

Towards inclusion: an Australian perspective

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This article outlines the views of the Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA) on inclusion and the impact this is having on Australian Government Schools from a school based perspective. ASEPA is a relatively young association and was formed in 1997 out of the need to put forward the case to support students with special needs and disabilities nationally, due to the inability of the other peak educational bodies to adequately cover the special education area, while covering so many other areas relevant to the day to day operations of schools. Meeting the needs of special needs and disability students is the core business of ASEPA. Fiona Forbes, ASEPA's Vice President, covers areas such as parental choice, schools and their ability to meet the needs of students with special needs and disabilities, teacher training and the type of schools needed in the future to further develop effective programmes for 'all' students.

Key words: curriculum; disability; inclusion; leadership; students with special needs; teacher training.

Introduction

Australia is similar to much of the developed world in terms of the issues it faces in Special Education. By the nature of its sheer size and geography, Australia has many and varied approaches to working with students with disabilities and special needs. Each state and territory has their own jurisdictions and interpretations of the federal perspective. Under the Australian constitution, states have responsibility for education. Some additional funds are provided federally for targeted priorities. Systems and processes for the disbursement of funding to schools is different in each of the seven states and territories, with little apparent transparency and consistency.

The Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA) promotes:

- the professional development of special education principals and other leaders in special education;
- the provision of a full range of education services for students with disabilities from inclusion through to special school placement;
- research and excellence in special education;

It is from this perspective that this article is written.

Internationally, educational authorities have adopted a philosophy of inclusion to address their social and moral obligation to educate *all* students. The competing needs of different types of disabilities and special needs, as expressed through the associated lobby groups, have led to a range different philosophies of inclusion. This paper does not seek to articulate the perceived positives and negatives of inclusion, except to promote debate as to the current direction of inclusive practices. For example, Smith (2006), has suggested that the inclusion debate has, for too long, focused on whether children with learning difficulties and disabilities should be educated in special schools or mainstream, rather than the quality of education and the support they receive. This is also the perception to which Baroness Warnock (2005) alluded to when referring to inclusion, 'that to persist will be foolish . . . the idea of inclusiveness springs from the heart in the right place'. Baroness Warnock describes the implementation of the philosophy of inclusion in the United Kingdom and the consequent moving of students out of [special] schools as a 'disastrous legacy'.

This article aims to give one interpretation of inclusion in the Australian context, from the perception of school based special educational principals, leaders and practitioners. While being supportive of the intended positive outcomes of inclusion, the paper questions the efficacy and efficiency of current policies of implementation and practices. Finally, the article suggests possible models for the future that are being discussed by advocacy groups at a national level as possible solutions to the issues raised.

Current context

Currently, in Australia there appears to be a philosophy, both implicit and explicit, of 'full inclusion'. This has been

interpreted to mean that all students with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream schools alongside non-disabled peers, in order for the benefits of inclusion to be realized. There is a current underlying tenet that believes that the necessary needs based learning environments can be created in any mainstream school. Such statements often ignore reference to the sufficient and necessary specialized teaching skills, human and financial resources required to achieve this.

This misconception that inclusion refers to a place and not a process is very pervasive. The current Australian view is restricted to the concept of an inclusive school as a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, and where special education needs students are supported and cared for by their peers and other members of the school community. This is a Utopian view, where there are no references to the processes and learning environments needed to achieve authentic educational outcomes for *all* students.

Politically, inclusion can be seen as very attractive to the economic rationalists as it is mistakenly perceived to be less resource intensive and palatable to the various strong lobby groups including bureaucrats and parents. Some parent advocates perceive that 'inclusion' as a descriptor avoids negative status and therefore their child's educational needs will be met.

