

AUSTRALIA

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES (INCLUDING DEAFBLINDNESS): A REPORT FROM AUSTRALIA

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The following short paper has been written as a script to accompany a 25-minute powerpoint presentation to be shown at a UNESCO seminar, the 24th Asia-Pacific International Seminar on Special Education, in Yokosuka City, Japan. As preparation of this paper was assisted by those who shared some useful and timely information, the authors would like to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance given by the following people: Michelle Aniftos, Toowoomba, Queensland; Lyn Armanasco, office admin, Braille transcriber and other roles, Education Western Australia; Kieran Blake, teacher, Yirrkala CEC, Yirrkala, Northern Territory; John Brigg, Manager of Inclusive Education, Education Western Australia; Marlene Browne, Principal, Gladys Newton School, Perth, Western Australia; Chris Dinning; Learne Dunne, Assistant Principal, Henbury School, Wanguri, Northern Territory; Geraldine Gray, State Coordinator; Special Learning Needs, Catholic Education Commission NSW; Sharon Barrey Grassick, Senses Foundation, Maylands, Western Australia; Lisa Hall, Teacher, Utopia Homeland Schools, Utopia, Northern Territory; Lorraine Hodgson, Assistant Principal, Namarluk School, Ludmilla, Northern Territory; Noeline Laurie, Assistant Manager, Student Services, Wulagi, Northern Territory; Rhondda McDougall, Support Teacher Vision, NSW Dept. of Education; Diane Schwartzkoff, Senior Education Advisory Teacher, Student Services, Australian Capital Territory; Dr Michael Steer, Renwick College, NSW; Dennis Yarrington, Principal, Cranleigh School, Holt, ACT; Sian Ziesing-Clarke, A/Deputy Principal, Woden School, ACT.

Slide 1 (Title)

0.1 The focus of this presentation is on current Australian policies and programs regarding the education of children with multiple disabilities and sensory impairment, including deafblindness.

Slide 2 (Outline)

0.2 This presentation comprises three sections, in addition to a brief introduction and conclusion: a short literature review, an overview of teacher education programs and three case studies to illustrate the range of work being undertaken.

Slide 3 (Introduction)

1.1 In the 10 years since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was produced educational policy in Australia has moved strongly in the direction of making education more *inclusive*.

1.2 The proportion of students with a disability in Australia is said to be 3.9% of the total school population in government schools and 2.2% in the Catholic school sector (Australian Parents Council, 2002). Another recent estimate (van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer & Rickards, 2000) is that "students with vision, hearing, intellectual, physical, social-emotional and multiple disabilities" comprise between three to five per cent of the Australian school population. However, according to the ABS (1998, cited in the Senate Report, 2002, section 7.42), at least 277 400 children aged 5 to 17 were considered to have a disability, representing eight per cent of the total population. In the view of some researchers (van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer & Rickards, 2000), the difference between these figures can be partly explained by the "a lack of uniformity across Australia in the way in which students with disabilities were identified with different criteria being used for operationalising the definitions across the states and territories".

1.3 It is a concern that less than half of the young people with high support needs in Australia are likely to complete secondary education compared to the rest of the population. This is a major equity challenge for Australian educators and governments. It is also of concern that "Women with disabilities are less likely than their male counterparts to receive a senior secondary and/or tertiary education (WWDA, 1992).

1.4 According to the Australian Constitution, education is largely under the control of the States rather than a Commonwealth Government responsibility (Sawer, 1975, p. 94). However, in practice, education is jointly funded by Commonwealth and State governments because of the costs involved, and in view of the fact that since 1942 only the Commonwealth Government can raise revenue through income taxes.

1.5 Educational services for children with disabilities are provided within a Commonwealth and State framework of disability discrimination legislation. The most important law, *The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)*, put in place by the Commonwealth Government, has established a rights-based framework for evaluating service provision.

However, since the provisions of this Act are "very general" (Senate Report, 2002, section 7.15) there has been some doubt about the extent to which they can be applied. "Although these Acts effectively guarantee the provision of educational services to all

students, they do not specify the way in which these services should be delivered" as Tracey (2002) has noted. Schools are required to comply with the Act unless this creates 'unjustifiable hardship', a term that has created some "uncertainty about the precise legal obligation this entails" (NCIS, 2002, p. 8).

