



AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL EDUCATION PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION

POSITION PAPER - TEACHER TRAINING

1. INTRODUCTION

Australian society readily endorses the rhetoric of a “fair go for all” yet equitable access to quality education for all students with special education needs, including those associated with disabilities is currently not being achieved.

One of the principal factors contributing to the achievement of equitable outcomes for this group of students is the provision of a sufficient number of teachers, all of whom have professional expertise to match the task. Across Australia, in all sectors, there is both an immediate crisis with regard to supply and, a longer term challenge to provide educators generally, and, in particular, suitably qualified special educators.

As a profession of choice, teaching is not presently attracting sufficient numbers to meet the demand. Evidence from universities across recent years indicates a falling standard of entry qualification level to undergraduate teacher courses. At the same time as other professions are more attractive to the “best and brightest”, the teaching profession is beset with pressures due to a range of social impacts including

- Community structural breakdowns relating to the care and support of children,
- lack of social support structures to counter these breakdowns,
- government and community demands for improved educational performance and accountability,
- failure of resources to keep pace with demand and
- most significantly, the teaching demands of the current student population
- the unintended consequences of policies of inclusion without adequate practicality, realism or support structures

2. THE IMPACTS OF INCLUSION PHILOSOPHY

The practice of inclusion, whereby students with special needs, including disabilities,, are educated alongside non disabled peers, has created an additional demand for expertise that is currently not being met. There has been a mistaken view that placement alone will meet all of the philosophical imperatives of inclusion, together with the assumption that the same learning environment is optimal for all students. It is somewhat ironic to witness now the development of separate programs of “excellence” for gifted and talented students

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specializing in science, mathematics, drama or sport to meet what is perceived to be this cohort's unique needs for a particular set of learning environments. The critical priority concern for students with special needs (including disabilities) to achieve appropriate outcomes is contingent, surely, upon a similar consideration for the optimal learning environment which may or may not be in a mainstream generic placement. A range of placement options that is resourced equitably and given equal status does not presently exist and both government and non government sectors have been seduced by the lure of apparent economic efficiency of "one size fitting all" in the quest for inclusion.

In reality, for inclusion to be successful, specialised expertise is required at a number of levels in any system, viz

1. for teachers of students with special needs who are included in mainstream classes, requiring some level of expertise of the teacher
2. for teachers of students with a greater severity of exceptional need for whom a second, higher tier of teacher expertise is required.
3. for teachers of students where a policy of parental choice has created an expectation that all teachers will be equipped to cope with all disabilities in all settings.

3. CURRENT CONTEXT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

The following features of the contemporary context represent the collective views of special education administrators across Australia and have been endorsed by ASEPA as an accurate "expert" perspective from the profession:-

- Special Education courses received great attention immediately following the Second World War and for several decades following. Teachers were recruited and given in-service incentives and universities then had the justification for course provision. Few, if any such courses, are now available.
- Further to the points relating to inclusion (above), in the latter part of last century, the status of special education as a unique profession has been challenged and this has been further complicated by being enmeshed into the inclusion debates.
- In many circles there is a philosophical view due to the inclusion movement that there is no longer a need for special educators.
- As a consequence of the lack of demand for specialisation, there are fewer university courses available to train special educators. Any content relating to the traditional areas of special education, if it does exist, then, is more likely to be delivered in a generic, less rigorous context.
- Current policies create financial disincentives to train (HECS). Costs are incurred by individuals.
- The lack of expertise is further being exacerbated by the current attrition rates due to both ageing and the disincentives to enter into and remain in the profession at this time. The Victorian Department of Education, for example will lose 70% of the trained Special Education Principals in the next 5 years and 40 % of Special Needs Teachers are expected to leave over the next 5 years. A study by ASEPA(2006 a) has confirmed that this trend is replicated to a greater or lesser extent in all states and territories

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- Employment policies for teachers in this area have changed over the past 10 years. For example, Victorian and Western Australian Education Departments once required special education qualifications. These are no longer mandated. This changing views on the requirements of special qualifications is being exacerbated as systems are being forced to put on teachers without special education qualifications because of scarcity of trained personnel
- Students with special needs are increasingly being subjected to programs without appropriate educational outcomes. This will intensify as the capacity of all education systems to replace expertise is reduced. This potentially will, in turn, lead to more litigation for States as parental demands for quality educational outcomes cannot be met.
- This corporate knowledge of special educational practice is not being replaced and therefore systems “do not know what they do not know”. Perception, understanding and knowledge of what is needed for these students is lacking. This is a dire situation and, with the introduction of the DDA standards, demand for this expertise will be increased, but not necessarily acknowledged by systems. The potential waste of social capital if students with special needs do not achieve their potential is to be deplored.

4. ACTIONS REQUIRED AND RECOMMENDED

ASEPA contends that students with special educational needs require a unique professional response by persons trained to appropriate levels of expertise, no matter where they may engage for their education programs.

Further, systems are increasingly liable to legal and moral challenges for failing to provide that level of expertise.

The profile of special educators across Australia must therefore be raised in the following ways:-

- The Federal government needs to take the lead and fund professional training programs for special educators to meet the changing needs of this cohort of students
- The Federal government needs to take a strategic lead in promoting best practice in preparation of special educators across Australia and to ensure that parochial interests of individual training authorities do not override considerations of effectiveness and efficiency. Australia has a relatively small total population and, therefore, in this field particularly, fewer course offerings of quality, centrally coordinated but delivered regionally would make economic and educational sense.
- The School Practicum components in undergraduate courses must include a block in a special education setting
- States need to have workforce policies and practices that encourage staff to move between settings to allow for professional development in the area of special education
- There needs to be a central capacity to monitor, evaluate, research and develop pedagogy to continue to adapt to the changing face of disability. As well as changes

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in the degree of disability due to improvements in medical treatments, there is a new set of students with special needs such as those with autism or foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. (ASEPA,2006(b))

- With respect to the need for ongoing in-service professional development, there is a need for the incorporation of mentoring roles, and peer instruction.
- Leadership roles, particularly for special education programs would benefit from the application of an *internship* concept to ensure that experience and skills are retained and improved
- There needs to be a reconsideration of the benefits of inclusive policies as well as the disadvantages that presently are emerging.

REFERENCES

- ASEPA (a) Survey of Special Educators Attrition Rates in Australia
- ASEPA(b) Position paper on the Changing Face of Disability
- PASS Position paper on Report of Qualifications Sub-Committee

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