Impact of policy changes

One impact of the policy and practice of inclusion is the gradual diminution of specialized knowledge and experience and the school facilities and resources associated with them. Over time, if this is left to continue at its current rate, this will lead to a serious erosion of embedded professional knowledge. Furthermore, there is a perception that modern advances in technology and medicine will result in a decrease in disabilities. There is no basis for assuming that this will be the case. Carpenter (2006) suggests that if one looks ahead, there may, in fact, be increases in incidence of disabilities, for example, due to iodine deficiency, poverty, drug use and alcohol consumption. He also suggests that Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is identified as being the single biggest cause of non-genetic learning disabilities facing future society. ASEPA believes that the policy and practice of inclusion places systems at risk in the long term. Special Educators have traditionally worked with parents, the medical profession, therapists and others to develop appropriate pedagogy for students with disabilities – autism being a pertinent example. ASEPA is concerned that mainstream teachers will be unable, for a variety of reasons, to assume these added professional responsibilities when faced with both these new and existing disabling conditions.

There is currently an immediate crisis in the supply of suitably qualified special educators across Australia. The practice of inclusion has created a demand for expertise

within regular education for specialist knowledge that is currently not being met. This is placing unrealistic demands on teachers with little or no knowledge of the specific needs of these students. The additional complexity of this movement demands a greater level of expertise. This demand is at three levels:

- students who are included in mainstream classes with significant special needs, for whom the teacher has not been prepared;
- students with exceptional needs for whom a greater degree of teacher expertise is required;
- the current policy of parental choice has created an expectation that *all* teachers will be equipped to cope with *all* disabilities in *all* settings. Current pre-service training is not equipped to provide this expertise.

The lack of expertise is being exacerbated by the demographic characteristics of existing, experienced special educators. Attrition rates are especially high, primarily because of the impact of an ageing profession. For example, the state of Victoria will lose 70% of trained Special Education Principals in the next five years. Forty per cent of Special Needs Teachers are expected to leave over the next five years (Principals Association of Specialist Schools (PASS), 2006). An ASEPA survey has confirmed this as a national trend.

There has been a considerable lack in planning by policy-makers and university training providers to counter this trend. The accumulated knowledge of special educationalists leaving or retiring is not being replaced and, therefore, systems are left not knowing what they do not know. There is little in the way of informed understanding and knowledge of what is needed for students with SEN. This is a situation of great concern to ASEPA, and with the introduction of the federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992, and its subsequent standards, the demand for this expertise will be increased with no strategic plan for how the current knowledge is to be replaced. The situation is further complicated by the mistaken belief that the philosophy of inclusion has reduced the need for previous levels of specialization.

To meet the obligations of inclusion and anti-discrimination legislation alone, schools of the future will be required to have teachers with adequate training in disabilities and special needs at an undergraduate level. All systems will also need to ensure that they have enough teachers and principals/headteachers who have highly specialized skills relevant to the needs of students with special needs and disability.

Nationally, there is a severe shortage of those undergraduate degree opportunities that might allow prospective teachers to major in special education; so, even when employees seek a high level of qualifications, this prerequisite is often not able to be met.

Many undergraduate teaching degrees do include one or more units in 'disability studies' as a requirement. While this can be seen as a positive experience for all participants, the reality is that such units frequently contain mainly generic content that raises awareness but does not address the knowledge and specialized pedagogical skills that teachers will need to enhance the levels of academic and social outcomes for pupils/students.

As a result of these changes, there is a reduced number of vocational pathways for teachers who would, in more favourable circumstances, wish to develop a high level of specialization in disability and the professional opportunities related to this expertise. There are fewer courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels available to train special educators. In Australia, many argue that there is no longer a need for 'special educators' in an age of inclusive developments. In the past, the lack of staff with formal qualifications would have been countered by committed general educators who have refined their skills 'on the job', in schools and other settings for students with disabilities. However, as these schools continue to be marginalized, or even shut down, the opportunities to use them as training and research facilities will also diminish.

This trend runs parallel with employment policies that have changed over the past ten years. No state or territory has a requirement that a special education qualification should be prerequisite for employment as a special educator. For example, Victoria and Western Australia once required special education qualifications in order to teach in special schools; these policies are no longer adhered to, in response to a lack of qualified personnel. There are also changing views on the requirements of special qualifications. Systems are being forced to employ teachers without designated special education qualifications because of the scarcity of trained personnel. Moreover, current policies create financial disincentives to undertake further training, where the costs now have to be incurred by individual teachers. Historically, the post war special education emphasis was met with a strategically planned and supported training programme for professional development. Of those courses currently advertised to teachers in Australia, few subsidized places are available and the courses have often been delivered at a more generic, less specialized level. In consequence, many students with special needs in mainstream settings are frequently not receiving adequate curriculum support to enable their learning needs to be met. As has already been pointed out, this situation will be exacerbated by the reduced systemic capacity to replace expertise. ASEPA believes that this may, in fact, lead to more litigation against state and territory education authorities as parental demand for quality educational outcomes are not met.