In 1995 a council of education ministers (MCEETYA) established a task force to help achieve a uniform national approach by developing standards that would provide "greater certainty about equity entitlements for students with disabilities" (Senate Report, 2002, section 7.15). However, nine years later these educational standards are still in draft form.

Slide 4 (Research)

2.1 Pierce (2001) summarised some multiple disabilities survey results obtained from a range of countries, including Australia. The 221 vision professionals who participated in the study agreed that their greatest need was for more books that are specifically designed for the VI/MD population. Of the 48 products or curriculum ideas that were rated in priority order by the respondents, the one that was identified as the top need was "age-appropriate (10-20 years old), high-interest, low vocabulary books for students with visual impairments and multiple disabilities, in which interactive output is used".

2.2 Through her research Dr Teresa Iacono, at the Centre for Developmental Disability, Health Victoria, has contributed important understandings about the uses of augmentative and alternative communication (see, for example, Iacono, 2003 and Bloomberg, West & Iacono, 2003). One of her recent projects used small groups of carers to trial PICTURE IT, a communication training package designed for carers of adults with severe and multiple disabilities.

2.3 Dennis Yarrington, Principal of Cranleigh School in the ACT has spoken to us about the need for research to evaluate the *effectiveness* of various communication strategies, by determining whether they make a difference by improving educational outcomes. If we don't do this, he says, the risk is that we simply swap one communication system for another, simply because it is new, without necessarily knowing whether it is more effective or not.

Recent research on autistic disorder is relevant (for example, by Couper & Sampson, 2003) because it has highlighted the pervasive problem that there are many competing interventions in Australia, some of which are not supported by adequate scientific research. For example, "sensorimotor integration therapy ... and dietary interventions ... are widely practised in Australia, but data for their efficacy are inadequate", whereas there is "now definite evidence that behavioural intervention improves cognitive, communication, adaptive and social skills in young children with autism". However, this approach is not commonly implemented largely because of its *expense*. Although this situation is beginning to change, especially in Western Australia (Couper & Sampson, 2003), "most young children with autism in Australia do not receive intensive behavioural intervention programs" as a result.

Tony Payne is directing a project to identify strategies for supporting students with vision impairments and to improve access to useful information about teaching practices. Funded by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC), this project is being undertaken by a consortium of universities (Melbourne, New England, Sydney and Tasmania). A report is due in December 2004 but updates on

progress should appear on the Web (www.utas.edu.au/services/visproj) as they become available.

2.4 In a study commissioned by the State Minister for Schools in New South Wales, McRae (1996) estimated the costs and benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities. After visiting more than 50 schools in New South Wales and interviewing relevant stakeholders, his conclusion was that current anti-discrimination law and education policy were not being upheld and so the way in which students with disabilities were enrolled and supported in schools should be reviewed.

Stephenson (2003) has also considered the inclusion of students with high support needs in regular classrooms in NSW, but from a staffing perspective. She concludes that it would not be unreasonable to suggest a "case load of up to nine or ten students for a special educator providing services only to students with high support needs".

Despite the efforts made by both regular and special schools Parmenter (2002) points out that

Presently, one of the most disturbing problems is the lack of opportunities for students with high support needs to access special employment supports upon leaving school.

In his analysis one of the factors that limits effective post-school transition for significant numbers of students with disabilities is the type of support they receive at school. For this is usually highly structured. Since the locus of control is usually external, the student is not called upon to make many decisions. However, on exiting school, responsibility shifts to the student, who has not yet gained enough experience in negotiating his or her own support needs. One unfortunate consequence of this lack of preparation is the 'revolving door' situation where students with disabilities may take several TAFE courses in succession in an unplanned and somewhat adhoc manner. In an attempt to offset this Parmenter (2002) has advocated that "the transition planning process should start **early** in the students' secondary school life".

