

## Why should schools include children with a disability?

The first point to consider about inclusion is that it is fundamentally a moral issue. It is a question of whom we see as belonging and who does not. It is a question of whom we share our resources with and who waits until resources arrive. It is a question of the forced segregation of children against the wishes of their parents and whether we want to be part of that. The question of costs and benefits of inclusion are ultimately secondary to these questions. Like all great moral questions they come down to where individuals stand, what they believe in and their own judgements based on their conscience and experience.

First, a definition of inclusion: it has 3 parts (Wills and Jackson, 1996)

- Physically included in the mainstream classroom to the same extent as all other children (that is, not in a separate room or in a 'pull out' program).
- Socially included with mainstream children (this means not isolated in a classroom with an aide).
- Included in the regular curriculum, albeit modified where necessary.

In forming judgements about inclusion, we should have the benefit of factual information and that is the purpose of this document.

### Reasons for Inclusion

#### 1. *It is the right thing to do.*

A common experience of children with a disability and their family is rejection. This may come from family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances or just from the uncomfortable stares of total strangers. The child with a disability may have had no experiences of shared play in the sand pit, sleepovers or going over to a friend's place. Similarly families may be isolated from their own friend and support networks. With school being the most powerful social development institution in our society after the family, we have an extremely powerful tool to reverse the rejection of society and bring the child to a state of belonging with his or her peers. This has an inherent 'rightness', whereas the alternative of rejection from shared experiences with peers over the developmental period goes against all the basic religious and secular values of our society. Inclusion fits the meaning of a 'fair go'.

#### 2. *It's good for the school and essential for society*

Many of us worry about our society. We seem to be driven by four very powerful values:

- Materialism
- Individualism
- Utilitarianism (valuing things and people by their usefulness and productivity).
- Hedonism – personal comfort and pursuit of pleasure and excitement.

If these are strong values of our culture, then we have to ask whether they are adding to or taking away from the 'glue' that binds us together as a community. Most would agree that the values above weaken 'community'. Take two other lists of values:

Compassion	Rejection
Caring	Unconcern
Consideration	Insensitivity
Altruism	Selfishness
Empathy	Putting down
Cooperation	Competition
Assistance	Undermining
Friendship	Devaluation
Commitment	Apathy
Humanism	Materialism

As teachers, we want to bring out the values on the left in the children in our care, which are all values that will increase the 'glue' that holds our community together. These are of course exactly the values that a child with a disability WILL bring out in other children with proper adult guidance and modelling. What this means is that the child with a disability is a major asset to the school and *essential* to the building of an alternative set of community values in the next generation to counteract the current values. Children with a disability are a wonderful resource who can transform a school's values and help build a very different world for the next generation. They are not a burden who should be grateful for anything that they get. We should be grateful for the potential they bring to build our school and society.

### **3. *Long term outcomes***

The goal of segregated education reported in numerous policy documents over the last several decades is to prepare children with a disability to fit into the world after school. However, despite half a century of experience, it is obvious that this has not occurred. The large majority of people with a disability are unemployed after school and a significant proportion of the people who do have a job are in segregated employment on wages of a few dollars per week. Even those living in the community tend to be lonely and isolated with almost no community friends and networks.

We should not be surprised at this outcome however. The segregated model works on the logic of segregating a person with a disability for the whole of the developmental period; surrounding him or her with models who also have limited social and other skills; and teaching a totally different curriculum using specialist teachers and other professionals. After 12 years of this education it is assumed that the person will be ready to be fully included in the general society.

The cost of this model is huge. If a person is in residential care the cost to the community is tens of thousands of dollars per annum. Similarly a person who is unemployed is a financial cost to the community and if they are receiving a day service such as sheltered work additional costs are incurred. However we know that people with a disability who are included in regular education have a much higher probability of gainful employment due to the picking up social skills and networks of friends.

