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Joys, tensions and issues Special needs provisions in an Australian, Christian, education system 2009/2010

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This research project investigated the current provisions for students with special needs (SWSN) in a national, Australian, Christian school system (49 schools) during 2009–2010. 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 data 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; enrolment of SWSN and a changing school profile; lack of networking and sharing between the schools in the system; and diagnosis for 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, together with a number of recommendations for improvement.

Inclusion is recommended as the best educational provision for students with disabilities, primarily to combat discrimination

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

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 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 in Australia today.

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 increasingly including students with special needs. 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. Although the DDA (1992) has helped to expedite the process of inclusion in state schools, some church-based and other non-government education systems have been slower to provide this service.

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 and values to their own (Stymeist, 2008). Today, many Christian parents who have children with special needs want 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 funding pressures.

The dramatic increase in the number of identified students with disabilities or special needs in recent years...along with the move towards greater inclusion...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.

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; identifying SWSN; organising 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; keeping records; and liaising with parents (Forlin, 2001). This multi-faceted coordinating role supports both the SWSN and classroom teachers, as well as school administration.

Aims of the study

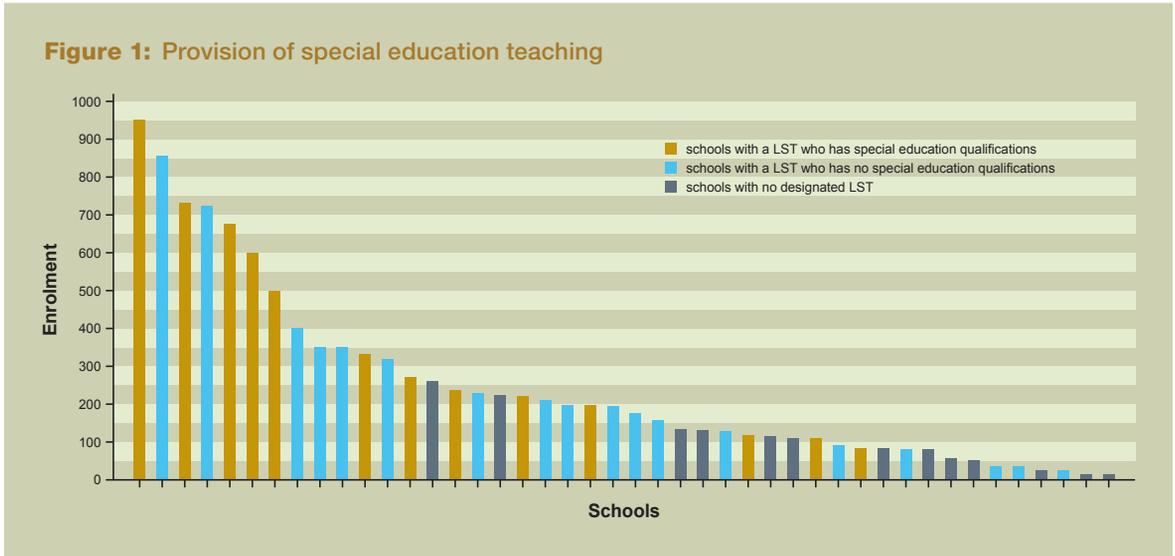
This study was conducted within a church-based education system during 2009 and 2010 to gain an

Table 1: Total school enrolments, enrolled students with special needs, and the latter expressed as a percentage

Enrolment	SWSN	%
950	219	23
856	77	9
732	71	10
724	59	8
676	102	15
600	10	2
500	200	40
400	77	19
350	84	24
350	31	9
332	64	19
320	41	13
272	22	8
260	17	7
237	102	43
228	60	26
224	37	17
220	44	20
210	12	6
195	15	8
195	9	5
193	43	22
176	63	36
158	36	23
134	5	4
130	11	8
128	45	35
118	21	18
115	32	28
110	18	16
110	16	5
90	24	27
84	8	10
84	4	5
80	8	10
79	17	22
57	4	7
51	3	6
36	12	33
35	14	40
26	3	12
26	6	23
14	3	21
13	4	31

“Funding the education of students with special needs is an important and difficult issue”

Figure 1: Provision of special education teaching



understanding of current provisions and the issues involved in accommodating students with special needs. The study investigated:

1. The extent to which students with special needs were included in the system’s schools.
2. Whether the individual school had a designated learning support teacher, and his/her qualifications for this role.
3. The key issues in providing an education for included students with special needs, in system schools.
4. The perceived relationship between the school’s Christian ethos and the special education program.

“28% of schools indicated that they did not have a full-time or part-time teacher designated to care for students with special needs”

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 the special needs teachers, except in small schools where the principal carried this role.

Results—Quantitative

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 based on formal, external testing, or informal classroom-based assessment by the special needs teacher. Table 1 displays the

enrolment for each individual school, the number of students in the school with special needs and then this number expressed as a percentage.