Future system accountabilities

Accountability is of paramount importance in twenty-first century schools, irrespective of their global location.

ASEPA believes that *all* students can learn if they are exposed to, and participate in, appropriate teaching and learning programmes. This can be achieved by providing a full continuum of services in both specialist and mainstream settings, with appropriate choices being made available to parents at all points in their child's education. The maintenance of a polarized debate in which specialized programmes are seen to be negative and mainstream programmes positive, irrespective of quality or outcomes, cannot be sustained without prejudicing the future of students with disability. Accountability must, therefore, be for achievement of outcomes – what students know and can do, rather than placement and inputs.

All schools, both specialist and mainstream, should be accountable for the learning of all students enrolled. While many students cannot participate in standardized testing, appropriate measurement methods do exist to assess student achievement. The recent 2006 audit document, *Educating Primary School Students with Disabilities in NSW Primary Schools* by the NSW Auditor-General, found that there was no real evidence to suggest that effective assessment of the support needs of students in support units, support classes or mainstream classes was being undertaken.

ASEPA believes that, notwithstanding the above, some students' needs are not necessarily best served in mainstream schools. 'Inclusive schools' value the learning of all students. Specialist schools *are schools* not 'institutions' in a Goffmanesque fashion; they are inclusive in their nature. They understand that their primary aim and responsibility is for teaching that will result in improved student outcomes across a rich and diverse curriculum, thereby preparing students for inclusion into the broader society.

This is an important principle: inclusion should mean being involved in the common enterprise of learning rather than necessarily being under the same roof at a particular phase of education. Parents have the right to choose the most appropriate education for their child and be offered the full continuum of services when considering schools if their child has disabilities. They require support to understand that each option may have its inherent advantages and disadvantages. Parents need to be given opportunities to make informed choices on the academic and social outcomes for their child. This should include advice on all facilities in the local area that may provide appropriate educational outcomes, without bias towards one educational setting or another and without an emphasis on a crude interpretation of term inclusion.

To honour this right, ASEPA would contend that *all* component parts of the Australian education system have an obligation to

- create and maintain appropriate specialist facilities, e.g., special schools;
- create curricula that allow access, regardless of ability;
- design systems that allow all schools to be accountable for student learning (not just care).

The primacy of future curriculum

The importance of curriculum cannot be understated as the principal pathway to achieving inclusion. ASEPA contends that a separate set of curriculum processes is not required for students with disabilities, but rather that the generic curriculum outcomes become a common inspirational goal for *all* students.

The ASEPA summary statement on curriculum (2006) found that while all Australian systems have assumed a theoretical responsibility for *all* students, they struggle to resolve the tension between their aspirations for learning for *all* and an authentic curriculum model. They are attempting to develop a generic product broad enough to accommodate the learning outcomes of *all* students when clearly *all* actually means *most*. ASEPA believes that provision of curriculum by state education systems needs to move beyond a *theoretical* obligation to students with disabilities and special needs to the *actual inclusion* of the learning outcomes of *all* students. ASEPA believes that the curriculum needs of students with a range of special needs must be built in to all policies and documentation, and not merely ‘bolted on’ as an afterthought. Designated curriculum authorities must move from writing curricula and syllabus materials that appear to target the ‘typical’ or average learner to those which include *all* students at all phases of schooling. A developmental continuum such as the English system of P-Scales is needed in the educational landscape in Australia. Until we have a similar system, we will continue to exclude a significant population of students in all curricula documentation currently being used to deliver programmes to students. It is ASEPA’s position that these students need to be the starting point rather than the afterthought of curriculum development and the processes within it.

