

Productivity Commission —Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act 1992

Alice Springs visits, 24–26 June 2003 (*Cate McKenzie, Patrick Laplagne, Jo Lawson*)

This note was prepared by Productivity Commission staff who participated in the visit detailed below, and checked by Chris Tudor for accuracy. This note summarises the tenor of the discussions held at the time and does not represent the views of the Commission.

Association of Independent Schools of NT — 26 June, 10.00am–11.30am (*Chris Tudor, Principal of St Philip's College, Alice Springs*)

Chris was part of the ISCA (NCISA) delegation to the Senate inquiry into students with disabilities in his capacity as Chair of NCISA and as Headmaster of an independent school. The Commission met with Chris against the background of the NCISA submission to the Commission and the appearance of its representatives at a Commission hearing. Chris has particular experience in his capacity as Chairman of ISCA and as Headmaster of a school with a significant indigenous enrolment in the Northern Territory, which has a number of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities attending independent schools fall between the cracks of Commonwealth and State funding. Independent schools get approximately \$6,000 p.a. for each disabled child, when one inclusion support person alone costs \$25,000 plus p.a., or more if the school tries to provide any carer structure or recognition of experience for special aides. If the school accepts too many students with disabilities, it ends up going broke.

Students with disabilities enrich any school that they attend. Conversely, other children can be very supportive of children with disabilities.

Chris' school has included children with Asperger's syndrome. Those with mild to moderate Asperger's pose no particular problem. With those that have severe Asperger's, safety issues can arise. Full-time inclusion support people are necessary for these children. A particular child in that situation was able to attend a school camp with the appropriate support.

Too many children with disabilities in a school can mean the school struggles financially. The funding shortfall caused by using inclusion support people falls on the wider school community, through higher fees. Educating children with

disabilities is a community responsibility, and Government funding should be greater than at present.

Based on Chris' own experience of fund raising, the DDA's requirement to make adjustments is a very useful one. The demonstration effect of giving students with disabilities full access cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, it means that students can be regularly exposed to people with disabilities from outside the school, who can act as role models for them. Infrastructure issues are of concerns for schools because some schools simply don't have the money to purchase items such as lifts (\$80,000). However, schools should be encouraged to 'have a go' rather than claim unjustifiable hardship. Funding should be available to help them provide expensive capital so they can do this.

Violent behaviour of some students is a real issue and there is no clear solution to this. The situation becomes untenable if other students or staff find themselves at risk.. It is necessary to distinguish between disruptive and dangerous behaviour, and also to examine the sources of the behaviour, such as home circumstances.

In some cases, the definition of disability needs to be revised. In this respect, ADHD is a real problem which can destroy families and classrooms and yet it is not classified as a disability. Government should ensure that the problem is dealt with at the school, not handballed to someone else. This may require extra funding to allow schools to run special units, with a view to progressively integrating the difficult children into the mainstream of the school. In a school a Bridging Unit can be useful for students with learning difficulties. St Philip's has a unit which includes some students with disabilities.

University teachers' training needs to be more practically orientated. It is overly theoretical in the early stages, when priority should be given to hands-on teaching. Trainee teachers should be taught ways to cope (e.g. with a student in a wheelchair) very early on, before they become discouraged because they are unable to cope. Chris' school and organisation are experimenting with a new approach to teacher training in conjunction with Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory University and Monash University, Gippsland.

The most significant group of students with disabilities in the NT are indigenous students.

Indigenous children's reading and writing skills suffer from:

- High incidence of hearing impairment: teachers need to have an awareness of the problem and implement remedies in class.
- Language problems: even when children have English as their first language, their written communication skills are often basic while oral

communications skills are much better. However, this may not affect their capacity to operate within society.

Some children come from dysfunctional, violent remote communities, where there is little discipline. Being a school boarder gives them a more structured environment and prepares them for urban life. Nonetheless, some of the dysfunctional behaviours can resurface in the school environment.

Abstudy funding of Indigenous children's' school fees can be supplemented by school bursaries. While non-Indigenous children are aware of this income support of Indigenous children, this does not create resentment. Means-testing of Abstudy is inappropriate, given the redistribution of income that occurs within large family groups. Exempting them from the means test is a form of affirmative action which would be more appropriate at present than the rigid enforcement of the current rules.

Cultural awareness is crucial for such things as 'sorry business' (relating to attendance at funerals). It is important for schools to have access to Aboriginal officers who can understand/confirm the cultural imperatives of Aboriginal students.

Dealing with Centrelink and other agencies' eligibility requirements is too hard for most people. This often leads to Indigenous people not being aware of what support is available. These agencies must find less complex ways to communicate.

What happens to Indigenous students when they leave schools depends on a number of things, including:

- the type of community they go back to (harmonious or dysfunctional).
- what kinds of role models they have been exposed to.

Racism can be a problem outside of school. It is not strongly evident within the school where young people tend to accept each other based on character. Not all racism is white – black – it can also be black – black.