Joys, Tensions and Issues: Special Needs Provisions in an Australian, Christian, Education System 2009/2010.

Abstract

Inclusion in mainstream education for students with special needs has been accepted for the last 25 years in Australian government schools. However, Christian and non-government schools have been slower to include these students.

This research project investigated the current provisions for students with special needs (SWSN) in a national, Australian, Christian school system (49 schools) during 2009 and 2010. Most respondents were the designated special needs teachers in those schools; however, in some of the small schools the principal also carried this role. In addition to the quantitative date reported via questionnaires, respondents were able to comment on relevant issues and possible solutions as they perceived them.

Issues and tensions included managing limited funding for SWSN in non-government schools, a lack of appropriate qualifications for staff who worked with SWSN, issues in enrolment of SWSN and a changing school profile; lack of networking and sharing between the schools in the system; and issues of incorrect diagnosis for all students with special needs. Results indicated that 16% of the students had special needs, 28% of the schools did not have any designated special needs staff, while a further 36% did not have qualified staff in this role.

The paper includes discussion of the evidence-based issues facing these schools and the system, drawn from the data, together with a number of recommendations for improvement.

Acronyms:

DDA – Disability Discrimination Act – Australian Federal Legislation of 1992
HREOC – Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, now known as the Australian Human Rights Commission.
IEP – Individual Education Plan/Program
LST – Learning Support Teacher
SWSN – Students With Special Needs
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Historical Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, an important societal shift began to take place as researchers such as Bank-Mikkelsen (1969), Nirje (1970) and Wolfensberger (1972) began to advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities into society and a lifestyle as close as possible to normal, which they called normalisation. At the same time, many parents in America, Europe and Australia also began to advocate for increased educational and lifestyle opportunities for their children with disabilities (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009).

In the United States legislation was enacted to support this concept with Public Law 94-142 – the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. In the United Kingdom, the Warnock report was released in 1978 and these policies and legislation set a benchmark for the rest of the world to support and protect children with disabilities. Australia followed this trend in 1992 with the federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) which "makes it against the law for an educational authority to discriminate against someone because that person has a disability" (HREOC). The DDA addresses the enrolment, curriculum and school programs of students with disabilities today, in Australia.

In 1994 an international conference to discuss children with special needs was held in Salamanca , Spain. Organised by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the conference produced the Salamanca Statement, signed by

over 90 countries, which recommended inclusion as the best educational provision for students with disabilities, primarily to combat discrimination.

Over the last 25 years or so, state education systems in Australia have commenced including students with disabilities. Some church-based and other non-government education systems have been slower to provide this service, but the DDA (1992) has helped to expedite the process of inclusion in Australia. As these students have moved into regular classes or special education units within regular schools, teachers have adapted lessons and increasingly differentiated their teaching to accommodate the educational needs of these children and provide them with a relevant education.

Meanwhile, non-government, evangelical Christian schools began to grow rapidly from the 1960s as parents observed an increasingly secular influence in public schools. These parents wanted schools where their children would be educated with a similar worldview to their own and similar values (Stymeist, 2008). Today, many Christian parents who have children with special needs want these children educated in a Christian school environment as well (Zehr, 2005).

Funding the education of students with special needs is an important and difficult issue. In 2009 the NSW government inquiry into the provision of education to students with disabilities or special needs recognised the "dramatic increase in the number of identified students with disabilities or special needs in recent years…….along with the move towards greater inclusion…..this places a growing pressure on available government and non-government education resources including funding" (NSW Government, 2010). Christian Schools Australia (CSA) is a peak group serving the needs of Australian independent schools with a commitment to religious freedom, choice and equitable funding. In 2009 CSA issued a position paper regarding funding for students with disabilities, in which they commented that 'additional funding available to students with disabilities in non-government schools is vastly disproportionate to that available in government schools. CSA's research found shortfalls of up to $20,000 per student with disability. Their position is that: 'the additional funding allocated to meet the specific needs of students with disability should be the same irrespective of their choice of school' (O'Doherty, 2009).

Integral to the support of SWSN are designated Learning Support Teachers (LST) (who may have different nomenclature in different systems). Their role has broadened over recent years from working individually with SWSN, to include support to classroom teachers with included SWSN by providing advice as well as individualised and group teaching; identification of SWSN; organisation of diagnostic assessments; writing or assisting with writing of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs); liaising with external agencies including government and Independent Schools' Associations for funding and support; record keeping; and liaising with parents (Forlin, 2001). This multi-faceted coordinating role supports both the SWSN and classroom teachers, as well as school administration.

