



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

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Submitting as a: Other (Group of academic experts in inclusive education)
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Summary

This submission refers to all students and focuses on those perceived as challenging for educational systems to accommodate, especially due to disability or identified learning needs. How an education system includes these students is a core indication of its effectiveness. We present evidence to support improving school performance and student outcomes through inclusive practices, specifically using evidence-based teaching in mixed-ability classrooms to benefit all students both socially and academically. The submission argues that current practices constitute entrenched barriers to effective inclusion by interfering with two foundational characteristics of effective schooling: (1) the inclusion of students with diverse abilities in naturally heterogeneous classrooms, and (2) effective use of teachers who are competent in adopting flexible teaching practices that are supportive of high-quality learning for all students. The barriers discussed in the submission are grouped into these two sections.

1. BARRIERS THAT IMPACT ON PARTICIPATION IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS
 - 1.a. Decreased enrolment of students with disability in mainstream schools
 - 1.b. Students with disability experience diverse forms of gatekeeping and restrictive practices
 - 1.c. Students enrolled in mainstream schools are impacted by continued use of ability grouping, streaming and settings
 - 1.d. Many students with disability experience limited access to curriculum and assessment.
 - 1.e. Students with disability are more likely to be suspended or expelled
2. BARRIERS TO STUDENTS BEING TAUGHT BY QUALIFIED TEACHERS
 - 2.a. Reliance on practices that lack supporting evidence
 - 2.b. Over-reliance on teacher aides

2.c. NDIS impact of withdrawal and use of therapies in schools

The cost of these practices is substantial in terms of funding and resources but, most importantly, underachievement and limited lifelong opportunities for a large group of students. The submission provides directions for structural and cultural changes in developing a quality, inclusive education system for all students.

Main submission

REVIEW TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

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We thank the Panel for the opportunity to provide a submission on this Review.

When considering how excellence in Australian schooling might best be achieved, it is vital to consider how this can be achieved for all students. This means reviewing what the evidence shows to be the best ways of supporting high-quality learning for all students, including those with a disability or an identified learning need.

There is clear evidence of superior outcomes across a range of domains when these students are taught by qualified teachers in mixed-ability classrooms. One way of measuring these superior outcomes is through academic achievement. This body of research has found that students with disability who are included in mixed-ability classrooms “performed significantly better on measures of language and mathematics than students with similar disabilities [who were not included]” [1]. Similar benefits are extended to students without disability who also make greater academic progress in mixed-ability inclusive classrooms [2].

Another superior outcome from inclusion in mixed-ability classrooms is the social benefits that accrue for students with and without disability in terms of improvements in behaviour, acceptance of diversity, and ability to cooperate in pursuit of common goals [1]. Working cooperatively and respectfully with diverse individuals are critical capabilities to prepare students for future work, and support productivity in the workplace [3].

Further superior benefits of mixed-ability classrooms can be seen in long-term outcomes for students with disability relating to their participation in further education and employment, as well as the ability to support themselves as independent adults. Longitudinal studies show that students who are educated in inclusive high school environments are more likely to enrol and remain in postsecondary educational courses, which are associated with better employment opportunities and greater financial independence [4,5]. Additionally, students with disability who are educated in mixed-ability classrooms have improved social-emotional development, peer-relationships, classroom behaviour, independence and self-sufficiency [1].

The two main reasons for these positive outcomes are:

- 1) the inclusion of students with diverse abilities in naturally heterogeneous classrooms enables them to learn both with and from their peers in prosocial, language-rich environments, and
- 2) teachers adopting flexible practices, such as explicit teaching and clear instruction, that are helpful for ALL students. Educational success should be evaluated by achievements in terms of both academic and social outcomes for all students.

The international research evidence shows that all students achieve better academic and social-emotional outcomes when they are included in mixed-ability classrooms and taught by qualified teachers, yet this is not the norm in Australian schools.

In this submission, we point to the continued use of practices that are not evidence-based, and for which the published research evidence shows negative outcomes. The continued use of these practices serve as barriers to keeping students in mixed-ability classrooms as outlined below.

1) BARRIERS THAT IMPACT ON PARTICIPATION IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS

Barrier 1a: Decreased enrolment of students with disability in mainstream schools. Increases in identifying and labelling students with disabilities give the impression that there are more students in mainstream schools, but national data indicate that there was a 35% increase in special schools attendance between 2003 and 2015 [6]. In New South Wales, since 2011 there was a 12% increase of students in special school and 19% in special classes. This is a long-term trend, going back in the 1990s

[7]. Systematic enablers to ensure that mainstream schools are the default enrolment choices could include a clear articulation of enrolment processes and expectations.

Barrier 1b: Students and their families who persevere for a mainstream enrolment experience diverse forms of Gatekeeping and restrictive practices. The 2016 report of the Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee on access to learning for students with disability received several submissions on gatekeeping practices in mainstream schools[8], resulting in minimized school enrolment and reduced participation in classrooms, as well as several reports of the use of gatekeeping practices [9]. Oleinik defines gatekeeping as a strategy used by power holders (in this case, principals and teachers) to create, mobilize, recreate and reinforce structural barriers, such as access to education [10]. Such barriers include, but also extend beyond, direct refusal to enrol students with disability, making them or their family feel unwelcome, offering a part-time enrolment or limited service provision, asking the family to supplement resourcing, educating the student in isolation from their peers, limiting access to curriculum or extracurricular activities, or the use of restraint or seclusion. Poed et al. [11] highlighted that across Australia, these practices are widespread, with over 70% of Australian families responding to a recent survey stating their child had been subject to one or more of these practices. Accountability and transparency for decision-making processes that affect the full participation of students with disability would assist in changing school cultures that perpetuate these processes and practices.

