

Submission  
No 10

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

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Leura, January 6<sup>th</sup> 2010

Re; Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to submit my thoughts and experiences in relation to the provision of education to students with special needs e.g. Intellectual and physical disabilities.

My background of experience is gained in the Netherlands where I enjoyed my education and worked as a Physiotherapist for a few years. I also worked in Florida as a physio in the educational and hospital system for several years. Since 2001 I have worked in the disability sector for Disability Enterprises "Greystanes" which continues to be my main employer. In those years here in Australia I was also employed as a therapist on a part-time basis for ADHC, Learning Links and The Northcott Society. Currently I work one day a week for Northcott within their Early Childhood Support Service.

The Disability Discrimination Act (Education Standards) of 1992 should prevent mainstream schools from discriminating against children with a disability. Educational Providers cannot discriminate against students who require support services to be able to take part in school or a course (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission HREOC).

The Disability standards for Education (2005) state that Providers have to make reasonable adjustments. The adjustments are not mandatory if it would cause unjustifiable hardship to the Provider. This means that it is quit easy for schools to refuse students who need more support than your average student.

The hardship for the family if their child cannot get his educational needs met at his local school together with his/her able bodied brother or sister is often times not considered or discussed at all and it seems that what the family has to endure does not weigh much when it comes to making decisions and the family has no recourse when the decision is not in the families favor. It sometimes happened that the family could not be bothered to protest after having been told that their child's needs could not be met and needed to go somewhere else. In other words, was not welcome and so pulled their other child out as well.

For typical developing kids, schools are held to account when their SAT test results are reviewed. However a national standard is still not established (I believe) or some form of accountability re performance. And what to do with low

performing students and schools (less funding?) is still a question. Do schools with low performing students need more support in form of increased funding, smaller classes, and increased support for the individual student etc?

Most students I work with all have an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) which outlines the goals and objectives for the coming school year and how to achieve them. I was very surprised to learn that the IEP is just a piece of paper, in other words, it is not a legal document (contract, if you will, between parents and school). This means the student is at the mercy of the school and its willingness to accommodate the student and abide by the agreed upon goals and objectives. There is no accountability for the school when goals are not met and resources not in place to be able to meet the agreed upon goals. If the IEP was a legal document ultimately the parents could get their child's needs met or at least be heard via the legal system.

At one particular school the PE teacher refused to give PE to the students of the support unit because he lacked the expertise and equipment. End of story.

Children with a disability often need personal assistance with activities of daily living (ADL's) and learning activities. To be effective or successful students need more 1 on 1 support for both learning and ADL activities than is currently available. I often come across situations where there is no time for students, who are wheelchair bound and cannot get in/out of their wheelchair themselves, to use the commode or other equipment e.g. standers or walkers because the staff has to abide by the schedule or staff is just not available. It sometimes seems that the schedule/time table is more important than the needs of the students.

Students who require a lot of manual handling by the teachers are often not moved at all because of the perception that a therapist is required and teachers are not therapists and therefore are reluctant to touch/support/prepare (physically)/ adjust equipment because they feel inadequate. This might indicate a lack of specific training relating to students with a physical disability. Another barrier to move students is often the OH&S policies relating to manual handling and the available equipment. Teachers are not allowed to lift and often two persons or lifting equipment is only limited or not at all available.

Very few educational providers have asked me to give specific manual handling training for children with special needs. No training for teachers is available to teach them about the physical nature of the disability and how to handle the students, how to position them, how to prepare their bodies and minds for movement so they can be successful at and participate in their learning experience. I was recently told during a transition period of a student who is starting primary

school this year that the preschool teacher had told the primary school teacher that this student was unable to use the stander because the student was not strong enough. This type of advice needs to be given by a therapist who has assessed the situation. With training these kinds of situations could be prevented.

It does not matter what disability the children have, it matters what is needed to support them so they can have access to their learning environment and participate. Assessing and planning becomes very important if you need to pool resources for the students and have everything in place at the moment they enter school.

Input from allied health professionals (speech therapist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, social work etc.) is important to get the right advice re support the students need. Acting upon that advice needs to be done before the students enter school. Because of the many support services which are involved with some of these children, coordination of these services becomes important but difficult at the same time. Besides the waiting lists these services have, another thing is to get them at an IEP meeting to discuss the needs and goals for the students. Usually the allied health professionals only support the students in the early years and they become less available in the later (high school) years.

It could be considered that schools or at least the educational department employ their own allied health professionals to assist with the support. They could also take care of the staff training re manual handling and disability specific training.

To get the right equipment is another issue that needs attention. Most schools have to do their own fundraising to get some of the equipment needed e.g. standers, walkers, sidelyers, sensory equipment etc. The process to get equipment funded can be lengthy. I have experienced it can take up to two years before the required piece of equipment was actually available to the student. It would be good if the Educational Department had its own equipment pool similar to the Lady Gowrie Loan Pool/Resource Centre which is only available to non government preschools.

I have come across schools who did not have their own transport for the students who were wheelchair bound. Fortunately for these students the group-home where these students resided let the school use their van for community access. These students have graduated in the meantime so I do not know how the transport situation is for current wheelchair bound students at that particular school.

It seems that the anti discrimination laws only pertain to Australian students. I have recently come across a situation where a family who is in Australia on a long term business visa cannot access the support they need for their child with a disability to access equipment funding for a wheelchair so this child can access the local

school. It was the effort of the local community that raised the funds for the equipment.

Regards;

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