Submission
No 127

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Submission to the inquiry on provision of education to students with a disability or special needs

I would like to make a submission to the inquiry on provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales. I feel I have a unique perspective on this topic:

i. I am a Speech Pathologist who works with children with a cognitive disability
ii. I work alongside teachers in both mainstream and support classes in government and non-government schools.

I would like to state outright:

i. I support and admire our schools and the teachers who work in this field.
ii. I support the recent changes made by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) to ensure syllabus is inclusive of a full range of learners
iii. I believe students with a disability have a right to the very best education, but that they do not always experience this level of excellence for many and varied reasons.

A. Equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas:

1. Teachers attending training days: I live in a remote region and teachers in this area find it difficult to attend specialised training because most education events take place in Sydney. Flights and accommodation are prohibitively expensive and schools are not able to release staff for several days to drive there and back. We have very few disability specific courses that take place in our region, so we have a lot of teachers who are unaware of evidenced based best practice in this specialised field. We can't sustain a culture of excellence in our area because there are too few people with a high level of knowledge.
Recommendation: Frequent use of technology (e.g. Skype, videoconferencing) in NSW so that teachers in regional and remote areas have more equitable access to training

2. **Support and Supervision from SSP/lighthouse schools:** I've met many teachers who want to learn more about how to support children with special needs but they struggle to find support within NSW Department of Education. Teachers who are new to this specialised area of knowledge can observe excellence in a School for Specific Purposes (SSP) but our nearest lighthouse school is outside our region. I know of individuals who have travelled 6 hours to attend one of these centres to improve their practice but the outcomes are not good. They were overwhelmed by the difference between what was occurring in the lighthouse school and their own classroom. They were confronted by specialised equipment (e.g. trampolines, water play walls or sensory gardens) that would never be available in their own teaching environment. They were not sufficiently supported to see the small but effective adjustments they could make in their own school and so no changes occurred.

Recommendation:

i. Identify more local centres of excellence so that teachers can more easily make multiple visits

ii. Support following visits from expert teachers in SSP/lighthouse schools or from the teacher's own school community in the form of goal setting or mentorship.

iii. Use of technology to allow teachers regular access to expert mentoring or group training using webinar formats

3. **Teacher training:**

Support unit teachers: the training and experience of teachers employed to work in government support classes varies enormously from a lot of specialised training to none at all. It is rare for teachers in this region to have special education undergraduate degrees. Most now have a Masters degree in special education or autism. They worked on this post-graduate degree while teaching in a support unit classroom. I find this degree results in teachers having a lot of relevant knowledge, but it does not change the level of support they provide to students in their classroom. For example, the teacher might now be able to talk about auditory processing difficulties associated with Autism, but they don't change daily practice to include more support for their student. For example, what scaffolding tools, visual supports, transition cues, key word prompts at the beginning and end of predictable routines and practical changes to the classroom environment to block out background noise or reverberations (echoes) will they make? It would appear that these teachers can talk about the problems but still feel powerless to alter the classroom environment or the pedagogy they use.

Government and Non-government mainstream teachers: teachers who have a student with a disability enrolled in their mainstream classroom usually have no specialist training in special education or autism and they struggle to know how to support these students. Non-government catholic schools say they can organise for whole school training from Catholic Education. This level of support is not available in government schools. Who should provide education and support for mainstream teachers in NSW Department of Education? I have asked this question many times and our teachers don't seem to know the answer:

Undergraduate training: mainstream teachers have all been trained at an undergraduate level to differentiate curriculum for students who have skills that are **delayed** in comparison with their peers. Teachers know how to assess numeracy and literacy levels, map progress on a continuum (or on PLAN), and differentiate lessons to ensure these students make good progress. What happens when a student's disability means that they are not simply delayed? How does a mainstream teacher modify classroom practice to differentiate for a non-verbal student with autism who is overwhelmed by busy classroom routines and having multiple meltdowns everyday? Our teacher's undergraduate studies do not prepare them for working with students with severely **disordered** skills and in fact they are told that they will get this assistance from NSW Department of Education when they commence working in these schools.

