Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter:	Family Advocacy
Submitting as a:	Parent or community organisation
State:	NSW

Summary

In order to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools, all students need to be learning in the same classroom together, with authentic inclusion in the three domains – physical, social and curricular. In order for this to happen, we need to overcome the barriers to inclusion. We need to remove the segregated system currently in place, combat the culture that supports segregation, create and support an inclusive culture, provide greater clarity in the legislation for more accountability, and instill good quality pre-service teacher training. By removing these barriers, we have the opportunity to learn that we are all different and all the same. With this appreciation within our education system, we can produce positive outcomes for all students which will lead to a better world for everyone.

Main submission

About Family Advocacy

Family Advocacy supports families to advocate for a good life for their family member with disability for the things most of us would expect in Australia: a good education, a place to call home, a valued place in the community amongst friends and family, and the supports, informal and paid, necessary to make that happen.

Family Advocacy was founded by families of people with disability and is funded by New South Wales (NSW) and the Commonwealth. Our purview lies in alignment with the overall objectives and aims of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act (1 July 2013). Our goal is to advance and protect the rights of people with developmental disability to achieve meaningful lives and enjoy the same opportunities and living conditions as the majority of Australians.

Terms of reference

Family Advocacy appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the more effective and efficient use of funding to improve the outcomes of all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students. Our comments are premised on 25

years of experience working with families in the education system in New South Wales, collaborating with the Department of Education, and our widespread knowledge of international research in the field of inclusive education.

What is Inclusive Education?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability, and its General Comment on the Right to Inclusive Education No.4, stated in 2016 that:

Inclusion involves a process embodying changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies in education, with a common vision that serves to include all students of the relevant age range.

The Committee emphasizes that placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without appropriate support does not constitute inclusion. Similarly, creating discrete and isolated units for students with particular disabilities within a mainstream school environment remains a form of segregation, and cannot be defined as inclusive education.

Inclusion is not a place, a service, or letting children with disabilities join typical children for particular activities.

In contrast to segregation or congregation, Family Advocacy defines inclusion as:

- a commitment to creating environments in which all students feel welcomed, accepted and honoured for who they are

- the belief that everyone benefits from knowing, interacting with and learning from a wide range of other individuals

- the understanding that we are ALL different - and ALL the same. We are all human beings seeking connections, affection, and opportunities to learn, grow and belong. We all have different strengths, challenges, and needs for support

- inclusion is also the recognition that if we want to make a better world for everyone we all need to learn to be comfortable, skilled and enthusiastic interacting with a wide range of people.

In school, inclusion has three main domains:

- physical - where students with disability are present in the same environments as all other students for the same amounts of time

- social - where all students are welcomed and seen to belong. Students with disabilities are not separated in the classroom or playground, including through being with the support staff during times when their peers are together

- curricular - where all students are included in the same lesson material, with appropriate adaptations.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

Educational success for Australian students means that all students should be learning in the same classroom together. Both international and Australian research shows that children with disability do better on all measures in inclusive settings, rather than disability-specific settings (Cologon 2013, Jackson 2008). This claim may seem hard to believe, given the widespread practice of special schooling in Australia and overseas. Yet in 2008, a rigorous review of literature comparing inclusion and segregation could not find a single empirical study that drew conclusions in favour of segregation (Jackson 2008). A study of literature by Dr Kathy Cologon in 2013 found the following:

- inclusive education leads to better social development for children with and without disability

- children who experience disability who are included into mainstream educational settings demonstrate better academic and vocational outcomes when compared to children who are educated in segregated settings

- children who do not experience disability have also been found to benefit academically from inclusive education with equal or better academic outcomes compared to children participating in non-inclusive settings

- and through participation in inclusive education, teachers experience professional growth and increased personal satisfaction.

Research shows that inclusion in the regular class provides the best learning outcomes for children with disabilities (de Graaf, van Hove and Haveman 2013), as well as benefitting children without disabilities (e.g. Dessemontet and Bless 2013). Children who are taught with diverse peer groups benefit in a variety of ways and have no negative impact on their overall results. As evidence suggests, those included in mainstream education are more likely to gain social and economic participation in the general community due to exposure to a diverse curriculum, employing key social skills/cues, enhancing communication skills, building support networks/friendships along the way in inclusive settings.

