Post School Neglect: Expensive Adult Minding

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It is an expectation of many parents of school leavers that a young adult leaving school would, at some stage, continue their education as a key part in the development of their post school working life. This may be via a natural transition from school to university or TAFE or as an industry-based apprentice. For some this may take place immediately upon leaving school, while for others this will occur at a later stage or even in an early to mid-career stage when an individual realises that progression, career opportunities and higher remuneration, by and large, requires some form of further learning and development.

In a similar vein, many parents and carers of a young adult with a disability have expectations that the key skills learned and nurtured in schools would hold their child in good stead, and with the right support and encouragement they would continue to learn and develop those skills necessary for adulthood, greater independence and for some, employment. This is particularly so for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities, but just as important for those with more severe disabilities. The last thing any parent wants to see is their child losing the hard-won skills learned over many years from pre-school to high school.

In NSW, "Special education refers to teaching practices that meet the individual needs of students with disability"; but this description can be equally applied to all states and territories in Australia. Since the 1990's, effective Special Education has predominantly focused upon teaching a functional curriculum emphasising independent living skills, vocational skills, communication, and social skills. A robust functional curriculum approach should provide procedures for assessing students for placement in the curriculum as well as methods for teaching the various elements of the curricula and the placement of students in community-based settings. Although many parts of the curriculum can be taught in a classroom setting, the need for generalising those taught skills in the community is essential. Effective secondary programs include the teaching of skills in the community which, also, offers students a rich experience across multiple settings and with many different people.

In the early 2000's, Inclusive Education became a key goal in the development of educational policy and funding to States and Territories (Forlin & Bamford, 2005). It is generally accepted today that the meaning behind the term "Inclusive Education" shifted from being exclusively about students with a disability to encompassing the delivery of a high-quality education to all students (Anderson & Boyle, 2015).

One argument that has been provided for developing inclusive education practices for students with significant disabilities has been that inclusive education practices are consistent with students' human rights, focusing on equal opportunity for access to general education curricula, instruction, materials, and activities. This access has led to the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in state and territory education systems, which has for some facilitated development of friendships with same-aged peers who do not have disabilities, leading to equal membership in peer groups and more extensive natural support networks.

Perhaps somewhere in the move to make Special Education more inclusive, bureaucrats and policy makers lost the focus on how to maintain the objectives of an inclusive model at a post school level. So, what is meant by a high-quality education for students with disability and should a notion of quality education continue in a post school world for young people with disability? A high-quality education for a person with disability:

1. is designed to meet the needs of the individual learner;
2. is designed to meet the needs of the individual learner;

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3. is designed to meet the needs of the individual learner;
4. has key learning (behavioural) objectives for each (curriculum) area including, where appropriate, a level of mastery;
5. ensures practice and application in and across real life settings; and
6. includes regular measurement against the key learning objectives.

"They are adults for longer than they are children" was my regular catchcry when faced with a lack of enthusiasm and support from organisational management and government bureaucrats for the development of life-long learning programs for adults with a disability. It beggars belief that, after spending hundreds of millions of dollars on the education from early intervention to Year 12 schooling for young people with disability, governments and management seem always to have a tin ear for the continuation of life-long and specialised adult education.

A major goal of special education services is to prepare school leavers for productive and rewarding lives as adults in the community. Follow-up studies, however, have consistently indicated poor post-school outcomes for these young people (Ryndak, et al., 2010). While there has been a wealth of research related to the effectiveness of services in inclusive general education settings for students of school age, few studies have investigated the impact of inclusive educational services on long-term outcomes for students with significant disabilities and, in fact, research into the maintenance of skills at a post school age is almost non-existent.

With few exceptions, "post-school options", "day programs", "community participation" and "leisure and recreation" labels were applied to thousands of Australian government-funded programs primarily operated by the non-government sector, to provide a "place" where young people transition after leaving school at the average age of 18 years. Transition programs and their related funding were introduced in the nineties to be used by schools and NGOs to facilitate the relocation from the school yard to the post school yard. The focus of these post school settings varied not only in name but also invariably in purpose or, unfortunately in many cases, lack of purpose. Such programs, which may enrol between 15-40 young people, have always been, and remain, under the NDIS, understaffed, overwhelmed and, for some, seemingly unaccountable in their delivery of service.

Funding of these programs has always been a determinant of a program's success, but the key determinant has been whether a program's overall objective is achieving outcomes matched to each individual person enrolled. Leisure and recreation and community access have been the overarching themes in most of these programs and staff, generally designated as Community Support Staff, are often poorly educated in the field of disability and often have no concept that a person with disability can learn and how they learn.

The intention has always been right but the outcome left a lot to be desired for many young people and has been a source of great concern and frustration for many parents. Today, many people with disability, young and old, become rapidly deskilled, more disabled, and more dependent. During their school years, many parents witnessed significant changes in their children's development as they learned skills of communication, independent travel, money and functional maths, meal preparation, choice making, personal care and grooming, and how to use technology as some simple examples. There was always an expectation that this learning would continue and that, as they transitioned into adulthood, they would become less dependent and be able to take a valued place in society. Instead, for many hundreds if not thousands of young people with disability, their school-based learning has been lost, dependency on others has grown and, unfortunately for some, there has also been a concomitant increase in behaviours of concern leading to the need for restrictive practices, for example chemical and environmental restraint. There is a significant amount of research that supports the correlation between poor communication, poor social skills and lack of engagement with increasing behaviours of concern (Bowring, Painter, & Hastings, 2019).

In this post-modern social constructivist world, by and large, "quality" has been lost in translation and has become part

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of the narrative about philosophy, policy, experiences, and inclusion rather than about meaningful long-term learning outcomes for people with disability.

In the 2016 Senate Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), on page 22, the section was titled "Education rather than Babysitting" and it was noted that "a related concern shared by multiple parents, advocacy groups and other submitters was a belief that children with disabilities received babysitting, rather than an education, from the school system". Further to this, the Report noted that "this is in part a consequence of low or, in some cases, no expectations of students with disabilities – that educators and other students fail to recognise students with disabilities as capable of learning. …… another factor is that teachers are unaware of how best to educate students with disability, and therefore may not adequately take into account the different learning needs of these students".

These sobering and unedifying remarks by the Committee about school-based education can, unfortunately, be transposed to reflect upon the experiences that many young people with disability now face in a post school life – low or no expectations, failure to accept that a person with disability is capable of learning, and that community support workers and management are unaware of how best to educate people with disability.

Returning to the question of whether a quality education can continue in a post school world for young people with disability, the answer is definitely yes. The essential components that make a high quality education are the very same components that can make a post school program just as effective for all people with disability:

1. is designed to meet the needs of the individual learner;
2. has key learning (behavioural) objectives for each (curriculum) area including, where appropriate, a level of mastery;
3. ensures practice and application in and across real life settings; and
4. includes regular measurement against the key learning objectives.

Unfortunately, the system currently lacks either the political wherewithal to achieve this or it just doesn't care.

The NDIS now provides the best opportunity to review and recast service delivery principles for school leavers. Under the NDIS category for individualised assistance with social and community participation and improved learning, an individual's NDIS Plan objectives can be established along the same lines as effective Special Education and these elements should be funded at a level that will facilitate the continuation and generalisation of a functional curriculum model of learning.

Where there are organisations offering NDIS participants life skills training and development, including communication and social skills development, they should be acknowledged and, where appropriate, used as models and promoted by the NDIA. Parents, carers and guardians can play a key role in driving these types of programs during the NDIS planning process.

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