NSW curriculum: The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) has finally provided us with specific suggestions for working with students with a disability in curriculum documents in 2017. I am happy that we have these expectations embedded into our education standards but who will be responsible for rolling these standards out? NSW teachers have clearly defined expectations for numeracy and literacy standards in the form of a syllabus, continuums and PLAN. How is NSW Department of Education going to assess evidence of practice with teachers who work with students who have special needs? What happens if a teacher chooses to not use disability specific pedagogy (e.g. visual supports) in an autism classroom? Evidence based practice says that visual supports are vital when working with students with an autism diagnosis. What can a parent do if her child's teacher is making choices that are clearly at odds with NESA guidelines? Does a school principal, AP or Stage leader have authority to recommend that the teacher adopt NESA standards?

Recommendations: Clear expectations from NESA regarding evidence of practice. Are the guidelines just suggestions or are they standards teachers work toward like other curriculum documents. Our most vulnerable students deserve a strong syllabus so everyone knows what standards we must work toward.

4. Inclusion in Government versus non-government schools:

Celebrating and valuing inclusion: I often hear parents complain they don't have a choice about where to enrol their child. The plain fact is that non-government schools don't employ aids and many parents believe that their child will need this level of support in the classroom. Non-government schools excel in inclusion however. In contrast, I have observed government schools segregate students with fences or separate seating; students in mainstream government classrooms who work with the SSLO in a separate room, eat lunch with another member of staff and then play alone in the playground. When do they get to build social relationships with their peers? We have a local Steiner school that excels in integrating students with significant cognitive disabilities into their school community. They work hard to support all students to participate in meaningful activities (including the child with the disability), in order to build reciprocal relationships. Students with a disability are sought out by peers during lunch and recess breaks because the friendships established are valued. The school plans on how the student with a disability can succeed at all school activities including overnight excursions. This school is not recognised in our region for its excellence in this area.

Recommendation:

i. evidence of inclusion in classroom and playground activities needs to be a goal schools actively work towards and report on in IEP or scope and sequence documents.

ii. we need to celebrate excellence in this area so that government and non-government school communities know what inclusion looks like.

5. High Schools:

Inclusion in high schools: Parents have a choice about where to enrol their child with a disability: will they go to a support unit or attend a mainstream classroom? In practice, many parents report that they are strongly pushed to move their child out of mainstream classes, particularly at local high schools. In eight years I have only seen one student mainstreamed in a local government high school. The parent had very strong views on integration and was very well educated in this field of excellence, yet she nearly buckled under the pressure placed on her by well meaning AP and LST staff. The parent was made to feel that she was making a bad choice; that her child would be more vulnerable to negative peer interactions and exposed to more dangerous situations. They didn't understand the parents' desire to maintain peer relationships by participation in whole class activities rather than have her child isolated in a corner doing 1:1 work with the SSLO. Teachers are learning about Universal Design at University but our schools are pushing students away from mainstream classes and into the support units. It would seem that parents face two choices: a non-government high school where their child will have no SSLO but get a lot of inclusion or a government high school where they have additional support but where inclusion is not valued.

No support in mainstream classes: Students enrolled in support units at high school have little or no support if they go out to mainstream classes because aid time is linked to all the students in the support classroom. For example, if a student with autism wanted to study mathematics in a mainstream class they will have to do it on their own while the aid stays in the support unit to work with the other students in this class. Students with autism (and no cognitive disability) can be very capable of attending mainstream classes if they have a quiet room (for example, a room in the school library) to retreat to for sensory regulation during the school day. Instead they are placed in MC support classes with students with significant behavioural issues (due to mental health or Type II trauma). The needs of these two groups of students are opposite and yet most high schools tell parents this is the best and only option for high functioning students with autism.

Visual supports are not used in high schools: I note with concern that the NESA guidelines only describe support for students with moderate to severe difficulties. No mention is made of supports for students with autism who talk but still need visual supports that are cognisant of their age and skill levels. High schools in my region say that visual supports should only be used with younger students. What they fail to see is that visual supports come in many different forms and include visual planning mechanisms (such as mind maps) and written prompts such as checklists, timetables and social stories as well as dynamic visuals such as films or cartoon slide shows. They deal with students who are not yet able to work independently and rely on constant verbal prompts in the classroom but they don't view autism specific pedagogy as relevant for use with adolescent students.