As can be seen from Table 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, whilst all schools reported having SWSN enrolled, some schools had a substantial proportion of students with special needs while some had far less. Of the 1753 students with special needs identified in this study, 313 (18%) had Individualised Education Programs (IEPs) and 659 (38%) received government funding towards their special needs education.

The allocation of a LST teacher to support SWSN was investigated, along with the qualifications of these teachers (see Figure 1). 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. While it can be seen that seven of these schools had below 100 students enrolled, three had over 100 students and two had over 200 students. Sixteen schools (36%) 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%) had either no LST or an unqualified LST to oversee the education and management of SWSN.

Results—Qualitative

The survey provided an opportunity for respondents to comment on their perspectives regarding special education in system schools. Thirty-seven schools

responded to this invitation. The key themes from these responses are outlined below and supported by quotes from respondents.

Funding—Sixteen of the 37 responding schools (43%) commented that:

- There was a disparity between funds available to support students attending government as opposed to non-government schools.

We are unable to afford the special needs teachers and aides. We are in desperate need of these specialists in our schools but it always comes down to the holy dollar!!

- They believed that financial support for programs and staff for students with special needs was very low on the system's priority list.
- 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.

Isolation/sharing/networking—Fifteen of the 37 responding schools (41%) commented on this issue:

- 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.

- There were no organised support groups in the system.

Each school appears to work in isolation.

- 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.

In-service training—Ten of the 37 responding schools (27%) commented on:

- 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.

- 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.

- Six commented on their heavy reliance on the various Independent Schools' Associations for this provision.

AIS here is excellent and that is who we use most of the time.

Perceived lack of support—Six of the 37 responding schools (16%) specifically mentioned a lack of systemic support:

- 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.

I would like to see Special Needs given a higher profile in the system and the school—more respect, credibility and impact.

There is a lack of credentialed and experienced/ passionate staff to drive the special education program.

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 focused 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.

It is infused into everything 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: 50–500), the role of the LST is often part-time (one or two days per week), leaving the principal to frequently carry some of the tasks. Thus, the findings reflect the perspectives of both teachers and administrators.

Discussion

1. Enrolments

As noted in Figure 1, the proportion of SWSN enrolled at the participant schools varies considerably. This study reported that a total of 16%

“**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**”

“It is well recognised that qualifications and ongoing professional development opportunities are required for these teachers”

of students in this system's schools had special needs, compared with 12% in NSW government schools (NSW Government, 2010) and 14% in NSW Catholic Schools (Catholic Education Commission, NSW, 2010).

What are possible reasons for these school and systemic differences?

Perceived level of care—Christian schools are perceived as offering a higher level of care.

Our Christian ethos is shown in our caring and parents of children with special needs tell me that is why they chose our school. (Respondent)

Another respondent reported a parent's comment that “compassion and tolerance appear far greater in a Christian School”. Stymeist (2008, p. 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 and 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.

Diagnosis—Given the lack of designated support staff and lack of special education qualifications, it is quite possible that some SWSN have not been identified. 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.

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 Shaywitz (2003) reported that school administrators sometimes feared the development of a good reputation for working with children with special needs as it might lead to a reduction in enrolments of high ability students.

2. Lack of qualifications

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 special needs. In addition, it is well recognised that qualifications and ongoing professional development opportunities are required for these teachers. “Teachers need ongoing professional learning opportunities inside and outside the school to maintain effective inclusive teaching practices” (Ashman & Elkins, 2009, p. 100).

In this system study, sixty-six percent of the schools did not have a staff member with special education qualifications designated to support students with special needs.

Little or no training makes this a very difficult area to manage well. (Principal of a small rural school)

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. Hodgkinson and Vickerman (2009, p.86) noted the problems associated with the lack of qualified LSTs 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.

3. 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 a lack of systemic support from state or national levels.

The respondents recognised the need for sharing and professional development for all staff working with SWSN.

If other schools are anything like ours then all teachers would benefit by learning about programming and teaching for children with special needs. (Respondent)

Research by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) demonstrated that half (49%) of the regular teachers in their study felt the need for specific training if they were to include children with special needs successfully. Pudlas (2004) proposed that if teachers are challenged by the diversity of their students, their own lack of training and perceived lack of support, it is likely that their professional efficacy will suffer and they model a negative attitude towards these students.

4. 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, p. 2) confirmed the funding difficulty.

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 Australian Education Union (2010, p. 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, there were higher percentages of SWSN enrolled than in either government or Catholic schools.

Conclusion and recommendations

1. 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 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 teachers 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 through the appointment of a system special education coordinator. This role could include advocacy, policy development, facilitation of collaborative networks, and delivery of in-servicing and professional development.
3. This study has provided considerable evidence that special needs staff feel isolated from each other in this system. Regular online-conferencing could address both the issue of isolation and 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. **TEACH**

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