### **4. *It's good for the child with a disability***

We now have over 40 years of comparative research of the impact of segregated versus inclusive education. In a recent review of the literature that I did for an international conference on inclusion, I could NOT FIND ONE research article comparing inclusion with segregation that favoured segregation. Professors or Heads

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of Education at Australian Universities were written to stating this finding and asking if they knew of any contrary finding. No one came up with a contrary finding. The finding was not challenged by any of the international experts at the conference, who indeed agreed with my finding. Similarly, Directors General of Education in all Australian States were asked for the research base on which they recommended segregated schooling. While many referred to government reports, they also could not provide empirical evidence in support of segregated schooling for children with an intellectual disability. That is, the belief commonly stated to parents that children with a disability are better off in segregated education is unsupported by research. In fact the opposite is true, based on studies involving thousands of children in several countries. Some findings are (some key references are available at the end of this paper):

- Children with an intellectual disability do better academically and socially when included.
- The more they are included, the better they do, academically and socially. That is, **pull out programs or part-time inclusion models are detrimental** in comparison to full inclusion. The longer the child is in segregated education, the larger the gap with the child who is included.
- In some major studies, inclusion was found to be *significantly* better than segregation, and children who were segregated *lost* percentile ranks.
- These findings also apply to children with severe and profound levels of disability. They also do better academically and socially in inclusive settings, and do better the more that they are included.
- Students with an intellectual disability in special schools tended to have fewer friends than students with an intellectual disability in mainstreamed schools, most of them meeting friends at school only.
- Students in special education schools felt lonelier than students in mainstream. They also responded more passively.

It is very important to note that the above research DOES NOT say that children fail to learn in segregated settings. Numerous studies show that children do develop skills in such settings. The point from the research is that they learn significantly better if they are included, regardless of the extent of their disability.

### **5. *It's good for other children***

We have seen how the inclusion of children with a disability allows us to demonstrate and directly teach values that are at the core of our job. This is also demonstrated in research findings that have been remarkably consistent over decades and many countries. It has been found that for children who share inclusive schools with children with disabilities:

- Students who participated in social integration programs have more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities.
- They learned how to match their language to the ability of the children with handicaps
- They engaged in less disruptive behaviour and spent an equal amount of time working, playing and talking with their peers.
- No reduction in academic progress for non-disabled children.
- Non-disabled children do not pick up undesirable behaviour from the children with a disability.
- Reduced fear of difference.
- Growth in social awareness.
- Improvement in their own self concept.
- Development of personal ethics.

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- Warm and caring friendships.
- The more contact with disabled children, the better the outcomes, for example:
  - i. Tolerance of others.
  - ii. Positive changes in their social status with peers.
  - iii. Valuing relationships with children with disabilities.
  - iv. Development of personal values.

### **6. *It's good for teachers***

Classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse with children from other countries; children from a range of home backgrounds, some with very significant issues; children with significant learning difficulties, and gifted children who may be one or two years ahead of the class. With the worldwide increase in accountability of teachers in relation to student outcomes, teachers have to teach children at multiple levels simultaneously. The child with a disability has a huge developmental impact on teachers in learning how to teach to diversity more effectively and how to scaffold curriculum to make it accessible to all. This has significant benefits for all children, many of whom can be overlooked in the day-to-day business of the class. As the teacher learns to individualise curriculum, the gifted child is also given extension. Other noted benefits are the increased use of careful grouping and classroom environments, greater accent on positive and developmental teaching and major boosts to teacher self esteem. Many see it as the best thing that happened to them in their teaching career if they have been properly supported through the process. Research also has cast considerable doubt on some common concerns. For example it has been found in large review studies that:

- The presence of students with severe disabilities had no effect on levels of (teachers') allocated or engaged time.
- Time lost to interruptions of instruction not significantly different to non-inclusive classrooms.