Recommendation:

i. inclusion needs to be a core value in the way we design our school communities and we need to celebrate excellence in this area.

ii. students with a disability should be supported to attend mainstream high school classes if that is their choice.

iii. NESA needs to describe a wider variety of support needs for higher functioning students, for example, for students who have autism with no cognitive disability.

B. Impact of the Government's 'Every Student Every School' policy:

1. Learning and Support Teachers (LST): LSTs differ enormously in their ability to provide information and support to teachers who have a student with a significant cognitive disability. In fact their knowledge base is often heavily influenced by their speciality role before 'Every Student Every School' policy was started (i.e. were they a behaviour, autism or reading specialist?). For example, a LST known for her superior knowledge in reading difficulties doesn't know how to support a child with Down Syndrome in a mainstream class. Our LSTs have been successfully embedded in school communities, but **have they** been trained up in the specialist knowledge they need to support a student with a disability?

2. **Specialist training:** who in NSW Department Education and non-government schools can provide training in special education for mainstream teachers? NSW Department of Education APL's used to roll out training developed in the UK on specialist areas such as literacy, autism and behaviour. Why are we not developing our own specialist training packages in Australia? NSW training and disability standards are always about ‘big ideas’ and fail to help our school staff with the practical support they need to make changes in daily classroom routines. I often don’t get to do real ‘Speech Pathology’ work because I’m too busy helping teachers set up visual supports. Disability specific visual supports were developed by teachers decades ago. It is urgent that schools take ownership of this skill base once again because ADHC Speech Pathologists will be working on parent directed goals under NDIS.

Recommendations:

i. We continue to have Itinerant Support Teachers of hearing and vision so why can’t we have a specialist itinerant service for children with a significant cognitive disability?

ii. NSW Department of Education and non-government schools need to develop webinar training to create a culture of excellence across the state. Training should include the ‘big idea’ information outlined in NESA guidelines as well as practical “how to make or use this resource” training. The Alaska Autism resource centre tackled this problem head on by providing training to teachers and SSLO staff over a large geographical area using webinar workshops. (Example sourced from: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ0Pz5JGEjk)

iii. NSW Department of Education should directly employ Speech Pathologists

3. Speech Pathologists in NSW schools: NSW is one of the few states in Australia that does not employ Speech Pathologists in Government schools (see Appendix 2: Speech Pathology Response to Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs). Speech Pathology services provided by state funded organisations are limited for school aged children. NSW Health closed its waiting lists for school aged children in our region while ADHC Speech Pathologists will transfer to the private sector in 2017. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will take over funding Speech Pathology services for a lot of students with a disability but they will be **working on goals that have been identified by the student’s parents (because teachers are not invited to NDIS planning meetings).** Only a few local schools employ private Speech Pathologists to work in their schools. As a Speech Pathologist I am a visiting service; a specialist in my field who recognises the excellence of teachers working in their area of expertise. The impact I can have is very much dependant on the collaborative relationship I develop with the teacher. According to Speech Pathology Australia's submission to the 2015 Review of the Disability Standards for Education: "The experiences of Speech Pathologists across Australia is that whether a child has their learning needs met really depends on the skills and interest of the teacher and how well that teacher is supported to do so by their school community and Principal." (**Sourced from: file:///H:/Curriculum/SPA_submission_Disability_Standards_Education_May_.pdf , p. 10.)**

Teachers are under a lot of pressure at the moment and are already struggling to meet all requirements outlined in the Australian Curriculum. Unless further changes are mandated by NESA, there will continue to be unpredictable outcomes for students with a disability in NSW classrooms. It is my experience that an outside service that places additional demands on teachers or SSLO staff, for example, to start using visual supports in daily classroom activities, will continue to fail more times than it succeeds. I can provide up to date information and recognised training, for example, Key Word Sign training workshops are recognised by NESA, but few teachers or SSLOs will start signing after attending a whole day workshop. I can provide practical support by making up the visual tools and therapy materials that have been requested by school staff. I can do all of this and most of the time I will have no impact whatsoever. I can work successfully with a teacher one year and have to start all over again the next when the student moves to a new classroom. I can spend hours making support materials that work really well throughout a school year only to find that they are thrown out the next because the new teacher doesn't like visual supports. Everything I do follows NESA recommendations but I am still an outside service placing additional demands on staff already overwhelmed with their workloads. The impact Speech Pathologists have in NSW schools is so small it feels like we are moving mountain with a teaspoon.

