

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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To whom this concerns regarding the special needs children inquiry into NSW schools:

I have a Master's degree in Child Development with concentration in Early Childhood Education (ECE) from an American University. My teaching license was for PreK – Year 4. I also have a Bachelor's degree in Child and Family Studies with concentration in Early Childhood Education (ECE). I also have a child on the autism spectrum, who at this stage is currently still in preschool. He is thriving in preschool, but I worry about the significant and dramatic change, in regards to the teaching model shift once a child moves from a preschool setting to a primary school setting. I feel it is utterly shocking how those in charge of the primary school system fail to continue with a model that values developmentally appropriate practice and early childhood education as preschool does, given the fact early childhood education and developmental needs do not halt when a child graduates to the kindergarten class. ECE continues into Year 4 of primary school, and therefore, in the same way a preschool takes in the varying developmental needs of each individual child, so should the majority primary school do the same. It starts with the teaching model, and understanding the theory behind it. Many of these are not developmentally appropriate for early childhood, even for the typically developing child, let alone one with a special need situation such as autism.

My field was very different to that of a typical teaching degree, as it embodied a great deal of understanding for the many models of teaching and the theory behind each, as well as the research in the field for what methods and theories work best for children. The Direct Instruction teaching model is currently what our primary school systems utilize as their main model for teaching. Although there may be variations of different models that sometimes are brought in as influence depending on the teacher, still the main system used is Direct Instruction, and not much has changed in 100 years of schooling. The DI model is founded in the Behaviorist Theory (BF Skinner). I am not going to go into an explanation of theory here, as one can do that for their own self, but essentially with this model the motivational factors that come from this kind of methodology in our education is extrinsic... outside of the child.

Research in the field of child development and learning (and adults for the matter) shows that development and learning thrives when motivation is intrinsic in nature, which means it is naturally occurring within the child, not reinforced by something outside the child (ex. A sticker on a chart). Instead, the motivation comes from the rawness of being naturally inspired or curious... having a question and wanting to seek out the answer. Often you will see preschools embody this understanding, as they put more emphasis on early childhood education, and encourage a learning environment meant to cradle self-esteem above all, while at the same time sparking curiosity and enthusiasm in the child through an environment that fuels the fire of motivation within the individual. Why this philosophy seems to stop at preschool, is just the point I'm making here. It shouldn't. Although teachers may understand this philosophy and "want" it for their classrooms, they still must work with the old-fashioned cookie cutter factory system that is Direct Instruction. I would recommend that the primary school system study research in Early childhood education and child development because if development is not considered primarily, learning can be greatly impacted.

I feel the school system should be understanding theory and research in the field, which clearly shows that Behaviorist style approach is not inclusive. The primary school class should trade in the NAPLAN centered mentality for the importance of engaging children into inquiry based learning, rather than utilizing standardized curriculums. The learning desired in these curriculum standards can still be achieved in a more constructivist model of teaching, which nurtures self-esteem and keeps motivation intrinsic in nature. I feel, based on theory and research, that schools need less reliance on test scores in primary education which research shows is not only inappropriate, but is not conclusive of a child's knowledge, understanding, and capabilities. I feel the direct instruction model is not developmentally appropriate, and makes inclusion very difficult for children with special needs.

The sudden drop of "developmentally appropriate practice" once children reach primary school is simply unacceptable. A child goes from exploring his/her environment, and constructing knowledge through experiences, collaborating with peers (developing social acceptance for differences), to being told to sit in their desk, be still, be quiet, don't talk to their peers, and listen to the teacher always. Learning comes in the form of a worksheet created in bulk by some random person who doesn't even know the child, and mass produced on a grand scale, by a small collective group of individuals who presume that this will work for "all" children.

