funding for professional development of teachers in standard classes that integrate students with disability;
- streamlining the procedures for applying for integration funding;
- providing a professional incentive scheme to attract experienced, able and local teachers to disadvantaged and remote rural schools;
- providing mentor support for beginner teachers; and
- monitoring and reviewing building and refurbishing programs.

We acknowledged that the introduction of Community Liaison workers and DET's 'Community Schools' and 'Families First' programs are responses to some of these recommendations. These initiatives work through a coordinated network of government and non-government services (NSW Health; Community Services; Ageing, Disability and Home Care; Education and Training; and Housing) and aim to provide wide-ranging support for families raising children. These programs offer guidelines for the strategies that must be developed to support students from a NESB with disability and their families.

We found, however, that MDAA consumers who have experienced mainstream classroom integration still report difficulties they could not resolve. Some of these include the sudden withdrawal of support funding for students in mainstream classrooms; bullying by students without disabilities; and an inability to interact socially, causing feelings of isolation and loneliness. The families felt powerless to help their child and frustrated trying to communicate with the school.

Our consumers' experiences reinforce the Communication Project Group's submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the *Disability Discrimination Act* 1992 which raised issues about mainstreaming of children from a NESB with disabilities into regular classrooms, especially when the teachers have no specialist training. It reported that these teachers often lack training and time and this resulted in students from a NESB failing to reach their potential. The Commission noted that the lack of adequately trained staff in regular classrooms '…can even have an impact on the type of schooling the child with a disability receives and the school which the child is able to attend, e.g. the parents may be advised to seek enrolment in one school rather than another or in the private rather than the state system'. Of course this statement assumed that staff in SSP or Support units do receive adequate training.

This may explain comments to us by some parents that their children, especially children with moderate to high intellectual disability and/ or high support needs, were happier in a Support unit or SSP. They were where the 'professionals' recommended they should be, with staff trained to provide the support they needed. This is reflected in the statistical information we collected for 2003 that shows enrolment figures of 24.7% for SSP and 32.5% for Support units for students from a NESB.

While the many reviews and reports cited in this project date back to 2000, similar concerns were reported to us in 2005 by a number of interviewees. This suggests that the process of placing students from a NESB with disability into mainstream classroom, Support units or SSP, must consider language skill as well as disability when providing staff training and resources. Staff in all education settings need the skills to differentiate between language skill and level of disability as well as the ability to modify curricula to meet the learning needs of the student. To support all students, teachers and school staff need a greater understanding of what it means to be from a NESB and have a disability. This includes recognising that there is diversity across and within all cultures and that people cannot be stereotyped as 'NESB' or 'Anglo-Australian'.

We identified a gap in the current literature, reviews and inquiries, as few address the combined impact of being from a NESB and having a disability. While the Government, Catholic and Independent school systems all offer some level of support to students with disability and to students who are new arrivals to the country or for whom English is their second language, the experiences reported by MDAA consumers show that these services seldom overlap. Added to this is the lack of recognition that cultural competence is as much an issue in the delivery of education to students with disability as it is to other students.

The development of cultural competence of all stakeholders must therefore be one of the first priorities. Developing cultural competence in staff, students and the community is the key to schools achieving the mission and value statements presented as the goals of education in NSW. Most importantly it will help all students, including those from a NESB with disability, to maximise their learning potential.

This is consistent with the goal of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, which clarify that all students with disability and prospective students have the same rights to education and training as other students, free from discrimination or harassment. Giving practical effect to these standards will only happen through a culturally competent education sector which provides culturally appropriate community education and information to all parents and students about their rights and the education opportunities available to all.

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Appendix 1

Interviewee Profile

The names of all interviewees have been changed for privacy.