Recommendations: NSW Education to directly employ Speech Pathologist to work in NSW government and non-government schools alongside teachers according to the tiered support model recommended by Speech Pathology Australia: (Sourced from: file:///H:/Curriculum/SPA_submission_Disability_Standards_Education_May_.pdf , p. 38.)

C. Developments since the 2010 Upper House inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and the implementation of its recommendations:

"The NSW Government has a proud history of supporting students with a disability and the Department of Education and Training ('the Department') is widely regarded as a leader in the education of students with a disability or special needs." (Sourced from http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/documents/15060385/15385042/inquiry_disabilities.pdf p. 3).

I think we need to do much more to deserve this accolade.

1. **Is excellence recognised?** The region I work in has a lot of outstanding teachers who demonstrate superior work with students with significant cognitive disabilities. The problem is that their achievements are not celebrated: their schools seem to have no idea when staff should be recognised for a high level of excellence. These teachers are not put in positions of authority where they can mentor their peers or provide leadership within their school community.

2. **Our schools are using restrictive practices:** Schools also don't seem to be aware of their own restrictive practice guidelines. I have visited a number of schools where staff were using undocumented restrictive practices. For example, I have observed a student in a mainstream classroom blocked into a small area by bookcases positioned on all four sides. I have observed SSLO staff restricting a child's movement by blocking the student's chair and holding them in a firm embrace while the child screamed in distress. I've observed a child with an autism diagnosis made to sit on a dirty door mat near an open door in winter as a negative consequence when the student was clearly in distress and not able to listen to instructions. I've observed SSLOs physically propelling students with Autism multiple times a day with the student biting and scratching the SSLO's arms because were in meltdown. What distresses me most is that all the staff at these schools believed that they were doing a good job. These restrictive practices were used multiple times a day over a number of years with no plans on how they would reduce the use of these routines.

3. Reasonable adjustments: many teachers don't seem to be aware of strategies that are allowed to use under the heading of 'making reasonable adjustments' for students with a disability. For example, children with an autism diagnosis have very specific sensory needs. Parents are told that their child will not be allowed to remove their shoes in the classroom when I know this is not a school rule in other locations. Parents are told SSLO staff will not be allowed to go outside with their child to complete a calming activities (e.g. use a swing or dig in the sandpit) because they would then be out of the teacher's line of sight. I know many classrooms where this is not a school rule. Some teachers battle all day long with students who are too distressed to learn and having multiple meltdowns, when simple adjustments would create a positive learning environment.

4. Do our teachers actually know how a Support Classroom should function? Our teachers often work in isolation without any learning community they can turn to for help. Many mainstream or support class teachers still don't know how to use visual supports in their classrooms. There might be pictures up on the wall, but they are not being used. The problem is so prevalent that I train parents in the art of analysis: does your child's classroom really use the visuals supports you see or is it simply wallpaper that doesn't change from week to week. This is a specialised area of knowledge and our teachers have no idea how they are operating in comparison with other individuals in their profession. NAPLAN doesn't exist for students with a disability, so how does a Principal know if a teacher needs more support? If a formal complaint is made by a parent, could a principal recognise excellence in disability specific pedagogy or if there were no disability specific strategies at all?

