



Adequate funding not included

Lacking adequate aide support, the child with behavioural issues can hold the whole class back. **Annie Facchinetti** explores the issues



One of the hallmarks of the new Australian Curriculum is its commitment to 'An Australian Curriculum for all students' (ACARA, n.d.). The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) has as its first goal, 'Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence', and based on this, the Australian Curriculum was shaped by several propositions, one of which is, 'that each student is entitled to knowledge, understanding and skills that provide a foundation for successful and lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community'.

It would be sad indeed if our curriculum was based on anything less than an aspiration of equity of access for all students, but it is a goal that is much easier to achieve in rhetoric than in reality.

The right to be included

Since the 1970s, governments and schools have increasingly adopted a policy of inclusion for students with disabilities or other special needs. A recent paper released by Children with Disability Australia (Cologon, 2013) acknowledges that, 'All children have the right to an inclusive education. However, there are many barriers to the realisation of this right in the lived experiences of children and families.'

This statement is bound to resonate with teachers for whom, with the best intentions, effective inclusion of students with special needs that demand a high degree of extra attention, and in particular those of a behavioural nature, can be challenging at best. Inclusion, as opposed to integration, seeks to establish all students in a class on an equal footing. According to Konza (2008) inclusion, "is a philosophical move away from the accommodation of students with special needs into a 'normal' system,

towards a full inclusion model where everyone is considered normal, and where the needs of all can be met. This trend is situated within a broad social justice agenda, which argues that equality for all must include access for all students to their local school."

However, while this may be the philosophical direction in which we are being pointed, the level of support in terms of funding, resources and sustained and targeted teacher training for practising educators as well as pre-service teachers has left our school system in many cases under-prepared to do justice to the ideal. In Konza's (2008) paper examining the issue of inclusion in Australia, she identifies a number of challenges to effective implementation that we currently face, most of which relate to inadequate support in one form or another.

For instance, Konza suggests that, "Inclusive class sizes are often no smaller than other classes, and do not allow for the additional individualised attention some students need." One Early Years teacher I spoke to [prefers not to be identified by name] related how in her class of 26 students, which includes four students with diagnosed behavioural conditions, it is difficult to devote the necessary teaching time to all students. "I think I spend the majority of my time when those children [with diagnosed special needs] are not with an aide, supporting those students, making sure those children are on track, praising them when they are, using consequences and enforcing those consequences when they are doing things that stop themselves and other children from learning."

This response raises an interesting conundrum – while the students with special needs unquestionably have the right to access schools and curriculum in the same way as their peers, the other students in that class hold that right equally. The situation becomes particularly contentious

when dealing with the area of behavioural issues. If a student has a physical or intellectual disability, but is not disruptive to the learning needs of others, inclusion may take a certain amount of extra time and effort, but the benefits of this are clear, both for the student who gains experience and confidence as a regular class member in a mainstream setting, and his or her peers who learn firsthand about understanding and accepting individual differences.

Safe schools

Behavioural problems bring with them a whole new set of complications. Chief amongst these is the safety and security of the class as a whole. The Australian Government Department of Education's Safe Schools hub lists guiding principles that build a safe and supportive school environment, two of which are that Australian schools:

- Affirm the rights of all members of the school community to feel safe and be safe at school
 - Acknowledge that being safe and supported at school is essential for student wellbeing and effective learning.
- (Safe Schools Hub, 2014).

Although there are many management strategies and organisational approaches that can be tried to prevent violent or excessively disruptive behaviour in a class, the truth is

that some students are difficult to control. What works one day may not the next, with the result that there is a risk the other students in the class may not feel that they are in a safe learning environment. In my time as a teacher, I have seen students with special needs who began school with little sense of what is socially acceptable grow to be valued members of their classes who are functioning at a level beyond our expectations. I have also seen students become increasingly difficult to manage as they get older and their physicality endangers staff and peers alike as they grow in size and strength. A one-size-fits-all approach, as in many other aspects of education, is unlikely to succeed.

