



INTRODUCTION

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) is committed to advocating for the provision of quality education for children and young people with special education needs. It is a broad-based group with membership comprising teachers, therapists, academics and others. AASE National is represented on advisory bodies such as the ACARA Students With Disabilities Advisory Group. At a state level, AASE State Chapters are consulted by education departments, provide representation on a range of state committees and offer professional learning for teachers and others. AASE supports awards to exemplary teachers and leaders in the education of students with special needs. In advocating for evidence based practices in the education of students with disability AASE provides a biennial award to support research relevant to the education of students with special needs, and organises an annual conference focusing on the education of students with special needs. It also publishes two journals, the Australasian Journal of Special Education and Special Education Perspectives.

AASE is appreciative of the opportunity to make a submission to this enquiry and representatives are available to provide further information if required.

SUMMARY

This AASE submission addresses three areas of particular relevance to students with disability and/or special education needs, in relation to the first two issues raised in the paper.

Firstly, we address the need for data collection to **provide accountability and transparency around educational outcomes for students with disability who do not participate in NAPLAN**, particularly those with more severe or complex disability.

Secondly, we address the need for **early objective assessment of beginning reading skills**, especially the foundation skills related to phonics in order to identify struggling readers before the NAPLAN assessment in Year 3 and to provide additional support as early as possible.

Thirdly, we address the need for **data about the qualifications of specialist teachers** who work with students with disability and/or special education needs in both inclusive and segregated settings.

How is disability defined?

For the purposes of this submission, the interpretation of “students with disability” means those students identified under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA), including those for whom educational adjustments must be provided.

Need for data collection related to students with disability

AASE acknowledges that considerable resources have been committed to improving education for students with disability, with the federal government budgeting \$5.2 billion over 2014-2017. Substantial commitment has also been made by states, for example in NSW, funding for students with disability has been steadily increasing and reached over \$1.2 billion in 2014/15.

For typically developing students, data on outcomes are collected through the national NAPLAN assessments, but more than a third of students with disability do not participate (Dempsey & Davies, 2013). Dempsey and Davies comment (p. 9) that “the lack of NAPLAN data on the achievement of students with disabilities could easily give the impression that these students do not exist in the education system”. The lack of data means there is a lack of accountability for students, who if provided with appropriate programs and instruction and with suitable adjustments could complete NAPLAN assessments, as well as a total lack of accountability for those who are exempted because of significant intellectual disability.

Although Australian jurisdictions often use some form of individualised education plan or program to support students with disability, there is no national policy approach to their use or to monitoring student outcomes apart from the requirement in the Disability Standards for Education that schools consult the students and/or their carer when making adjustments (Dempsey, 2012). Where students with disability are included in regular schools, funds may be used to provide additional staffing (teachers and teacher assistants), programs, material resources or consultancy support. Segregated settings are typically staffed at with a higher staff to student ratio than regular settings and are also likely to have specialist equipment etc. Student outcome data would provide one source of information to allow consideration of the effectiveness of the schooling and adjustments provided.

AASE’s position is supported by other recent reports such as those produced by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Forlin, Loreman, Deppeler, & Sharma, 2013), the report of the 2016 Victorian Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities and the 2016 NSW Auditor-General’s Report on Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools. These reports have highlighted the issues of neglect of students with disability in national assessments, the variations in outcome data collected in the various jurisdictions and the consequent lower standard of accountability for outcomes for students with disability. The lack of outcome data means that although schools are making adjustments, there is no way of judging the general effectiveness of these adjustments, or knowing whether additional targeted

funding and supports for students with disability are effective. Data is required not only on the supports and adjustments provided (for example that collected through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability) but also on the outcomes for students. The educational progress of ALL students must be monitored.

Early assessment of foundation reading skills (phonics)

The importance of the ability to read for mature literacy, success in education and employment cannot be overestimated. Scientific research tells us that explicit and systematic synthetic phonics instruction is a crucial component in developing early reading (Rose, 2006). Australia still has a large minority of both school students and adults who do not achieve basic literacy standards. Great Britain now assesses the phonics skills of young children in the middle of year 1 and mandates the teaching of synthetic phonics. The preliminary data from a report from the London School of Economics and Political Science on these changes show lasting positive effects for children who are most likely to struggle with learning to read (Machin, McNally & Viarengo, 2016). A similar national data collection in Australia, using objective assessment of specific skills, would likely lead to more effective reading instruction and assist teachers to identify students who are struggling to learn to read, well before the NAPLAN reading assessment in Year 3. This would allow the use of additional support as early as possible and may drive the use of effective reading instruction for all students from the beginning of school.

Data on specialist teacher qualifications

Current evidence suggests that many teachers who are in support positions or in segregated settings with responsibility for teaching and/or supporting students with disability and special education needs are not qualified for their positions. AASE takes the position that these teachers should have completed an additional qualification in special or inclusive education at diploma or masters level in special education or completed a special education/inclusion major in undergraduate studies with at least 8 units. Educational jurisdictions are likely to hold data on both teacher positions and their qualifications, but this is not reported (possibly because of the shortage of appropriately qualified special educators). Recently efforts have been made to ensure those teaching in STEM have appropriate qualifications, and the need is equally urgent for students with disability in both regular and specialist settings.

This issue has also been raised in recent reports. The 2016 NSW Auditor-General's Report on Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools identified as a concern the fact that NSW DE does not require learning and support teachers to have special education qualifications. The report noted that NSW DE does have information on teachers who do have special education qualifications, so the data are available. The 2016 Victorian Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities found "there is a lack of specialist

expertise and support for schools to deliver inclusive education. This can make it difficult for schools to implement strategies to maximise the learning of students with disabilities “ (p.79). This report also noted the need for teachers with expertise in autism to provide specialist support to teachers and students. Requiring systems and sectors to report on the number of appropriately qualified teachers in support and special education positions would add pressure to employ and educate more specialist teachers for students with special education needs.

References

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