It is clear that no one school can possess all the skills, understanding, and knowledge, nor a complete range of programmes and resources to ensure all students achieve to their maximum potential. Emphasis needs to be placed on developing interdependent, collaborative models to access knowledge, programmes and resources wherever they exist.

To enable a model such as this to emerge, a school needs to be an effective organization. Kanter’s (1989) research on effective organizations of the future shows that, in order to function successfully, organizations need to:

- pool resources with others;
- ally to exploit an opportunity;
- link in partnership.

To be successful in an inclusive environment, schools will also need to adopt these principles.

The model outlined in Figure 1 is a demonstration of how this could work in the Australian context.

This model enables:

- free movement of students and staff across the cluster and between types of schools;
- movement based on the student’s curriculum needs, social needs, resource provision and capacity to provide a programme;
- expertise and resources to be shared;
- some central specialist provision for rural and remote area.

Increased school autonomy has placed principals/head-teachers in a crucial management role: that of ensuring that students with disabilities and special needs receive the support to which they are entitled.

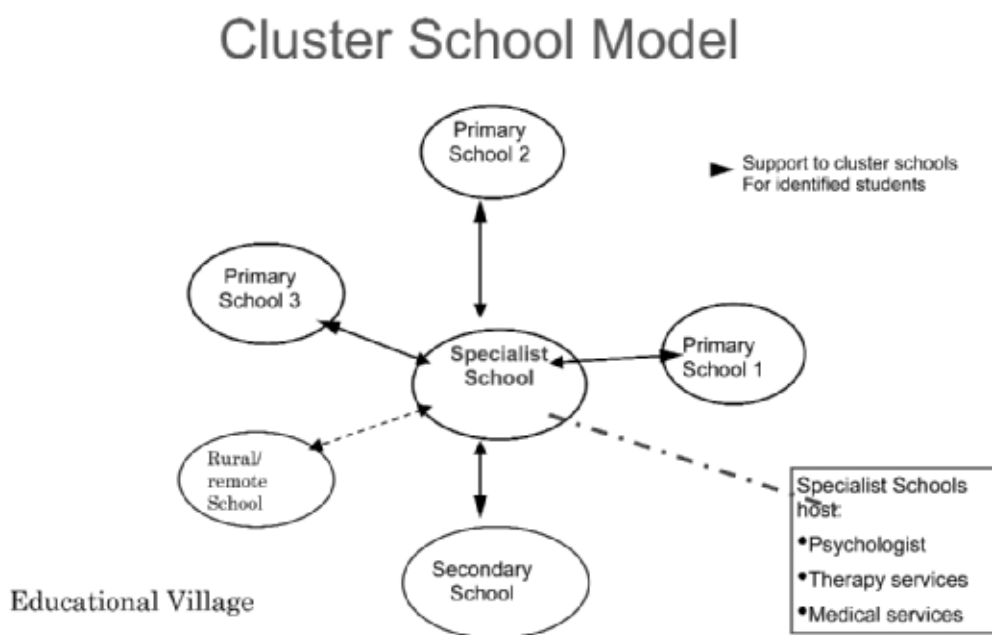


Figure 1. Cluster model

Tom Luce, former chief of staff for the Texas Select Committee on Public Education, stated:

Most of the factors that we have long believed determine academic results are not as important as we may have thought. But all those successful schools, whatever the economic status or location, shared one vitally important characteristic. The common denominator of successful schools, we found, was a principal who was an academic leader. (Luce, 2000)

The West Australian model of service delivery for students with language disorders, disabilities and special needs is an indicative example of how this concept can be embraced. Over the past twenty-five years there has been a very successful ‘schools within schools’ approach, offering a highly inclusive environment within which pupils can operate. It is based on a co-principalship model, which is underpinned by a philosophy of shared management, collective power, shared responsibility and accountability, and consultation and collaboration. In order to facilitate teamwork and shared skilling, focus needs to be on collegiality and co-ownership. The approach is summarized in Figure 2.

