

Inclusion: Ideology vs Reality

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There are many variations around the theme of inclusion, but what is the 'real' status of the delivery of Special Education in NSW schools in 2022? A few questions come to mind "Ideological inclusion versus the reality of inclusion for students with additional needs?" and, the "least restrictive environment?" There is a strong humane motive for the philosophy of inclusion in all walks of life, be it in education, women's rights, racial equality, gender rights, religious rights, indeed, many other areas of human existence. How well is this implemented in schools?

When we look closely at education and the time spent at school, usually from 5 to 18 years of age, our hopes are that young people will move successfully from childhood to young adulthood, they will develop the self-esteem and personal maturity they need, they will be resilient and comfortable with their own abilities, have realistic expectations and be able to meet life's never-ending challenges. Quality education, in combination with quality of life outside of the school sphere, will potentially achieve this for our students. For a quality education in a school, teachers are trained in various specialities. In the primary school setting, the focus is on developing young children into pre-adolescence and giving these children the skills, both academic and social/emotional, to achieve a successful transition to the secondary school setting. Teachers in primary schools have specific skills that are developed through focussed tuition at university. Similarly, in secondary schools, specialist areas of the curriculum such as English, Maths, and Science are taught.

At this point, teachers are not sufficiently trained to meet the specific needs of students with a disability or learning difficulty. The teachers may, at some point in their initial entrée into their education course of study, have had some minor contact with some of the philosophies, processes, and ideals behind the actual delivery of 'special education', or what has been more recently but mistakenly labelled, 'inclusive education'.

No NSW teacher is permitted by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) to teach a specialist subject without being accredited in that subject (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2021). This document fails to mention the teaching speciality of special educators and therefore appears, on paper at least, to not recognise the distinction of 'quality teaching practice' as espoused by quality trained special educators. Insulting to say the least! Surely students with additional needs have the same rights to a quality and appropriate education as students who wish to learn about science or mathematics.

All teachers need extensive training in the 'how to teach' every bit as much as the training in the 'what to teach'. The APSTs (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), n.d.) clearly state this in their Standards 1, 3, 4, and 5. The School Excellence Framework (SEF) (NSW Department of Education, 2017, July) states that 'In our schools, every student is known, valued and cared for,' but ***where is the evidence for this 'value' in teacher training that focuses on mainstream delivery but lacks training in 'how to deliver' for the broader differentiated community in all classrooms, across all schools, no matter the school description? And also, who at the level of tertiary training, will have the expertise in this area that appears to be disappearing from our teacher training institutions?***

As a special education practitioner whose formal academic training in this area was at a time when the study of special education in Australia was still in its infancy at Masters level, I have long reflected on the difficulty potential students had in gaining entry to the special education course that I completed in the early to mid-1990s. Prior to course entry we were directed to a text on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) for Teachers (Alberto and Troutman, 1991), and a few weeks later were given a test on the contents.

It is a text that I have never stopped thinking about and using as a basis for my teaching in this area. While I adapt and adjust my teaching methods for the individuals and classes that I am fortunate enough to teach, the basis of my behaviour management lies in ABA. To use it as a guide rather than having it define my teaching by strict adherence to

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its 'rules', has been helpful in each setting. In fact, much that is suggested for Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) and Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) (De Nobile et al., 2017) utilises these same basic principles. Many NSW schools use PBL as the basis for their behaviour management, although the strict adherence to these principles and the understanding of this by the staff on how this should be implemented, varies greatly.

The schools in which I have taught, seven (both metropolitan and non-metropolitan) over the past 30 years, vary from primary schools to secondary schools (mainstream and support unit classes), and schools for specific purposes (SSPs). The latter include schools that focus on behaviour and emotional disturbance and those that focus on teaching students who have been diagnosed with various combinations of autism, moderate, severe or profound intellectual and physical disability. When I reflect on the staff I have worked with in mainstream schools, few have been fully qualified special educators. It is also interesting to note that in each of these schools there has never been a person with a recognised formal qualification who has held the position of *learning and support teacher* (LaST), previously known as *support teaching learning assistance* (STLA). The LaST position has often been held by a classroom teacher who chose to move from the classroom to working in a withdrawal capacity or 'advising' classroom teachers on how to teach students with additional needs in the classroom, that is, inclusion! This begs the first question relating to equity in the receipt of specialist education for students with exceptional needs. ***Why are their rights not being met?***

Inclusion movement proponents will immediately say that, with regard to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), n.d.), there is provision for "Standard 1: Knowing your students and how they learn"; "Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning"; "Standard 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments"; and "Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning". This leads to the next question of ***How does this actually translate into practice for students with additional needs?***

I was reminded, just recently, of the reason I trained in special education 34 years ago. In a metropolitan secondary school, a *learning and support teacher* (LaST) told a parent that the child with a disability can sit in the mainstream class and 'participate as much or as little as possible because she's a good girl and won't cause any disruption...'. This LaST had, or purported to have, little or no knowledge of the place of the Life Skills Curriculum in each subject area for each Stage. This, in 2022! I had exactly the same comment made to me about my young son with a disability way back in 1986 in a primary school setting! While the Life Skills Curriculum did not exist then, 'rights of individuals' did!

In a special education life skills classroom, either in a support unit setting or in a special school, the qualified special education class teacher uses techniques such as task analysis to inform the process of differentiating and using evidence-based practice to inform the next step in the student's learning. However, imagine being in a mainstream classroom, no background of formal study in the area of special education, and reliant on the under-qualified or unqualified LaST for advice, and also having to complete the syllabus of nine outcomes for the year for each of the students in this class. In a mainstream classroom there are assessments to be formally completed within time frames and also a number of students who also struggle in certain areas, but time marches on. The teacher can tick the box for the Life Skills outcomes and the mainstream outcomes, but realistically, ***how much actual learning has taken place particularly for the student/s with additional needs?***

Those of us who work with students with special education needs are fully aware that it takes longer for achievement and also even longer to gain the necessary skill of generalisation, once acquisition, fluency and maintenance of the particular skill (encompassed within outcomes but not necessarily depicted by the outcome statement) have been proven by data to be achieved. Teaching a skill is about achievement for our students, achievement that makes them feel good about themselves and about their learning. It makes them feel included in society in general, even if they are better placed to make these gains in a less inclusive setting.

It is not unusual for students entering a secondary school setting, having struggled throughout the primary years in literacy and numeracy, to be unable to access the curriculum in the secondary setting because of their poor results in these areas. A glance at the NAPLAN scores of students moving from Year 6 to Year 7 and watching the gradual sense

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of disengagement for many of these students is a clear demonstration that there is a problem. Ask any secondary school teacher about the on-task behaviours of students who have lower than acceptable NAPLAN scores. Some schools are able to put into place extra programs to address these anomalies, but they are usually run by the LaST, who is now so over-worked that not every student's needs can possibly be addressed, never mind still trying to assist the class teacher in making the continuously necessary adjustments to teaching and learning.

Ideally each school would have many formally qualified educators, from tertiary institutions that employ suitably qualified staff with the required level of expertise in this area. These special educators would hopefully be placed in a position of being able to assist the classroom teachers, assist the students and also maintain the administrative paperwork required to demonstrate teaching/learning.

Inclusion has been on the agenda for quite a long time, but dealing with the reality needs to be addressed if we want to ensure equity in education for all participants and to provide education for all our students in 'the least restrictive environment'.



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