Classroom aides

Classroom aides help to mitigate this risk somewhat, but unfortunately the majority of schools do not seem to have access to enough aide time to meet the needs of all students. As the late Miro Martin, renowned educator and regular contributor to *Education Today* observed in his article *Mainstreaming vs Segregation*, "Aide time is part-time but aberrant behaviour tends to be full-time" (Martin, 2011).

Konza's (2008) research also identified insufficient curriculum resources and aide support as an impediment to successful inclusive processes. The Early Years teacher I spoke with

noted that she gets two to three hours of aide time a day, which leaves three to four hours of each day without an extra pair of hands to help with special needs students. "Other children get distracted by the behaviour of students with special needs and some begin to imitate those behaviours, for example going under a table, throwing a tantrum when they don't get a desired outcome or making noises when other children are trying to listen," she observes. Without the appropriate structures and supporting arrangements in place, it can be a huge challenge to juggle the competing needs of students.

In recognition of these difficulties, during his principalship Miro Martin and his team instituted what they called a 'Gold Class'. The program grouped 12 students each with six hours of aide time a week into a single class with a fulltime teacher and a fulltime aide. In an article for *Education Today*, Martin explained, "We don't isolate our Gold Class students for the whole time, but make sure that they mix with the other children at least two days a week for sport and various electives. Also, the gold children are buddies for our preps" (Martin, 2010). It's an interesting compromise, which can be both praised for being a creative solution tailored to the school's specific context, and censured by hardline inclusionists for segregating students. Martin gave some food for thought in his article



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when he said, “Ask a teacher with an ASD child who needs constant one-on-one attention how much easier it is to teach the rest of the class when that student is away. What use is six hours of aide time when the child is in the class for 27.5 hours? What does the teacher do the rest of the time?”

My Early Years contact offered similar ideas on the frustrations that can be involved when trying to cater to behavioural extremes. “Spending so much time supporting students with special needs makes it difficult to support students who struggle, who also need lots of teacher support. It means that children who need extension work are given less of my attention. The pace of my teaching is slower because of the constant interruptions.”

She also raised the issue of the additional time investment required outside standard teaching hours: “In addition to in class time, I spend time outside of class meeting with parents, psychologists and occupational therapists to try and help those children. I do background reading about their diagnosis. I write individual learning plans. I spend time thinking about how I can teach the whole class and differentiate for their special needs, which often requires a substantially different activity.”

Konza’s (2008) research corroborates this statement with both ‘Increased administrative demands’ including individual learning plans, input to funding submissions and reports for other professionals such as psychologists, and ‘Need for collaboration’ making it onto her list of reasons why teachers find students with special needs challenging.

Yet despite the difficulties, there are many compelling reasons to pursue an agenda of inclusion. The most obvious is the starting point of this article – the fact that equity and excellence are goals that we as a nation aspire to for our students. As US academic Mara Sapon-Shevin (2003) says, “Inclusion is not about disability, nor

is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice. What kind of world do we want to create and how should we educate children for that world? What kinds of skills and commitments do people need to thrive in a diverse society?”

Inclusion does not just teach students about diversity, it allows them to truly understand and learn to appreciate the different needs of others through genuine involvement. Cologon’s (2013) literature review of research about inclusion in education found a number of supporting benefits ranging from improved behaviour development over time for both students who do and do not experience a disability, to better academic outcomes for students with a disability compared with when they are in a segregated environment. Cologon also concluded, “Research has found that through participation in inclusive education, teachers experience professional growth and increased personal satisfaction. Additionally, developing skills to enable the inclusion of children who experience disability results in higher quality teaching for all children and more confident teachers.”

One might, however, view this as a best case scenario, and even Cologon (2013) concedes that, “...limited funding and resources, lack of support from specialist staff and education authorities, and inadequate professional development opportunities were identified as barriers to implementing the *Disability Standards For Education*. These findings are consistent with research evidence suggesting that many teachers feel insufficiently supported and under-resourced for inclusive education.”

Which brings us back to the heart of the matter. Most teachers are supportive of the notion of inclusion in theory; indeed it is enshrined in each of the domains of teaching within the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2014). But without clear

guidance backed by support in the form of sufficient funding and resources, it will continue to be an unattainable ideal.

Further reading

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