Conclusion

The two models illustrated in this brief article are examples of how inclusion can be achieved and learning outcomes and curriculum integrity maintained. They have been developed to meet specific local need, but the underlying principles are easily able to be generalized to suit other situations. Parents of students in specialist facilities across Australia are highly satisfied with the progress, outcomes and level

of care afforded to their children, as evidenced by parental surveys conducted by systems. They are able to see progress in their children and are also able to see them successfully access the wider community after they leave school. This is attributed to the highly skilled and competent teaching and learning programmes that are provided during their years in special schools and facilities. This level of satisfaction and successful educational outcomes is strong evidence from the consumer, and advocates that a continuum of service inclusive of specialist facilities is a highly valued commodity and one that needs to be maintained. Such sentiments will find echoes in many other international locations.

The schools we need are effective schools that will focus on maximizing outcomes for *all* students. These will be schools that will provide a quality programme for all students, regardless of where they are receiving it. It is not about inclusion any more, but informed parental choice about the programme options available that will best achieve desirable student learning outcomes. Australian systems planning for a ‘continuum of service’ will be the best equipped to move into the future.

As has been noted in the UK: ‘Effective schools are educationally inclusive schools . . . in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and well-being of every young person matter’ (OfSTED, 2001).

In sum, the schools we need in Australia will require that:

- all teachers have undertaken compulsory units in disability/special needs;
- all teachers have completed a practicum in a specialist school or setting;

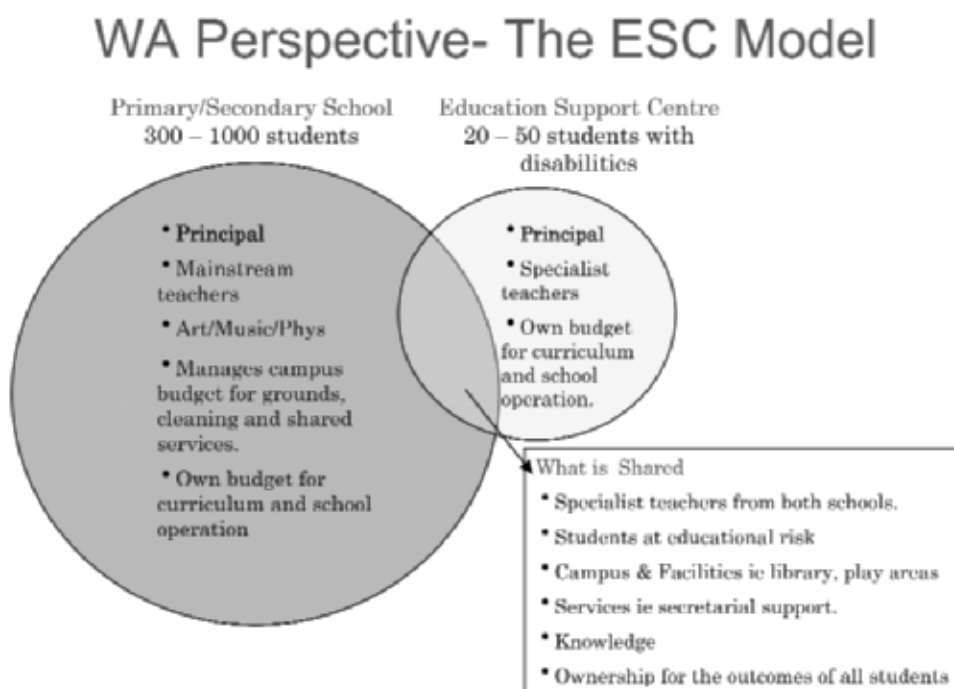


Figure 2. WA ESC model

- an additional tier of expertise is available for students with disabilities through specialist teachers who have appropriate qualifications, skills and competence;
- all teachers are able to move between settings to share and update their expertise.

Within these schools teachers need

- direct support, not consultancy models;
- a ‘shoulder to shoulder’ model of peer teacher support;
- clear curriculum direction that outlines the essential knowledge and skills to be taught;
- principals/headteachers who are educational leaders who use evidence-based decision making
- quality education, regardless of setting, is what is needed for *all* students.

It is a limited view that sees separate special education as no longer needed in any system. A system that is limited by these narrow views and ideas is not an inclusive system, but, by its very design, results in exclusion for some students. With planned and supported training programmes that value difference, state education systems will be looking forward to the achievement of genuine inclusion.

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