

Submission
No 23

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL
SETTINGS**

Organisation: Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA)

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Inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales educational settings

Occupational Therapy Australia submission

February 2024

Introduction

Thank you for writing to Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) regarding the inquiry into children and young people with disability in New South Wales (NSW) educational settings (the Inquiry). OTA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for consideration by the NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education (the Committee).

This submission focuses on term of reference (p) – *'measures to implement the Disability Royal Commission's recommendations in relation to inclusive education'*.

OTA is keen to ensure that the important role that occupational therapists play in delivering inclusive education is supported and maintained throughout any NSW reforms. We welcome the opportunity to assist in planning for an integrated approach across state education systems. OTA representatives would be pleased to provide evidence at a future hearing on this matter.

Occupational therapists

OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of September 2023, there are over 30,000 registered occupational therapists in Australia, including over 8000 in NSW. Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities. Individuals practising occupational therapy must be registered with the regulatory body, the Occupational Therapy Board of Australia, under the auspices of the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).

Occupational therapy, education-based services, and inclusive education

Occupational therapists play an important role in supporting the delivery of inclusive education, by working with children and young people of all abilities to support participation in education. Occupational therapy education-based services range from developing and implementing school wide strategies, working with teachers to support students to engage in all aspects of their learning, and working with children one-on-one. Interventions are tailored to need and can include social emotional learning and aged appropriate pedagogy such as play based learning and life skill courses. Occupational therapists also play a key role in supporting positive student behaviour and wellbeing.

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

OTA has reviewed the comprehensive final report (the report) delivered to Ministers by the Royal Commission into violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people with disability (the Commission). OTA notes the stated aim of the commission to work towards the end of segregated education and recognises that this is a controversial and challenging area which has seen diverging recommendations from specific Commissioners.

Improving workforce capabilities, expertise, and development to realise inclusive education.

In the report, the Commission notes that a safe, quality, and inclusive education can only be delivered through significant transformation of the Australian school system. The report goes on to outline fifteen recommendations that seek to guide this transformation. This submission focuses on the implementation of recommendation 7.8, which relates to improving workforce capabilities, expertise, and development. Part of this recommendation urges state and territory government to increase access to expertise in inclusive education in government schools by employing lead practitioners specialising in inclusive teaching, behavioural support and deaf education to work across schools in a regional catchment to initiate and lead activities that focus on improving educational opportunities for students with disability, including by establishing inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of students.

Inclusive education in mainstream schools

As previously described, occupational therapists play a key role in specialist education settings and are increasingly working in mainstream schools to support all students to participate fully in their school experience and achieve their goals. OTA understands that one of the essential elements to ensuring the successful transition of education systems toward truly inclusive education, will be to ensure that the valued supports available in special schools can be readily accessed in mainstream settings.

Inclusive education is about diversity in general, however, the focus on students with disability as a central tenet of inclusive education. Students with disability have a range of educational, health and social welfare needs. With 1 in 10 Australian children aged 5 to 18 years having a disability, and almost 90% of these children attending mainstream schools, and 1 in 5 students receiving an educational adjustment related to disability, it is likely that teachers will need some support to adequately meet all these needs.

The challenges faced by teachers to provide for the diverse needs of students with disability necessitates working in unison with allied health colleagues, such as occupational therapists. Within inclusive mainstream classrooms collaborative practice between teachers and occupational therapists helps teachers better meet the demands of students and although roles may overlap between professionals involved in the education of children with disability, occupational therapists have unique discipline-specific skills and expertise to provide a holistic evaluation of the barriers that prevent students with disability from accessing and participating in their education.

Proposed model

OTA urges the Committee to adopt the Commission's recommendation 7.8 as a matter of priority. Specifically, we request that the NSW Government fund the direct employment of allied health professionals, such as occupational therapists, within the NSW Department of Education and establish well-resourced multidisciplinary teams at the regional level. The primary focus of these positions should be to enable the *universal provision of allied health services to all students* by working with teachers to build staff capacity and develop and implement school wide strategies that support *inclusive education for all*. We believe that this model will enable a whole-school approach

to inclusive education that embeds allied health professionals within the educational sector. Furthermore, this model would support the centralisation of decisions regarding service provision, which would reduce disparities in access to services and expertise across the state. Such a model will enable a level of support for all NSW families with children, meet the needs of families who currently receive no support, or limited supports, and ensure equitable access. It will also improve the workforce capabilities of the NSW educational system.

These positions should support clinical placements for newly graduated allied health professionals to support the development of the future workforce.

A case study: the benefits of a school based occupational therapist

The following case study provides a firsthand recount of a parent's experience with a school based occupational therapist, as per OTA's proposed model, and the benefits this model had on her daughter.

"I had an outside occupational therapist trying to assist with a successful transition into high school, using social stories, developing strategies on where to go to feel safe and regular trips into the school alongside the outside occupational therapist to explore options, which expended considerable funding, we were being met with considerable school resistance/ refusal from our daughter.

The school occupational therapist began taking a small group of students each week to work on barriers for each of them, bringing the students into the fold to problem solve as a group. Through this collaboration the students were able to brainstorm ideas, like where to go that's not as noisy, who's someone that's not scary to ask for help, is there anyone who's nice to meet in the morning before going to class, etc...

From this process multiple changes were made, including changing where her locker was situated, she had students she could find in the morning if she was stressed/ anxious and could ask for help, she also agreed to help other students with things that they needed help with.

This not only had her entering school independently, but she also quickly became comfortable enough to catch the bus independently to school. This all occurred within the first two weeks, originally, we expected something like catching the bus would be a yearlong goal.

The school occupational therapist expended less hours than our outside NDIS funded occupational therapist to achieve multiple goals in a fraction of the time.

One of the huge benefits in the model is the collaboration between students with similar challenges, where students would "feel stupid" for needing help with things, this also creates social groups and opportunities that can completely transform the school experience for a student with a disability.

Also, collaboration with a child's regular occupational therapist is incredibly valuable, dramatically reducing the amount of time spent to try and create strategies to solve problems in an environment they aren't really familiar with. This leaves them open to work on specific goals outside of the school environment."

OTA Contact

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