Early Childhood Education does not stop at preschool, it goes on into Year 4. Acknowledging developmental needs in ECE is crucial. Things like the appropriate scaffolding of social development is dropped in place of "no bullying programs" which do nothing to help children in real time interpersonal situations. An excellent preschool works on children in their interpersonal world, and once children get to primary school, the focus on solving conflict among peers, etc., is forgotten about. Children with social delays are left in a very vulnerable position, when the social constructivist philosophy is traded in for the direct instruction model.

I would recommend, that the system be changed so that teachers guide rather than instruct. The Behaviorist Direct Instruction model, is considered among the experts as the least developmentally appropriate of them all, and if the learning environment is not developmentally appropriate, self-esteem is slaughtered, and motivation is destroyed. Why are we still using it in primary school?

Early Childhood doesn't end at kindergarten, but rather goes until Year 4, so teaching practice still needs to be focused on developmental needs, with the self-esteem of the child as paramount above anything else including academics. As soon as the system recognizes this, and utilizes a program that epitomizes individual self-esteem above all, one will soon find the capabilities of the child (academic and all other areas) will then flourish.

The DI model forces even the most well intentioned of teachers to compare children, and also influences children to compete and "notice" how others differences affect their ability to fit into the cookie cutter expectations of the system, whereas a preschool utilizing a social constructivist approach where children do not compare, but rather accept whatever they are presented with in the form of individuality, and learn about each other's differences and how to interact accordingly in respect for such, and under teacher "guidance" come together to not only understand one another but collaborate effectively in full value of these expected differences among individuals. The teacher is there to "guide" learning rather than "instruct".

Given the fact the research in the field of child development and ECE points towards the more constructivist philosophies as most developmentally appropriate, the social constructivist influence should be continuing from preschool on into most primary school, while at the same time incorporating the core subject curriculum, but not backsliding in regards to utilizing a developmentally appropriate approach. You can teach anything in that same preschool social constructivist model, while giving respect and value for the varying developmental needs of each child. In such a model, inclusion is not something extra thrown in on the side, but rather it comes naturally, as the entire philosophy is centered around the idea of individual differences and a value for those differences. The idea of inclusion simply does not fit in a Behaviorist model, as the model itself, contradicts what inclusion is! With the current model, the child made aware of an expected "norm", and it becomes blaringly obvious by his/her peers when one is outside of the boundary.

Funding needs to be used more effectively to allow for smaller class sizes, and developmentally appropriate (going on the research in the field) teacher/child ratios per age of the child. There should be no standardized test taking performed in primary school, as the research is clear on the detrimental effects of such in childhood, with even this kind of testing showing a complete disconnect in regards to an individual's ability or understanding... even as an adult! If one is to take the time to simply consider the research of standardized test taking in childhood, one would realize what an utter

disgrace it is to have programs like NAPLAN. Use the research as your guide, and look to the Scandinavian schools like Finland as your guide. Read about the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy.

They type of shift in education model does require more creativity from the school and teacher, and better teacher to child ratios. Teachers in university are learning these more appropriate teaching models, yet are thrown in the fire once graduating into our primary schools which force them into the old-style factory approach.

I will add that the social constructivist theory utilizes a mixed age or mixed developmental ability where children who have mastered a task serve help those who haven't. The mentoring adds to furthering the empathy for one another's different paces. The ones that mastered it get a boost of confidence by helping another, and then the one that needs a bit more time feels like their peer really cares about them and wants to help them. The result is a harmonious acceptance of individual differences, and special needs children fit right in with all children, even those who are bestowed and working high above typical.

The DI approach, and factory model cause the bullying, given the fact the "different" child stands out as not fitting into the mold required for direct instruction! No extracurricular programs brought in to encourage children not to bully can change that fact, unless the environmental source is understood. The system is the bully, not the children, as the children who engage in bullying are only learning what the system is teaching them to do. If someone is not following the mold, the system tells others to notice and to fix it. How about we throw out the "mold" so there is nothing to compare? This is the only way inclusion can really be effective.

Society: Be yourself.

Society: No. Not like that.

This needs to change.