



DISABILITY INTO THE FUTURE AND THE IMPACT ON SCHOOLS

There is a commonly held misconception that advances in technology and medical science have led to a decrease in disabling conditions. Examples cited include prenatal screening for Down Syndrome and identifying the link between Spina Bifida with the mothers intake of folic acid. International research **does not** support the view that disability is decreasing. There is actually strong evidence to suggest that the nature of disability is changing resulting in an *increase* in some disabling conditions.

Many educational jurisdictions have enthusiastically adopted the philosophy of full inclusion whereby all students with disabilities could be accommodated in mainstream schools. This philosophy particularly appealed to systems who identified special schools as being resource intensive and expensive to run. It was also fueled by the misconception outlined above that assumed that special schools would no longer be required into the future as disabilities decreased.

Over the preceding two decades many policy makers subscribed to both of these viewpoints resulting in a diminution of special education provision and training. Particularly the failure to build new special schools where required and to staff them with appropriately trained staff. Lastly there is no nationally consistent criteria for disability funding support despite the adoption of the Disability Discrimination Act and Standards for Schools.

1. BACKGROUND

Population and resourcing

The number of children with disabilities in Australia is estimated at 386,100, or approximately 7.8% of children from birth to 18 years.

According to a recent OECD report Australian Education Authorities recognise between 12 and 20% as having special needs, but only around 2% are assessed as requiring individual programs. Proportions actually receiving special education support vary between states and fluctuate within states with changes in policy and funding mechanisms. This becomes particularly apparent when families relocate between states and territories and find that they are either eligible or non eligible for support in their new location.

According to the Productivity Commission of Australia (2003) funded students with disabilities were;

NSW	Vic	Q'ld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
4.8%	4%	3.2%	3.1%	7.4%	4.8%	4.2%	15.8%

President/Director: Mr Peter Davis
43 Cascade Street
Raceview QLD 4305

Ph: (07) 3813 5777
Fax: (07) 3813 5700
e-mail: pdavi16@eq.edu.au

Secretary: Mr Allen Cullen
Kurrambee School
Werrington Road
Werrington NSW 2747
Ph: (02) 9833 7400
Fax: (02) 9623 1335

e-mail: allen.cullen@det.nsw.edu.au

All states and territories have reported a growth of the actual number of children with disabilities. This growth has been driven by an increase in language/communication disorders, autism spectrum disorder and intellectual impairment. Carpenter (2006) indicates a number of causes for the increase in disabling conditions.

- Foetal alcohol syndrome disorder is the single biggest cause of non-genetic disabilities impacting on *high* socio-economic communities as well as indigenous communities.
- Increases in In vitro-fertilization (IVF) have led to increased multiple births. Carpenter reports that 70% of such births have resulted in some type of disability.
- A major rise in the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- A rise in childhood mental health issues including the fact that children with a special educational need are three times more likely to have a mental health issue.

2. IMPACT ON SCHOOLS

To determine exactly which students receive special education support, and how much support they receive has become a very complex process. Increasingly schools are becoming frustrated with the complexity of paperwork and time required to determine exactly which students are supported and at which level.

The arguments surrounding inclusion further impact on students, families and schools

Baroness Mary Warnock states

"Governments must come to recognise that, even if inclusion is an ideal for society in general, it may not always be an ideal for schools, I think it has gone too far. It was a sort of bright idea of the 1970s but by now it has become a kind of mantra and it really isn't working. Pressure to include children with severe emotional and behavioural problems and those with conditions such as autism had caused confusion of which the children were the casualties." Lightfoot (2005)

In most states the growth in the number of students with disabilities has not resulted in the establishment of new special schools. This has impacted in several ways. Firstly many special schools are experiencing high enrolments or enrolments of students with needs for which the school was not initially designed. Secondly in many areas both metropolitan and rural where special schools do not exist parents have had no choice but to enrol their child in a mainstream school. So whilst most policy makers promote informed parental choice, in reality a choice of schools is not available to many parents.

Conditions which result in challenging behaviours have the most impact on schools and these appear to be on the rise in all types of schools. However there is little recognition that special schools often manage students with the most extreme behaviours associated with intellectual impairment, autism or mental health issues. The co-morbidity of these conditions is high. A lack of acknowledgement of the changing face of disability has resulted in diminished support at all levels, fiscal, pedagogical and human to these schools.

President/Director: Mr Peter Davis
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Fax: (07) 3813 5700
e-mail: pdavi16@eq.edu.au

Secretary: Mr Allen Cullen
Kurrambee School
Werrington Road
Werrington NSW 2747
Ph: (02) 9833 7400
Fax: (02) 9623 1335

e-mail: allen.cullen@det.nsw.edu.au

Australian Special Education Principal Association Ltd (ASEPA)
ACN 098 803 233

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. Development of an agreed national definition of children with disabilities. This definition to take account of the latest research showing changing national/international trends in the nature of students with disabilities. The definition should acknowledge that this change has been accompanied by an increase in the number of students who are violent and aggressive.
- 3.2. Transparent and consistent resource allocation and funding mechanisms across Australia. Identification of student *need* and the resultant resource allocation processes to be streamlined and easily understood by both educators and families.
- 3.3. Increased linkages between Australian Special Education Principals Association members in all states and territories with the key education policy makers to ensure the changing complexities are reflected across systems.
- 3.4. Recognition of the need for teachers and school leaders to be sufficiently trained in order to manage the changing nature of the students with disabilities. This includes both specialist teachers/school leaders and mainstream teachers/school leaders.
- 3.5. A full continuum of service provision be available to parents of students with a disability from full inclusion to special schools. New special schools to be established and maintained in areas where demographics indicate they are required.
- 3.6. A greater range of professionals to assist with diagnosis and support be available to assist schools with the changing face of disability and these should be included in the resource allocation of schools.

4. REFERENCES

- Carpenter, B. 2006 The Changing Pattern of Childhood Disability. Paper from AFSEA conference Melbourne 2006.
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