Such planning is essential since "The prospects for many school leavers from special schools and special classes are severely limited and are, in many cases, uncoordinated" (Parmenter, 2002). Similar concerns were expressed by a number of the people interviewed by Nancy Devlin when this paper was being prepared. "

Slide 5 (Teacher education)

3.1 In many pre-service programs (e.g. in Western Australia, New South Wales and the Northern Territory) at least one unit on inclusive education must be taken by students. However, this is not yet the case in the ACT.

3.2 Of the various institutions which offer relevant courses in Australia the Faculty of Education at Newcastle University is noteworthy because it offers a Master of Special Education (Sensory Disability). This accredited program is available in two versions, one with honours, through Renwick College, which is operated by the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children.

3.3 What are the main gaps? We have identified two: Not enough specialist teachers are being produced; also, Australia's teacher education programs do not provide enough high level of training for classroom teachers in the use of technological aids such as Boardmaker and switches.

Slide 6 (Inclusion at work)

4.1 Since the middle 1990s Australian education systems have been producing more inclusive curricula. One of the newer ones is the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework, which is based on an outcomes-based approach that incorporates Essential Learnings. The scope of the curriculum is such that students with special needs are no longer excluded. However, special schools and students with identified special needs can still be exempted from the requirement that each school's performance be reported using Multilevel Assessment Program test data. These tests are administered each year to students in Years 3 and 5. Educators working with these students have begun grappling with ways to map what they are doing against the reporting framework.

Preservice students are no longer primarily taught subject content across specific years of schooling. They are now shown how to gauge students' level of functioning and, ideally, how to create individual education plans for all students across all areas of the curriculum.

In the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework a section called Key Growth Points precedes each subject area. These have been specifically designed to include students whose levels of skill development put them below the normal entry points for schooling. Students at the other end of the spectrum are also catered for by the inclusion of a Band 6 level *beyond* the knowledge, skills and understandings they are reasonably expected to need at the end of mandatory schooling. As a result, the breadth and flexibility of this curriculum framework make it impossible for any Northern Territory teacher to say, "This child is outside the scope of the Curriculum". The Curriculum is also useful for negotiating transition points, whether from pre-school to primary, from primary to secondary, or from a special school to a support unit in a mainstream school.

In this connection it is worth noting that the role of special schools has changed dramatically over the past 10 years. Many now have outreach programs into mainstream schools as well as dual enrolments to meet the needs of some children. Many students with high support needs also attend mainstream school at the request of parents. However, one issue raised by a teacher interviewed in connection with this paper is that students with complex needs are becoming the only ones left in special schools. With the inclusion movement gaining momentum "kids with moderate support needs are now mostly in mainstream schools".

In gathering information regarding best practice in Australian schools many people were consulted about programs that they thought were doing something really superior which should be shared with an international audience. More indepth information was gathered about three programs: one from the east, one from the west and one from the centre.

Slide 7 (Gladys Newton)

Gladys Newton School in Perth has 73 enrolled students aged 4 to 18, including a student who is deafblind. These students enter at various points, from the early years through to high school, with many entering from mainstream schools, support units or support centres. Some have autism with severe global developmental delay. Many have multiple disabilities.

The student who is deafblind has a full-time support assistant and uses a communication system, based on tactile signing, which has been devised by the Visiting Teacher Deafblind in conjunction with school-based staff. She has recently learned to eat from a bowl whereas three years ago she was solely tube-fed. (This program of desensitising has required a 3-1 staff-student support ratio.) Her priority areas, as well as those just mentioned, are learning to walk with a sighted guide and other self-care skills. She participates with her schoolmates in all other non-priority programs including excursions, playground, bike riding (using a modified bike) and the Health Club.

The Principal, Marlene Browne, has described two of the school's most successful programs. The first, from the University of North Carolina, is a structured program based on an approach known as TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children). Classes are very carefully set up. Students all have Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) workstations and predictable routines. They know how to do the set tasks. They are able to access drawers which are coded with pictures and symbols.

On a good day students will work up to half an hour on self-initiated tasks. As PECS is basically a visual augmentative system, predictability makes it work best. All teachers ensure that each day gets off to a good start by going through the schedule with the students.

A lot of time and energy have been devoted to teacher development, with a focus on communication issues; for example, using the PECS approach. The teachers have found that using picture cues has been most effective as a communication system. The students gradually improve as they stay in the school. As they get older they become less dependent on the cards and can be in smaller spaces with a less rigid classroom structure. The parents are thrilled with how PECS is going at home since many of the children are now less violent.