Recommendations:

i. State awards for excellence in teaching students with a disability. We need film footage and photographs of strategies that follow Evidence Based Practice and a link with NESA guidelines that will inspire our teachers.

ii. Use of technology to allow teachers regular access to expert mentoring, training or special interest group meetings

5. Who is planning lessons? Teachers are trained to differentiate curriculum so that the child is able to participate in the same activity as their peers but with altered expectations. The school executive informs parents it is the teachers who plan scope and sequence and evaluate change. In my experience, teachers often delegate this work to the SSLO in the classroom. It is the SSLO who is making daily decisions: how will they adapt the lesson, how will they know the student is ready for the next level of work. I know SSLOs who borrow materials from Stage 1 classrooms because they are not getting enough support from the Stage 3 teacher they work with. I hear parents discuss how their child brings home the same worksheets year after year. Is this happening because no one is tracking change and maximising the child's development? We have our most untrained people teaching our most vulnerable students how to read and count without an individualised scope and sequence to follow.

6. Behaviour:

Tracking behaviour incidents in support units: Teachers who work in support units are often working in isolation. Even the geography can emphasise this separation because classrooms are often positioned at the edge of schools in demountable buildings. It would seem that teachers in support units manage behavioural difficulties on their own as well. Are teachers in support units recording behaviour incidents in the computerised school records just like a teacher would in a mainstream classroom? I certainly don't hear of parents being invited to school to meet with the teacher, LST and Principal when their child is misbehaving in a support unit. Support unit teachers usually talk directly to the parent about their child having a 'bad day'. They often attribute all changes in behaviour to problems at home. It is a type of learned helplessness: if the problem stems from home, I can't impact on what happens at school because the parent needs to sort it out. There is so much teachers can do to manage behaviour in their classroom: collaborate with parents, make observations and hypothesise (if I do this the behaviour will get worse and if I do this the behaviour will reduce); put in place strategies and track changes. It can be difficult to do all of this without support. In my experience, it takes a team to solve some of these complex issues. If a teacher is handling behaviour incidents on their own, they are not getting the help of their school community who can reflect and problem solve alongside the teacher.

Managing behaviour incidents in mainstream classrooms: I am a Speech Pathologist but most of my work is in behaviour because of the strong links between behaviour and communication. I note with concern that the NESA guidelines don't make this connection. In my experience the incidence of behaviour always reduces and communication increases when students gets more support in a classroom (such as those outlined in the NESA guidelines). Mainstream school 'Positive Behaviour Support' practices are often at odds with disability specific pedagogy however. Giving a child with autism a timeout punishment when they are highly stressed is likely to increase the incidence of the behaviour. In my experience, behaviour occurs when a child is confused, overwhelmed or frightened and we need to add more support to the classroom to resolve these issues. I hear mainstream school staff express frustration and anger when they are asked to increase support because they think behaviour as a crime that needs punishment. Schools are locked into a negative consequence mode of thinking (detention, suspension etc.). It is perceived that if a child gets more support (by using disability specific pedagogy) they are getting a reward for their poor behaviour. Behaviour is not seen as a thermometer in schools: something we use to measure how effective we are in our classroom routines. ADHC therapists have traditionally been called in to schools to collaborate with teachers to try and resolve these sorts of issues. These therapists will no longer be able to do this under NDIS unless behaviour has been identified as a goal by the parent in the child's NDIS plan.

Recommendations:

i. Schools need to change the way they manage behaviour of students with a disability by adjusting the way they think about the issue. This can be achieved by whole school training or mentorship with specialist teachers at SSP schools.

ii. ADHC Speech Pathologists have played an important role in the past. Schools either need to collaborate more with parents so that behaviour goals are listed on NDIS plans or directly employ therapists themselves.

D. Complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems in New South Wales:

1. Parents who don't complain: Parents know when things are not working in their child's classroom but they are often reluctant to make a formal complaint. Families who live in rural and remote regions don't have many choices. If their relationship with their child’s teacher deteriorates, there will be no other classroom they can transfer to. Parents are willing to put up with classroom practices that concern them greatly rather than ‘rock the boat’ by demanding more. For example, I have supported a number of parents with non-verbal children who attend a support unit where the teacher chooses not to use Augmentative and Alternative communication (AAC) systems. In another school, parents are not allowed to come into their child’s classroom at school pick up and drop off times and instead have to hand their child over to a SSLO at the school gate. Parents at this school desperately want to be able to see the classroom so they can be reassured that their child is supported with autism specific pedagogy (such as visual supports). These parents feel very vulnerable. One parent told me that she fears retribution if her complaint makes the teacher angry, particularly as her child is non-verbal and unable to discuss her day at school. Teachers are professionals, experts in their field and I don’t believe there would be negative consequences if a parent made a complaint. None the less, I often find parents are asking me to go into the classroom so that I am the one expressing these concerns. So what happens if I make a recommendation and the teacher chooses to not make any change? I can write a report, I can give feedback in teacher/parent discussions, I can present suggestions at IEP meetings, I can hand over therapy materials and visual supports but in the end I am a voluntary service and have to respect the teachers’ right to decline to do any work with me. It always seems that the teachers working well outside ‘accepted practice guidelines’ of disability specific pedagogy are also the ones who don’t want any parents or therapists in their classroom. I know a number of Occupational Therapists and Speech Pathologists who have all been turned away from a particular classroom. The parents have a lot of concerns but because they are not willing to make a formal complaint, nothing will ever change. I have to work under the direction of the parent, so if they choose to not make a complaint, I am not able to discuss my concerns with anyone else.

2. Will Private Speech Pathologists complain? As a government funded Speech Pathologist I can be brave and make strong recommendations about adopting evidence based disability specific pedagogy. A number of private therapists tell me they avoid doing this because they worry about future referrals to their business if they give negative feedback. They avoid the problem by withdrawing the child from the classroom so they will not observe what is happening. ADHC Speech Pathologists will become private therapists in 2017/8 so will they also stop advocating on behalf of children as well? Teachers and Speech Pathologists generally collaborate very well together and this relationship often results in superb outcomes for students. I hope we can continue to work in a way that helps children with a significant disability thrive in their school community.

3. Parents who do use complaint and review mechanisms within the school systems: I know of situations where parents' complaints were handled in a sensitive manner and the school sought out an expert teacher from outside the school to provide training and support. I am aware of other situations where the process failed. Parents are frightened to use complaint and review mechanisms because they hear negative experiences from those who do. I think the main reason complaint forums disappoint is that they fail the parent's expectations. Parents often think they will be attending a forum where they can express their concerns and contribute to a solution. This doesn't often occur because:

i. schools **don't** see complaints as opportunities to reflect on practice and instead switch into protective mode. I attended one meeting where a LST wanted to offer her support to SSLO staff who were being bitten and scratched by a student during toilet timing activities. The LST did this by criticising the parent for not toilet training her child at home. Instead of the meeting being used to reflect on the situation and explore ideas about what might make it work better (e.g. use social stories, mini-schedules for home and school, transition cues, timers or sensory reward breaks before and after the routine) and building a positive outcome together, the fragile relationship between parent and school was damaged.

ii. school staff vastly outnumber parents in formal complaint meetings. A parent might find themselves in a room with a Principal, AP, LST, School Counsellor, Teacher and SSLO and if the complaint is elevated to department, meetings can also include Student Services Officer. One mother said she felt bullied at a meeting where her voice and opinions were in the minority. The SSLO staff no longer felt safe working with her child because they could no longer use their bodies to restrict his movements (this strategy only works in Stage 1 when children are little and as a restrictive practice it should not have become a long term strategy). The parent was asked to start medicating her child. When she refused her words were drowned out by six other voices in the room. The family moved out of the area and the child was enrolled in a classroom that used evidence based autism specific pedagogy. The student started to thrive without any medication. There were no meltdowns at his new school and he started to use words and sentences for the first time.