Name	*Ethnicity*	*Age*	*Sex*	*Disability*	*Type of School*	*Location*
Taban	Iranian	17	F	Intellectual Disability	Support class	City
Jafar	Iranian	15	M	Intellectual Disability	Support class	City
Habib	Iranian	9	M	Intellectual Disability	Support class	City
Dahab	Lebanese	6	F	Physical Disability	SSP	City
Gopal	Indian	17	M	Autism/ Intellectual Disability	SSP	City
Phuoc	Vietnamese	12	M	Autism/ Intellectual Disability	Integrated	City
Bay	Vietnamese	10	M	Language delay	Support class	City
Dong	Vietnamese	5	M	Hearing loss/ Autism	Pre-school	City
Chuong	Vietnamese	7	M	Downs Syndrome	SSP	City
Hao	Vietnamese	10	M	Autism/ Language delay	Integrated	City

Name	*Ethnicity*	*Age*	*Sex*	*Disability*	*Type of School*	*Location*
Bien	Vietnamese	5	M	Language delay	Early intervention at pre-school	City
Pedro	Philipino	6	M	Intellectual disability	SSP	City
Khalil	Afghani	17	M	Cerebral Palsy	SSP	City
Mariam	Afghani	13	F	Intellectual disability	SSP	City
Cha	Thai	8	M	Blind/ Intellectual disability	SSP	City
Christine	Chinese	18	F	Intellectual disability	PSO living group home	City
Robert	Croatian	12	M	Multiple disability	SSP	City
Francesca	Argentinian	21	F	Intellectual disability	Support class now TAFE	City
Alex	Yugoslavian	19	M	Multiple disability	SSP	Rural
Sylvia	Italian	14	F	Intellectual disability	Integrated	City
George	Lebanese	11	M	Intellectual disability	Support class	City
Paresh	Indian	21	M	Intellectual/ Physical disability	PSO	Rural

Name	***Ethnicity***	***Age***	***Sex***	***Disability***	***Type of School***	***Location***
Ayanna	Indian	11	F	Downs syndrome	SSP	Rural
Louis	Italian	16	M	Intellectual disability/ Language delay	SSP	Rural
Maricar	Philippina	12	F	Intellectual disability	Support class	City

Information obtained December 2004

Appendix 2

Interview Survey

Survey of the experiences of parents of students from a non-English speaking background with disability in the NSW school environment.

Interview with MDAA consumer/ family

NO NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS OR ORGANISATIONS WILL BE INCLUDED IN ANY REPORTS.

1. Student's first name:

   Age: Date of birth:

   Cultural background: Male/Female:

2. Does the student/ parent speak English?

   i. Fluently

   ii. Needs assistance

   iii. Not at all

3. Attending school?

   Yes/No If no, why not?

Type of school environment

4. Department of Education and Training (NSW government school)

   Catholic Education System

   Independent school

5. Name and location of school:

6. What class/ year is the student enrolled in? (eg, Year 2)

7. What type of school do you attend?

   i. Ordinary class in a mainstream school.

   ii. Support classes located in an ordinary school but with smaller number of students per class.

   iii. Special School (SSP) Name and location:

   iv. School not in the categories listed above

8. Did the client or their family/ carer receive any help in selecting the school that best met their needs?
9. Who provided this help and how did they help?
10. Once a school was chosen were there any problems getting into the school? (eg, long waiting list, accessing transport to get to the school)
11. Has school attendance been interrupted for any long periods? Why?
12. Have they had to repeat any class? Why?
13. Have they changed schools? Why?
14. Briefly tell what happens at school each day (eg, maths and English classes, life skills classes, filled in the day with craft and sport…)
15. What type and quantity of support does the student receive each day?
16. Has the student experienced any problems at school?

    Outline the nature of these problems.
17. As a parent/ carer do you experience difficulties when you are trying to solve problems? (School policies restrict access to teachers, you can't go into classrooms, lack of interpreters, etc.)
18. As a parent does the school provide opportunities for you to discuss and make suggestions about your child's learning? How?
19. Are there other school related problems faced by families?
20. Does the school provide opportunities to discuss your child's progress?

    (How and when?)
21. Does the school provide opportunities to learn skills to help your child at home? (eg, show you how to read with your child)
22. When your child has problems at school that are not being resolved, where do you go for help?
23. Has that organisation or person been able to help?
24. Are there problems that remain unresolved? If so what are they?
25. As a parent what do you think your child will do when they finish school?

Questions specifically for students

26. What type of things do you do at school each day?

27. Are you happy at school?

28. What do you like most about school? (eg, friends, learning, sport ….)

29. What don’t you like about school?

30. What do you want to do when you finish school?