It is with this background that the current study was conducted. Stemming from the researcher's role as a tertiary lecturer in special education, there was a need to create a nexus between practice in schools and teaching in the tertiary lecture theatre. Currency and a realistic perspective on current issues affecting students with special needs in Christian, non government schools are essential in the preparation of teaching graduates.

Aims of the study

This research study was conducted within a church-based education system during 2009 and 2010 to gain an understanding of current provisions and the issues involved in accommodating students with special needs. The study investigated:

- The extent to which students with special needs were included in the system's schools.
- Whether the individual school had a designated special needs support teacher, and his/her qualifications for this role.
- What the respondent considered were the main issues in providing an education for included students with special needs, in his/her school.
- How the respondent believed the school's Christian ethos affected the special education program.

Method

A letter of explanation, together with an invitation to participate and a detailed survey (with both open and closed type questions) was sent to the principals of all of the schools in the system (49) with a response rate of 44 (90%). Reasons for non-participation included school closure, two amalgamations, and a change of principal in three very small schools. Actual respondents were often the special needs teachers, except in small schools where the principal also carried this role.

Results - Quantitative

Respondents indicated that the total school system population of approximately 11,000 students included approximately 1753 (16%) with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities who required additional assistance to undertake an education. Classification was on the basis of formal, external testing, or informal classroom based assessment. Figure 1 displays the enrolments for the individual schools, with the black section at the top of each column indicating those with special needs. The colour groups represent the state and regional administrative groups within this school system.

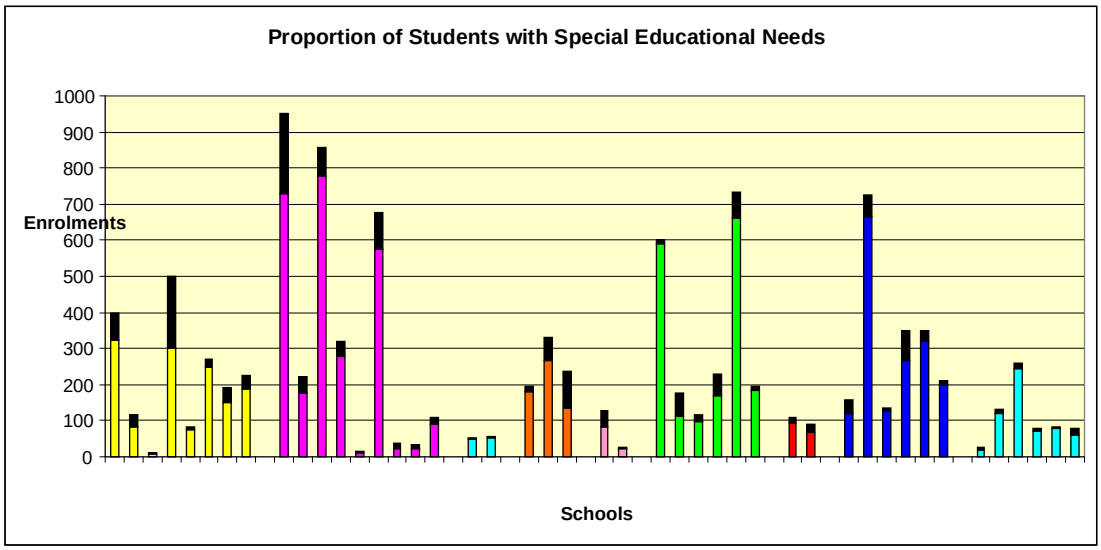


Figure 1. Proportion of students with special educational needs.
Each column represents a school. The black section at the top of each column indicates the proportion of students with special needs in that school.

As can be seen from Figure 1 there was a wide range in size of school enrolments from small one teacher schools (which were mainly in rural locations) to several schools of over

500 students. Further, some schools had a substantial proportion of students with special needs while some, even larger ones, had comparatively few. In addition, according to the information received, 313 (18%) of this group with special needs had Individualised Education Programs and 659 (38%) received government funding towards their special needs education.

Of the 44 schools returning completed surveys, 12 (28%) indicated that they did not have a full-time or a part-time teacher designated to care for students with special needs. These schools are displayed below in Figure 2, as black columns. While it can be seen that seven of the schools have below 100 students enrolled, three have over 100 students and two have over 200 students. All of these schools have enrolled students with special needs.