However, we need to be realistic here. These are overall results and do not mean that an individual child cannot be a significant problem in a classroom. It also pre-supposes appropriate support, school leadership, planning and in-service. However these are 'how' questions which are outside of the scope of this paper. The important point is that people around the world and in our State have achieved these results consistently.

### **7. *It doesn't cost any more overall***

While a lot of the argument about inclusion focuses on resources, when systems have moved to inclusion the consistent outcome is that it doesn't cost any more. Huge resources are held in the segregated systems, and as the demand for these falls, resources become available for inclusion.

Similarly, while resources are held to be critical, evidence does not support this. A consistent finding is that attitudes are the single most important determinant of success. Then issues such as school leadership, school policies of the inclusion and belonging of ALL children, a positive support teacher, assistance with curriculum modification, and in-class support start to figure.

### **8. *It's a world wide trend***

Inclusion is not just some new 'fad'. One of the first examples of coverage of the topic goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a paper by Alexander Graham Bell. The law was changed in America in 1974 to enforce inclusion as the first choice of schooling for all. Italy went to a full inclusion system over a decade ago. Education Acts in the UK are increasingly reflecting inclusion. Canada is strongly implementing inclusion with

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some provinces such as New Brunswick moving to a full inclusion policy with no segregated system. New Zealand has moved to parent choice in education. In Australia, Victoria and Tasmania have moved to a parent choice model so that if a parent wants full inclusion, that is what is provided with support. Most countries in the third world are on an inclusion path. In the Salamanca statement, the United Nations endorsed inclusion as the policy that should be supported world wide for education.

### **9. *It's certain to be policy***

For over a decade the WA Education Department has been moving towards increasing inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, and all other children with disabilities are automatically accorded mainstream status. The WA Education system became a leader in the country when it set up a pilot scheme to look at the impact of supported inclusion on children with intellectual disabilities, their classmates and schools. In an evaluation report by Dr Rod Chadbourne of Edith Cowan University, the results were found to be overwhelmingly positive so the scheme was extended. In 2002 the WA Department of Education carried out an extensive review of special education services. While that review is yet to report, all of the feedback and documents emanating from the Department point to parent choice being the policy for the future.

### **10. *It's the law***

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 states that both direct and indirect discrimination against a person with a disability is unlawful. *Direct discrimination* is where a person with a disability is not accorded the same rights and benefits as all other persons. For example, if a child with a disability were refused enrolment at a school when others in a similar situation were allowed enrolment, this would be direct discrimination.

*Indirect discrimination* is where, if a person with a disability requires supports in order to access a benefit available to others without a disability, it is the responsibility of the organisation involved to provide the necessary supports. The obvious example is where a child in a wheelchair cannot access the school due to steps blocking access. It is the responsibility of the school to adapt the environment to provide access – in this case probably by a ramp. For a child with an intellectual disability, if the support needed to access the learning environment is adult assistance in the classroom, then this also must be provided under the law if a finding of indirect discrimination is to be avoided.

The defence against a charge of discrimination is unjustifiable hardship. This requires a balancing of the benefit or detriment against the hardship in meeting the requirements of the Act. It should be noted that financial considerations are unlikely to be considered unreasonable hardship as the whole budget of the education department is considered, not just the school budget. Similarly, while a ramp might cost \$40,000, as it will last 20 years the cost considered would be \$2,000 per year. It has also been found in key cases to go before the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that segregation is inherently discriminatory so substantial benefit would need to be shown to compensate for the inherent discrimination of segregating a child.

In the Western Australian Education Act, there are provisions for the Director General to require a child to go where an 'appropriate education program' is available. Under the Australian Constitution, State Law is over-ridden by Federal Law, so it is likely

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that segregating a child under the WA Education Act would have difficulty under the superior Commonwealth Legislation. While this has not yet been tested in courts, legal advice is that the Commonwealth Law would prevail.

So, let's do it -- but we need both the will and the skill. With the will, it will work. Developing the skills is an issue but after all that is the business of education. We can do that.

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