The other program worth mentioning is a Health Club that the school has developed, largely because it faced up to the challenge of getting the students to be active enough and of ensuring that the high-school-aged were getting enough physical therapy. In the beginning the aim was just to support the older students, but the Health Club is now being used more widely. In fact, it is now accessed as well by therapists who bring students from other schools. So the Health Club is a model that other schools are beginning to copy. It is outfitted with treadmills, a mag-rower, a stepper machine, a multi-gym and a wheelchair bike. Students with low vision and the student with deafblindness are able to use the equipment. Even the children with autism, once they get over the anxiety, really enjoy participating.

The school keeps base line data so that individual progress can be gauged. The results have included successful weight loss, steadier walking and improved heart rates. However, this Club has not only helped the students with some of their physical needs; it has also provided a bridge to supporting students by helping them gain better access to the wider community and to a range of post-school options. In our view, given the complexity of the students' needs, the outcomes they have achieved are quite outstanding.

Slide 8 (Cranleigh)

Cranleigh, a school for those with moderate intellectual and/or multiple disabilities, has been at the forefront of developing programs to help students realise their potential and gain greater access to the wider community. It recently won a \$10,000 National Literacy and Numeracy Award which, according to the principal (Dennis Yarrington), is the first one that has been given to a program for students with multiple disabilities.

The school, which has approximately 80 students ranging in age from 3 to 12, is organised into three sections, based on age rather than disability. It has a policy of integrating students into local primary schools; for example, 20 students have recently moved on to mainstream settings.

The school's communication and literacy skills program makes use of PECS, PCS Boardmaker, as well as specialised computer interfaces such as Intellikeys software, Alphas and a range of switches and voice output devices. As well as relying on newer computer-based methods of enhancing communication skills, Dennis Yarrington has said that the school uses gesture and articulation as well to reinforce communication. Cranleigh is firmly committed to the Productive Pedagogies curriculum model, most widely implemented in Queensland.

The literacy program is based on the Four Resources Model: word study, writing, reading and communication. PECS has been found to be effective in working with children with autism, which has also been the experience at Gladys Newton School and at many other schools in Australia. While neither of these programs is for students with deafblindness, they have assisted students with communication needs. As Dennis has said, referring to a student with cerebral palsy in his school, once the communication channel was accessed the student's behaviour really improved.

As at Gladys Newton School, the staff believe in the importance of collaborating with families. This includes training parents to use PECS.

Slide 9 (Utopia)

We will now consider a program offered at a cluster of remote schools in the Northern Territory. The students who access the program do not have high support needs, as these are generally understood, yet some are considered to have mild to moderate disabilities and global delays. Many of the students also have *otitis media* and multiple health problems. Our particular focus is on how one student with foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) has gained the acceptance of other students and members of her community through the intervention of the class teacher (Lisa Hall). Other support mechanisms have also allowed this student to gain access to a meaningful learning program.

Lisa's program supports students with special needs in many ways. For one thing it is very structured. Students follow the same routine every day. As a result they are familiar with the sequence and so are the teaching assistants. Even though Lisa will regularly put in new content, the structured routine is such that all the students know what to do when they come to class. The students have lunch at the school and begin their days with a tooth brushing and grooming program as many do not have access to this where they live. Lisa's room also has many visual cues to support the students' learning. Her lessons are explicit and are based on the students' needs. Another important element of the Utopia Homeland Schools is that they are one-teacher schools that have been established in the places where the people live rather than

people being forced into a central place around the homestead where the teachers' houses are. This enables families to be more actively involved. Also, the assistants in the class are members of the local community.

Slide 10 (Utopia photo)

The schools only operate for four days out of five and there are specific times allocated to learning how to implement new programs. Time is allocated for planning together.

None of these elements was put in to support a particular student with special needs but all help to create a more inclusive program. Lisa is keen to ensure that all children come to school regularly and she has spent extra one-to-one time to help the child with FAS, who has since gravitated to the teacher and formed a warm relationship with her. Lisa's modelling has encouraged other people in the room to do the same thing.

