

**Submission
No 15**

**INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR
SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS**

Name: Name suppressed

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I am a mother of a 15 year old son with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Tourette Syndrome, and severe gross and fine motor delay. I believe passionately in inclusive education. I attended a state primary school in the early 1980s. My school included a child with Down Syndrome, at least one child who has since been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, and numerous children with serious behavioural disturbance. I feel my life has been enriched by the experience of knowing and learning with these children and the compassionate, effective and humane response of teachers at my school has been a source of lifelong inspiration.

My experience of enrolling my child with complex needs in school in the 21st century has been mixed. It was a battle to keep my son enrolled in mainstream primary school, but well worth the fight as it enabled my son to make some wonderful and lasting friendships. His best teachers were superb and made inclusion a worthwhile and positive experience for all involved. One principal in particular changed the entire culture of his primary school for the better and modelled humane and inspired leadership to all. However, there have been some serious low points.

The day he came home aged 5 with carpet burn up his torso after his teacher dragged him across the carpet is one of these. When I reported this to the principal I was made to feel that I was the problem. In high school his special needs classroom which contained several children with Autism inexplicably didn't have a quiet corner – a place routinely recommended by Australian and International experts as a place children can voluntarily go to calm down when distressed. My son reports that when he tried to make one in the space between the cupboard and the side wall two adults got behind the cupboard and pushed it towards him. He wasn't physically injured, but this and other experiences at the school left him severely anxious and depressed. Particularly psychologically destructive was the use of suspension for behaviours my son exhibited in situations of extreme anxiety, which often occurred when his individual special needs were not well addressed. In years when we had good teachers and principals with open communication and cooperation between school, home and his therapists, the behaviours which led to suspension in the less well supported years simply didn't occur and he made good ground developmentally, socially and academically.

Our worst experience was when he was placed in a special needs unit in high school. My son was isolated from the rest of the student body. He was denied access to mainstream classes and socialisation. Discipline was punitive and education followed a cookie cutter approach with no support of my son's individual strengths and deficits. He was denied access to any intellectual stimulation and punished for his dyspraxia (not being able to write or draw) and his tics (involuntary movements caused by Tourette Syndrome). He became anxious and severely depressed and his behaviour deteriorated at school and at home. His distress was met with intensified punishment.

After being knocked back from attending six public and private high schools due to his complex needs we were left with no option but to home school. This has been a positive experience which has brought much needed healing and allowed us to focus on the positive experiences of learning and life. He still has days however when he becomes inconsolable over events he experienced at school. All these years later when news items about children bullying in schools come up, my son observes that teachers can bully too and asks why we don't, as a society, talk about this.

What I have learnt is that good education and inclusion IS achievable. A number of good teachers and two good principals on our journey amply demonstrated this. But we had some very negative experiences too. There is a critical lack of support in schools for children with special needs and their teachers. And there is still too much reliance on practices such as shunning parents, harsh punitive discipline and repeated suspensions to move disabled children who are perceived to be difficult out of schools.

So, how can things be improved?

One issue is funding. Certainly it would have been easier for my son and his teachers had there been more support for my son at school, and the lack of funding and support was one of the main reasons my son was unable to attend mainstream high school classes, being then forced into a special education class which was totally inappropriate for his needs.

Another is training. Few of my son's mainstream teachers had had any training in basic accommodations for children with special needs until my son arrived in their class. We are not talking complicated things here but simple things like safe spaces, allowing scribing and oral responses, computer work and talking books. These are things that can be presented in one day workshops, and it's hard to understand how they can't be fitted into a three year teaching degree! Even more concerning was how limited his special education teacher's education was. It was clear that basic classroom accommodations for autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia had somehow not been covered in the course of three years of special education teaching.

The third is attitude which of course costs nothing! As noted previously during his school career my son had good years and bad years. He didn't have any more funding and assistance in the good years. In fact his school career came to an end in year 7 when he was enrolled in a self-contained special education class of 6 students, no doubt at considerable expense to the district. This was not our choice of placement, but something we were forced into because the principal wouldn't meet with us to discuss or facilitate his inclusion in the mainstream. Requests for meaningful contact with children in the mainstream for instance via a buddy system were ignored and my son was completely socially isolated from the rest of the school. As can happen when autistic children are not well supported, he became extremely anxious and his behaviour collapsed - a response which was met with very punitive discipline - and no support. One incident in particular left him so terrified of the school principal that he was unable to return to school, and requests to the principal for meetings with us to discuss how to support my son and his teacher better were refused making getting him back into school an impossibility.

In contrast, in good years he had teachers and principals who accepted his disability, treated him as a good person, spoke directly to that person, worked with his strengths, encouraged other children in the class to interact with and help him and were creative and supportive in helping him behave well. The teachers in those years truly believed in his right to be there with the other children and the benefits to the other children in knowing and working with my son. In the good years difficulties were regarded as problems to be solved, and there was open communication with his father and me who were regarded as part of the problem solving team rather than part of the problem. In the good years his teachers were supported to find creative ways to help him rather than fearing censure from above for doing something different. In those years we had a team approach which benefitted my son, his teachers and his class.

I dream of a time when this sort of acceptance is the norm and not the exception. It helps not only children with defined disabilities but those who are different for many reasons, and who can find themselves isolated and alone at school. It also helps the children without difficulties who learn that it is OK to need and ask for help which will be there if they ever need it, how to problem solve and think flexibly and creatively, and the importance of kindness and compassion. Surely these are life skills that will help all children reach their potential.