Barrier 1c: Students enrolled in mainstream schools are impacted by the continued use of ability grouping, streaming, and settings of classes. There is strong consensus in the empirical research literature that homogeneous class grouping through ability groups (or sets), streaming, tracking and selective schooling has little benefit for either higher or lower achieving students [12]. Decades of research has yielded little systematic evidence of the value of grouping classes by ability, while documenting the many undesirable impacts such as perpetuating disadvantage for vulnerable and minority students [13]. Data from PISA confirms that countries where ability-grouping in instruction is the norm have greater inequality of performance between students, while there are no significant benefits for overall performance [14]. PISA results demonstrate that countries that do well, typically offer a more “comprehensive” style of education [15]. Policies that actively endorse evidence-based grouping practices could assist with supporting their uptake and implementation by schools.

Barrier 1d: Many students with disability experience limited access to curriculum and assessment. While the Australian Curriculum is a curriculum for all students, many students with disability experience restricted access to it. This is mainly due to perceptions about specific students’ capacity to access the curriculum. This

restricted curriculum could include 'life skills' options, 'watered-down' access to the Australian curriculum, or access to specialist/alternative curriculum materials not aligned to the Australian curriculum. For example, in NSW approximately 2.8% of Year 10 students are enrolled in English, Maths and Science Life Skills [16]. Further, there is evidence that students with disability or additional education needs have lower participation rates than students without a disability at the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). NAPLAN data are not disaggregated by disability. Dempsey and Davies, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, estimated that more than a third of students with additional needs did not participate in national testing [17]. In a study commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (VDET), Haisken-DeNew et al. found that students receiving funding in mainstream public schools in Victoria under the Program for Student with Disability (PSD) have substantially less participation in NAPLAN [18]. Only one third of the students receiving PSD funding participated (265 out of 1,115), while the rest were exempted (715), or withdrawn by parents (103). Overall there is a 'steady decrease' in participation rates in NAPLAN of an average of 0.2 percentage per year [19]. Students with disabilities are potentially overrepresented in this figure in all settings. Bien examined the trends of participation in the period 2008-2013 by school type and reported that special schools have an average of non-participation of 8% reaching 13% in 2013 (withdrawn and absent) [20]. Teacher competency in planning for access to the curriculum by diverse learners could be improved by structural opportunities to develop these skills. Accountability could be embedded in the NAPLAN program by introducing transparency of the numbers of students with disability who do not participate, and disaggregation of the results.

Barrier 1e: Students with disability are more likely to be suspended or expelled from schools than their peers [21,22]. Principals have used suspension as a strategy to remove students ineligible for targeted supports to create a paper trail justifying additional needs[23]. Approximately 9% of 745 Australian parents recently reported their child with a disability had been regularly suspended from school, with over 17% of parents also reporting student suspensions for minor reasons [9]. Students with disability are also disproportionately expelled from schools, and many without the requisite requirements and processes that must occur before and after an expulsion [22]. If students are not in schools they will not learn, and a high-quality system would ensure that all students are learning. Students must be protected from unfair expulsions through embedding their human rights into transparent processes and shared decision-making between principals and school sector representatives [22].

2) BARRIERS TO STUDENTS BEING TAUGHT BY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Barrier 2a: Reliance on practices that lack supporting evidence and overlook those known to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students, particularly

students with disability who are frequently taught using unsupported teaching practices [24]. There is a solid evidence base identifying practices are effective for supporting diverse learners in mixed-ability classrooms and which are good practice for all students. These include cooperative and peer learning arrangements which were recommended in the Senate Report [9]. Limited implementation of these in practice represents a research-to-practice gap and forms a barrier to school improvement. This points to the need for teacher professional learning to be grounded in sound evidence in contrast with the current arrangements whereby teachers are able to use their professional learning funding to access training in discredited techniques such as Brain Gym [25,26].

Barrier 2b: Over-reliance on teacher aides means that teachers are transferring the responsibility of educating students with disabilities to lesser-qualified assistants [27,28]. The number of aides has increased by almost 49 per cent over the past ten years, with schools currently employing 92,800 [29]. This represents a significant investment of public money yet there is evidence to suggest that aides may have a negative impact on the learning of students with disability [30]. Sharples et al. found that when resourced with a teacher aide, classroom teachers tend to spend less time interacting students with disability, and they recommended teacher aides be deployed as a supplement, rather than a replacement, of the teacher [31]. A high-quality education system requires that students, particularly those most in need of support, should be supported by appropriately-qualified professionals. One suggested improvement is to ensure minimum qualification standards for teaching assistants and clear expectations of their role.

Barrier 2c: NDIS impact of withdrawal and use of therapies in schools, with increased demand on school facilities and students missing vital class instruction. To achieve excellence in Australian schools, key issues in relation to the interface between NDIS and school education require urgent attention. While the NDIS does not cover the provision of therapies to support educational goals, it does provide therapeutic supports to improve a student's functional capacity. In NDIS trial sites, this has led to scenarios of students, for example, having different home- and school-delivered therapy, each providing separate therapeutic interventions [32]. A co-ordinated service provision, with co-constructed goals and shared support planning, is vital [33,34,35,36].

In conclusion, this submission outlined a range of widespread and entrenched practices that negatively affect the inclusion of students with diverse abilities, and that affect the quality of the schooling system as a whole. These practices utilise resources, infrastructure and staffing that could be used in more effective and efficient ways towards the development of an inclusive and high-quality educational system for all students. To achieve this, radical changes in long-standing practices

are required if the promise of high-quality education is to be realised for all Australian school children.

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