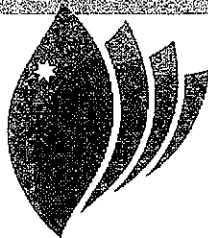


**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO
STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

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

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) School is an independent K-6 school catering for students with disabilities including intellectual impairment, autism and speech/language disorders. Located in the grounds of Macquarie University, MUSEC School is unique in that it not only provides a quality education for its students but also acts as a training centre for special educators undertaking post-graduate studies and as a research centre in the area of special education. MUSEC School provides a model of contemporary, research-based special education practice.

Features of the school program include:

- Intensive, individualised small group instruction in literacy and numeracy by specialist teachers;
- Instructional principles soundly based on research;
- Close monitoring of student progress;
- Program adjustment based on progress as determined by standardised and curriculum-based assessments, ensuring a truly individualised program.

MUSEC School is unique in offering a strongly academic program to students with special education needs irrespective of their diagnosed disability. Thus a non-categorical approach to teaching is adopted. Teaching strategies shown by research to be effective are those employed including explicit, teacher-directed instruction. An appropriately modified curriculum is constantly adjusted to meet student needs. The

effective teaching cycle involving initial review, presentation, guided practice, independent practice and cumulative reviews, provides the necessary framework for teaching and learning. Corrective feedback is provided to the students throughout the process and their on-going success in this carefully managed learning environment ensures the development and maintenance of a high self-esteem and a motivation to learn.

The overall outcome of the process is that students who attend MUSEC School all learn to read and have basic skills in numeracy. The implications for this in terms of their future employability, and their potential to usefully contribute to society in the long-term cannot be overstated.

RESPONSE TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE:

Adequacy of funding to children with a disability or special needs.

MUSEC School is one of a number of independent schools that offer programs to students with disabilities. Parents who choose to send their child to MUSEC School do so because they believe, and based on the evidence, rightly so, that that the school will provide their child(ren) with the best opportunity to maximise their potential. Empirical research conducted at MUSEC School and measured student outcomes show the educational programs to be effective: a direct result of the strong academic programming. There are three classes of 15 students at MUSEC School with is a staff/student ratio of 1:5. In each class there are two staff members with Master's degrees in Special Education who have the necessary skills and expertise to deliver the programs and manage student behaviour.

The provision of high quality educational programs is an expensive business. Students educated at the school are funded by Government funding and school fees. Last year the NSW Government Financial Viability Questionnaire (FVQ) was introduced. The FVQ provides a number of criteria that non-Government schools must meet if their funding is to continue. Without warning MUSEC School's Commonwealth funding was slashed by \$70,000. This made it very difficult for the school to meet the FVQ criteria. A further reduction in Commonwealth funding is a real possibility this year. The performance of any sort of budgeting in such circumstances is impossible.

The Association of Independent Schools has shown that the number of students with disabilities in independent schools has increased significantly. Figures released by the Association of Independent Schools (AIS) show that in NSW independent schools in 1992 there were 820 students with a disability, in 2002 there were 1993 and in 2008 this number had risen to 3178. The number of students requiring funding has risen, but the monies available have not, and this is why the Commonwealth funding to MUSEC School was decreased. The adequate funding of schools such as MUSEC is essential as it gives parents the freedom of choice as to how their child(ren) should be educated. It also gives the child with a disability the opportunity to learn to read and write.

A school may be not-for-profit but it's still a business. How can the Government expect a business to be run at efficiently and effectively if financial planning is impossible due to the unpredictable quantum of income? The need for a stable funding model that is equitable and based on student functioning capacity is paramount if a quality education is to be provided to students with disabilities.

Basing a student's funding allocation on their functioning capacity rather than their disability.

A student with a diagnosis of autism receives maximum Government funding whatever their level of autism. Facilitating access to the curriculum is the aim of support provided in the classroom. The level of support required by an individual who is severely autistic, in order for them to access the curriculum may be very different from that of a child with mild autism. Basing a student's funding allocation on their functioning capacity rather than their disability is the only practical way to go: providing the funding where it is most needed.