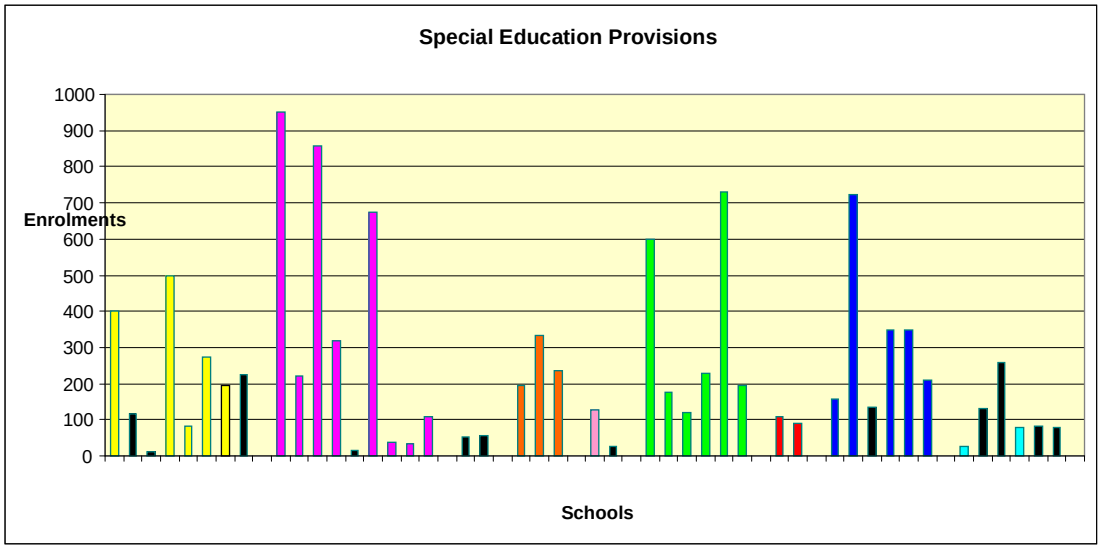


Figure 2: Special Education Staff (columns in black indicate schools with no designated special education teacher)

Sixteen of the remaining 32 schools had appointed a teacher to teach/supervise students with special needs, however, these teachers did not have any special education qualifications. Thus a total of 28 of the system schools (64%) either did not have anyone who was qualified in special education to oversee the education and management of these students, or did not have anyone at all specifically designated to oversee SWSN, as displayed below in Figure 3.

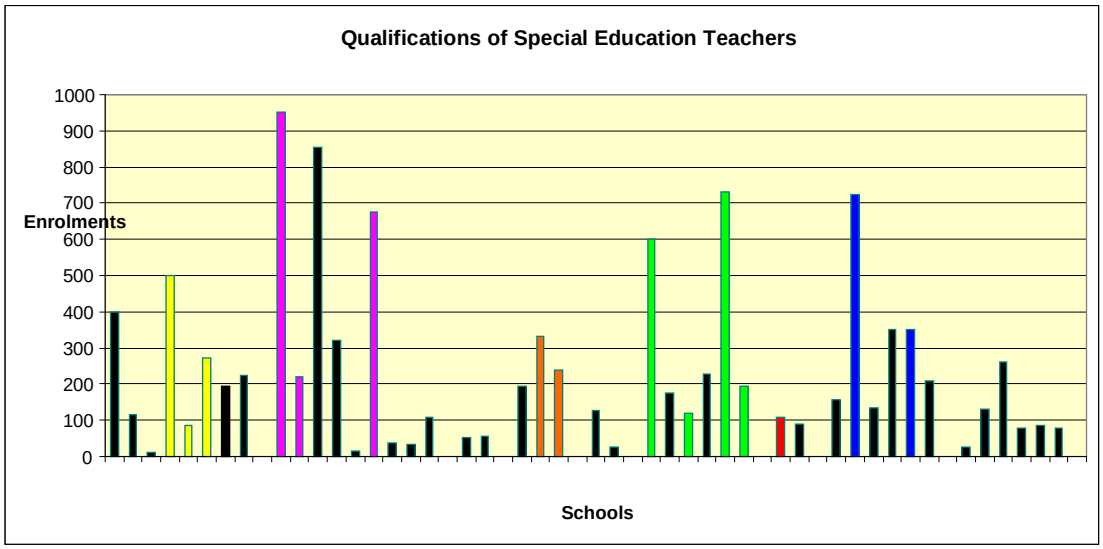


Figure 3. Columns in black represent schools lacking either a designated Special Education Teacher or having a designated teacher but without appropriate qualifications.