Most recently, in A Summary of the evidence of Inclusive Education (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2016), suggests that it is through the development of a culture of collaborative problem solving that the inclusion of students with disabilities serves as a catalyst for school wide improvement and yields benefits for non-disabled students (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Hehir & Katzman, 2012). Every students unique needs are being met because

educators have developed the skill needed to move from the traditional classroom to a flexible learning space that facilitates collaboration.

Therefore, it is clear on the evidence mentioned above, that the educational success for all Australian students and the preparation for their future, would be best facilitated within a fully inclusive education system.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Educational success should not simply be measured with standardised testing. We need a more sophisticated view of assessment. Each individual student and their learning pathway is unique. We need better tools in addition to the standardised testing. This includes tests for the skillsets to prepare for success in this changing world such as the well known four C's – communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking.

It is important to recognise each student as a diverse and different learner. There should be individualised education plans for each child with the tracking of each student's progress.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

Major reform of education is needed to build a culture in all schools where all students belong, are valued and included in the regular class lessons, with adjustments and supports as needed, and seated with their peers. It is essential that students are supported to build social connections and friendships, and provided with support to understand diversity and inclusion. If every child is known, valued and cared for, their learning outcomes will excel.

Effective and efficient funding allocation

The biggest impact regarding school funding to support inclusive education would be to shift the organisation of resources and infrastructure from the segregated setting to the inclusive setting. As we have previously explained, current evidence and values of community inclusion no longer support the model currently in place.

It is extremely important that we highlight that the success of inclusive education is not solely reliant on funding. What is also significant is having school leaders that create an inclusive culture. A school with an inclusive culture will search out solutions, use collaborative problem solving and flexible working structures.

As previously discussed, the inclusive culture provides a significant positive impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students.

Barriers to implementing these improvements

The parallel segregated system

The largest barrier to implementing an authentic inclusive education system which improves educational outcomes for all students is the existence of the parallel segregated special settings. Whilst a segregated option for children with disability exists, students will fill it. This leaves school leaders and regular classroom teachers feeling able to indicate that there is another place for students with different learning needs. A more enabling model is one where the system is expected to guarantee participation in the regular class and all those involved ask "what will it take" to enable the child's full participation. This can only happen if the option to segregate is not available.

A school culture that supports segregation

We have a culture of exclusion which then informs the school systems and practices that are adopted in response to students with disability. A recent study reported that 70% of students with disability experienced one or more examples of gatekeeping or restrictive practices (Poed, Cologon, and Jackson 2017). For example, families of a child with disability had experienced refusal to enrol in a regular classroom or discouragement to enrol in a regular classroom, offered only part-time enrolment, or the majority of classroom teaching being undertaken separate from peers.

Obviously, if a child with disability cannot enrol in a regular school and participate in the same way as a non-disabled child, as demonstrated with the research cited above, this will adversely impact educational outcomes for all students. A transformation in culture and practice is required to ensure that all students belong and we need to adapt our methods and resources to ensure this will occur.

Lack of clarity in legislation

More robust legislation is required to provide more clarity in regards to defining the responsibilities of school leaders to provide a more inclusive education for all. For example, the definition of "reasonable adjustments" is not clearly defined under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and leaves a student with disability open to indirect discrimination by a school leader who decides that an adjustment requested is unreasonable as it will cause undue hardship. This can be their own substantive opinion rather than an objective measure. One family reported to us that their local school said it was unreasonable to provide an AUSLAN communication partner for a student who communicated solely through sign language.

Inadequate teacher training

Lack of quality teacher education and support is a barrier to inclusive education. Teachers attitudes directly influence the implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom. Teacher education is directly related to teacher attitudes. Teachers who receive education about inclusion have been found to be more likely to have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disability (Cologon, 2012).

From the experiences of our families, an approach to pre-service teacher education would be to move away from deficit thinking with low expectations to an approach that welcomes and celebrates differences. It is not only disadvantaged and vulnerable students, but all students who will benefit from this approach.

Conclusion

In order to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools, all students need to be learning in the same classroom together, with authentic inclusion in the three domains – physical, social and curricular. In order for this to happen, we need to overcome the barriers to inclusion. We need to remove the segregated system currently in place, combat the culture that supports segregation, create and support an inclusive culture, provide greater clarity in the legislation for more accountability, and instill good quality pre-service teacher training. By removing these barriers, we have the opportunity to learn that we are all different and all the same. With this appreciation within our education system, we can produce positive outcomes for all students which will lead to a better world for everyone.

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