iii. Parents want their knowledge and skills to be recognised. Since FaHCSIA and Better Start funding commenced, parents are better informed about what is evidenced based best practice. They are well trained specialists in their child's area of difficulty and often know more than the professionals they work with. Therapists find they develop strong working relationships with parents because they are an invaluable source of information. Preschools have benefited from building close relationships with parents and they now consistently demonstrate excellence in this area. Schools have remained exactly the same in this changing world. It is rare for parents to be invited to share their insights in what works and what doesn't work. Many parents arrive at the school gate well prepared with 'All About Me' and 'Communication Dictionaries' to help teachers learn more about their child. They have visual supports and sensory profiles all at the ready only to find that they are no longer considered an expert in their child and that their contributions are not wanted. I was invited in to work with a non-verbal student in a mainstream class and I discovered the school still didn't know the child had a successful communication system at home (Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)) when he had already been at their school for 3 years. The school had viewed themselves as experts throughout this time and so had not valued information given by the family. I observe that teachers are now clashing more often with parents because they want to do what they have always done. The most effective teachers are confident in their skills and draw a team of experts around a student. This team always includes the parents.

iv. According to parents, nothing changes in their child's classroom after making a complaint. The complaint process seems to be more about starting a 'who's at fault' process (is the parent, student, teacher, SSLO to blame?) rather than a conversation that opens up a dialogue and starts an exchange of ideas.

Recommendations:

i. Schools need to invest more in their teacher and SSLO staff (who are their biggest assets) by providing more training, supportive mentorships and

linking teachers up with special interest groups. Schools can achieve all of this using technology to provide equitable support in regional areas.

ii Complaints from parents should be considered to be an opportunity to reflect on practice and rebuild relationships. School leaders need to be trained in different ways of handling complaints so that issues are resolved in a way that supports everyone concerned. Parents generally want their voice to be heard, their knowledge about their child to be recognised and for some change to occur in their child's classroom. The current complaint process seems to do the opposite so many parents are now staying silent. Whenever a teacher demonstrates excellence in our region, the school is flooded with transfer requests. This should be recognised for what it is: a silent protest from parents who simply can not make it work at their child's previous school.

Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings: Parents report confusion about the IEP process and I must admit, I am not sure about how this procedure is supposed to work myself. I understand that it is a forum where teachers and parents meet together at the start of the year to collaborate together and identify the year's goals. I have been invited to attend a number of IEP meetings and I have observed:

i. parents are sometimes presented with a complete IEP and are asked to sign off on the document in the 10 minutes they have with the teacher. Other parents find the IEP document is the same year after year. In contrast, I have attended collaborative IEP meetings where the parent and teacher met for more than an hour and both exchanged ideas and goals so the document was built together.

ii. I have attended IEP meetings where parents have put forward excellent goals (e.g. please use visual supports in this autism specific classroom) but the teacher didn't add their suggestions to the IEP plan. It means the parent has no power to make recommendations by suggesting goals.

iii. More than once I have attended an IEP meeting where the teacher discussed goals that involved the work I was doing (e.g. creating visual supports, writing social stories, developing key word prompts and transition cues) but the way it was communicated made the parents think it was the teacher doing the work. On one occasion a parent made a formal complaint to my manager because they thought that I had done nothing all term because the teacher had listed my completed work as her IEP goals.

iv. I am aware of one occasion where the parent was told that IEP goals had been accomplished when they had not. The parent on this occasion was not allowed to come to her child's classroom (the teacher doesn't allow any parent to do this) and so the parent wasn't able to see the social stories and visual timetables listed on the IEP document had not yet been created.

v. Parents are not often given a copy of the IEP document and meetings are not scheduled at the end of the year to identify what goals have been achieved.

Recommendations:

I believe the IEP process is of immense value but it often feels like it is a bit of paperwork that gets done just to be seen to be done. There needs to be transparency in the process so that everyone knows exactly what is expected of them. I am surprised teachers don't have a document they must hand out to parents ahead of time that states the roles and responsibilities of everyone concerned. For example, parents are generally not aware that they can bring another person for support.

In conclusion:

Schools are the legs that our society stands on. They are a powerful vehicle for change in our communities but they can also be the quicksand that stops families from achieving their best outcomes. The words of teachers continue to resonate throughout the years: I work with a family where the tiny mother continues to lift her full grown daughter into the bathtub everyday because a teacher told her to do this 30 years ago. Schools need to start changing because society has changed. Instead of blaming our teachers we need invest in them and celebrate their achievements. We need to inspire our schools by giving them examples of excellence and clear guidelines that show them how to reach these high levels of performance.