Results – Qualitative

The survey also provided an opportunity for respondents to comment about their perspectives on special education in system schools. Thirty seven schools responded to this invitation and a number of themes were mentioned many times from different schools, within different states. Actual quotes in italics in the following sections illustrate the various issues:

1. **Funding.** Sixteen of the 37 responding schools (43%) commented that:
    a. There was a disparity between funds available to support students attending government or non-government schools,
        'We are unable to afford the special need teachers and aides. We are in desperate need of these specialists in our schools but it always comes down to the holy dollar!!'
    b. Because of this they believed that financial support for programs and staff for students with special needs was very low on the system's priority list,
    c. When finances became strained, disability support was the first program to have cost cuts.
        'I am a very frustrated learning support teacher who has had her teaching time cut in half because of the school's financial difficulties.'

2. **Isolation/ sharing/ networking**. Fifteen of the 37 responding schools (41%) commented on this issue:
    a. Respondents reported that there was very little communication between system schools, and schools tended to work in isolation,
        'Due to our schools being isolated there is minimal sharing between schools.'
    b. There were no organised system groups,
        '*Each school appears to work in isolation.'*
    c. Organised networking and sharing were perceived to be extremely valuable.
        'It would be good to network with other system schools re special needs.'
        'Networking/in-service/newsletter would be a great help.'

3. **In-service Training.** Ten of the 37 responding schools (27%) commented on:
    a. The lack of training in special needs education and the need for regular in-servicing in this area for classroom teachers,
        'Too many children needing extra assistance; too little inservicing of teachers in this area.'
    b. The lack of special education qualifications for those designated to oversee special needs programs,
        'I would like to see some ongoing in-servicing for special needs teachers.'
    c. Six also commented on their heavy reliance on the various State Independent Schools' Associations for this provision.
        'AIS here is excellent and that is who we use most of the time.'

4. **Perceived Lack of Support.** Six of the 37 responding schools (16%) specifically mentioned a lack of systemic support:
    a. The respondents commented that they believed the lack of information, inservicing and networking indicated a lack of interest in and support for, special education within the system.
        'Absence of any support from the system to date.'
        'I am not aware of any networking, inservicing, etc run by the system.'

5. **Christian Ethos.** Thirty four of the 44 schools (77%) responded to the question: In what way do you feel the Christian ethos of your school affects the special

education program? All of the responses were extremely positive and focussed on the value of each child, with comments such as: *'*

We care for each individual and seek out their strengths. We teach that God loves unconditionally' and *'It is infused into <u>everything</u> we do.'*

It is interesting to note that of the 44 respondents to the survey, 22 were Learning Support Teachers and 22 were principals. However, in the mid-sized schools (enrolment: 50-1500), the role of the STD is often only part-time (one or two days per week) and so the principal frequently has to carry some of the tasks. Thus the comments reflect both the teaching and administrative perspectives.

Discussion

Enrolments.

As Figure 1 displays, there are considerable differences between some schools with similar enrolments but having very few students with special needs or having a comparatively large percentage. For example, some schools have enrolments of over 300 students with very few being identified as having special needs. In contrast, some schools appear to have high numbers of SWSN, and respondents in this study reported a total of 16% of students in this system's schools had special needs, compared with 6.7% in NSW government schools (NSW Government, 2010) and 4.3% in NSW Catholic Schools (Catholic Education Commission, NSW, 2010).

What are possible reasons for these school and systemic differences?

One respondent reported a parent's comment that "compassion and tolerance appear far greater in a Christian School". Another stated: "Our Christian ethos is shown in our caring and parents of children with special needs tell me that is why they chose our school". Stymeist (2008, 7) reinforces this perception: "many experts believe that the percentage of students with special needs is higher in private schools….parents of children who struggle in school perceive that smaller class sizes, noted care and concern for students can do a better job for their children".

However, in another study, Ramirez & Stymeist (2010) reported that some Christian parents who are discouraged from enrolling their child with special needs in a Christian school do not persist as they believe it is un-Christian to do so and they are also afraid that their child will not be treated with kindness.