Level and adequacy of current special education places.

There are only 45 places at MUSEC School. There is a long waiting list; some students have been on the waiting list for several years. There is clearly a demand for this kind of educational placement. The ability of other educational institutions in NSW to offer the quality of special education provided at MUSEC School is questionable. The availability of highly trained teachers and the research-based effective teaching conducted at the school are fundamental to its' success, and what makes it unique. Research (Thomas, 2009) shows that in extant special education

settings in NSW there is a lack of suitably qualified special education teachers. Within the NSW Institute of Teacher's accreditation program there is no place for the accreditation of teachers in relation to special education qualifications. These circumstances are clearly unsatisfactory.

Parents frequently express severe anxiety in relation to the secondary school options, or lack thereof, for their children with disabilities. Having assisted these parents in looking for suitable secondary placements I can confirm that there is also a dearth of secondary special education places, able to offer a quality education in NSW to follow-on from that provided by MUSEC School.

Adequacy of support services for children with a disability in mainstream school classes

In the past few years, due to financial pressures a number of our students have had to leave MUSEC School, as the parents are unable to pay the fees. In comparison to the support available to these students at MUSEC School, the situation in mainstream is dire. In a Government school, in an inclusive situation where there may be as many as 30 students in a class, a student typically might receive 1-2 hours of a non-trained teacher's aide and access to 1-2 hours of time from a special educator per week. The classroom teacher is unlikely to have any special education training whatsoever. This is totally inadequate. The classroom teacher often ends up feeling stressed and resents the pressure put upon them by having the student with special educational needs in their class.

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

The NSW Board of Studies has made efforts to provide an appropriate curriculum for students with intellectual disability and other students with conduct disorders. It is paramount if these individuals are going to live and work independently as adults, that they have access to the standard curriculum. At MUSEC School the BOS curriculum is modified to meet the needs of the students on an individualised basis. This takes time and expertise. It is not yet apparent that the new National Curriculum K-12 will meet the need of all students and this is a cause for great concern.

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

The waiting lists for these services are long and the provision of these services to children with disabilities is sporadic. The importance of early intervention for students with disabilities is well documented in the literature. There is a need for these professionals to work collaboratively with schools – not in isolation. At MUSEC School there is a speech/language pathologist who works with the parents and students. She also team-teaches in the classrooms working alongside the teachers, providing on-going support and guidance, thus achieving the best outcomes for the students.

Adequacy of pre-service and post-service teacher training

In order to become cognisant with effective pedagogies for students with disabilities teachers need appropriate teaching themselves. Only then will they be in a position to provide a quality education for their students with special education needs.

In each classroom at MUSEC School there are two professionals with Master's degrees in Special Education. They hold qualifications that have been gained through MUSEC Centre. These competent practitioners know about effective research-based strategies, particularly explicit, direct instruction, positive behaviour management strategies, ongoing formative assessment and related program adjustment. They know how to apply these strategies on a daily basis in order to maximise the potential of their students. Through the MUSEC post-graduate academic programs, which include practicum placement at MUSEC School, the teachers have become equipped with the necessary skills and expertise to do the job of providing a quality education for students with special educational needs, properly. It is recommended that such training be undertaken by all special education teachers whatever the nature of their teaching placement.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Necessary to ensure a quality education for students with disabilities, the provision of:

- Adequate, guaranteed Government funding with equitable distribution based on student functioning.
- A sufficient number of placements able to provide a first-class education for students with special educational needs.
- Adequate support services for children with a disability in mainstream school classes.
- Access to professional support services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors on a needs-basis.
- A NSW Institute of Teacher's accreditation requirement that all teachers undergo training in special education.

An Invitation

I would like to extend an open invitation to the Director of General Purpose Standing Committee No.2, and any other interested persons on the Committee to visit MUSEC School to view the school in operation and to discuss the post-graduate programs and teacher training provided. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



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Reference Thomas, T. (2009). The age and qualifications of special education staff in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 33, 109-116.