However, it was through a Drumming program that the child with FAS has found real acceptance from other members of the class. This program forms a part of a wider range of music programs offered by instrumentalists and others from the Northern Territory Department of Education. Guest musicians come out once a term for two weeks, which allows each homeland school to get about four days' worth of instruction. The musician who comes to Lisa's school is a full-of-life person who is well respected by the students. What is of particular interest is that for the student with FAS, who is now an accomplished drummer, the program has given her considerable standing in the eyes of the other kids. Now school is a happy place for her and she is a regularly attending member of the class.

Slide 11 (Exemplary video)

If you are interested in exploring a particular example of working with deafblind children you might like to set aside some time at this seminar to view this exemplary video, *We have contact*, produced by the Senses Foundation in Western Australia in 2004.

Sharon Barrey Grassick, a communication specialist who coordinates the Deafblind Education Service for the Senses Foundation, has explained the need for personal 'connections' between communication partners in this way:

Communication development in children with deafblindness is complex. Methods of communication used vary considerably and may include any combination of techniques, including touch cues, object cues, pictures, symbols, body language, gestures, fingerspelling and signs. Expressively, behaviour as communication may play a major role. Communication systems must, therefore, be highly individualised (Grassick, 2003)

Slide 12 (Discussion)

6.1 All of the three casestudy programs discussed by Nancy give time and attention to professional development. They allow the staff to learn together. They all have predictable routines and all three have been given outside support through grants to develop their programs. All involve the local community and parents in their planning for students.

It is our hope that this short presentation has helped to dispel the notion that the education of students with multiple disabilities can simply be left to specialists, who can then be left to get on with the job. Educating young people with disabilities is a broad, complex and evolving field of activity and research. At all levels of service support it requires cooperation, communication, understanding and adequate resources.

6.2 Education for students with disabilities is now conducted within a statutory environment. However, Australian legislation is less comprehensive than US mandates and the draft educational standards which have been designed to accompany the DDA have not yet been endorsed by State ministers of education, so there is some remaining ambiguity about the eventual cost of compliance by education providers.

6.3 Although Australia's philosophical commitment to inclusion continues to guide the placement of students with disabilities, there are a number of resourcing difficulties that have not yet been resolved, so it is true to say that cost-sharing arrangements in Australia still need to be clarified.

6.4 However, integration is here to stay. The direction of change is clearly away from segregation.

Slide 13 (Guiding question # 1)

Australia is committed to an inclusive ethos as this is considered to be "the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming and inclusive communities and achieve education for all" (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

Slide 14 (Guiding question # 2)

This has raised the awareness of teachers, parents and administrators and intensified advocacy efforts. With good will on the part of State and Commonwealth governments the groundswell of change *should* bring more funding, more targeted research and better outcomes for more students. However, such a commitment requires great determination, clarification of the legal issues, strong political support and adequate funding.

Slide 15 (Other focus questions)

National disability discrimination legislation has posed some challenges to educators and governments.

Slide 16 (Framework)

This framework suggested by Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has been used to evaluate the adequacy of educational provision in remote rural areas.

Slides 17 and 18 (International Standards)

It is partly based on some of the international rights-based frameworks to which Australia is a signatory.

Slide 19 (The promise!)

What of the future? There are many technological solutions that seem very promising, but they need to be carefully evaluated to ensure that they are educationally effective.

Slide 20 (The problems)

It is of continuing concern that much of the IT equipment required is so expensive. While it is undoubtedly convenient to use an enlarged and versatile keyboard such as *Intellikeys*, they cost AUD\$700 each, not to mention the cost of the accompanying software and hardware required.

Many of the interventions advocated on the internet are of variable quality and are often not supported by any scholarly research. This requires educators in the field to be a little wary.

Slide 21 (In conclusion)

Despite the difficulties, we contend that some excellent progress is being made in Australia with respect to the education of children with multiple disabilities and sensory impairment, including deafblindness

Slide 22 (Final)

Given the breadth of information available and the limited time available to present this country paper, our approach has necessarily been quite selective. If you would like further information about any of the programs or projects mentioned in this summary, please e-mail the authors

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