Could under-diagnosis or over-diagnosis be an issue? Given the lack of designated support staff and lack of special education qualifications, it is quite possible that some SWSN may not have been identified; or that some children with unidentified gifts and talents are bored and frustrated and incorrectly labelled? Further, testing and diagnosis can only be conducted with the approval of parents and some parents are reluctant to have their child formally 'labelled' with a disability or learning difficulty.

Could some children have specific learning disabilities that have not been properly diagnosed and therefore not reported as having special needs?

One respondent (the special needs teacher) reported that her principal had asked her to 'limit the success of her program, so as not to encourage too many children with special needs as their enrolment was changing the profile of the school'. It appears that this may not be an isolated case as Shaywtiz reported in 2003 that school administrators sometimes feared the development of a good reputation for working with children with special needs and which in turn might lead to a reduction in enrolments of high ability students (Shaywtiz, 2003).

Lack of Qualifications.

Sixty six percent of the system schools in this study did not have any staff member with special education qualifications designated to support students with special needs.

Ashman & Elkins (2009, 100) commented:‘ Teachers need ongoing professional learning opportunities inside and outside the school to maintain effective inclusive teaching practices’. While Hodkinson and Vickerman (2009, 86) noted the problems associated with this lack within UK schools: ‘As far back as the Warnock report (1978) the distinct lack of specialist training has been raised as a potential barrier to the successful implementation of special education…and most recently (2004) successful practice is again being inhibited by the same issue” Learning Support Teams and teachers are described by the General Purpose Standing Committee No 2 (2010) in NSW, as Key to the provision of adequate support for students with specials needs. In his 2005 study of faith based schools in 10 mid west counties in the USA, Eigenbrood also found teachers in the support role without the appropriate specialised qualifications.
One principal of a small rural school in this study commented: ‘*Little or no training makes this a very difficult area to manage well.’*

Networking and Professional Development.
There is an absence of sharing, networking and collegial support in the area of special needs for many of the schools in this study. This is exacerbated by little systemic support from state or national levels.
The respondents recognised the need for sharing and professional development for all staff working with SWSN. As one special needs teacher commented: ‘*If other schools are anything like ours then all teachers would benefit by learning about programming and teaching for children with special needs*.’ Research by Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden (2000) demonstrated that half of the regular teachers in their study felt the need for specific training (49%) if they were to include children with special needs successfully. Pudlas (2004) expressed concern that where teachers are challenged by the diversity of their students, their own lack of training and do not feel supported, it is likely that their professional efficacy will suffer and they may model a negative attitude towards these students.

Funding
As noted in the literature review, funding is both an important and difficult issue. The shift in educational policy and legislation has led to increasing numbers of students with special needs enrolling in regular schools – government or non-government. A report by the Australian Education Union (2010, 2) stated: ‘There is clear evidence over a long period that the level of resources and funding required to ensure quality education for disabilities/special needs is inadequate with negative consequences for students, families, teachers, other education workers and schools. While there have been significant increases in funding for students with a disability or special needs by governments, it has not been sufficient to ensure the resources necessary to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of students with an identified disability and increasingly complex disabilities.’
The AEU (2010, 3) argues that generally ‘private schools enrol less than half the percentage of students with disabilities than do government schools.’ However in the case of the schools in this study, they actually reported more than double the percentage of special needs students in state schools, and close to four times that of Catholic schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

1. Funding for students. There is a need for active lobbying by parents, teachers, school administrators and system administrators for funding to be attached to the student rather than the school. Given the far higher enrolment of students with special needs in this system than in state schools this is a critical issue if the students are to receive an adequate education and the staff are to provide for their needs.

2. The profile and value of education for students with special needs within the system needs to be enhanced though the appointment of a system special education coordinator. This role could include advocacy, facilitation of appropriate in-service and professional development as well as the development of networks and policy. One respondent (a principal) commented: 'I would like to see Special Needs given a higher profile in the system and the school – more respect, credibility and impact.' While another said: '*there is a lack of credentialed and experienced / passionate staff to drive the special education program.'*

3. This study has provided considerable evidence that special needs staff feel very isolated from each other in this system. However regular video-conferencing could address both the issue of isolation as well as that of regular in-servicing.

4. Increased support (and funding for release time) is needed to upgrade both classroom and support teachers' qualifications in the area of special needs.

Systemic improvement is possible, providing the stakeholders: teachers, ancillary staff, parents and administrators, are willing to work together and want to see improvement.

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