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102746 Position Paper

Strengthening the knowledge and capabilities of secondary educators: Recommendations for reform based on the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education.

This paper responds to the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE) by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE, 2020) by advocating for resources allocation and training support for inclusive environments through reform direction of “strengthening knowledge and [capabilities] of educators and providers” (Section 2.2; DESE, 2020, p.27-46), focussing specifically on educators in mainstream secondary schools. Obstacles to inclusion reform will be examined herein with evidence illuminating changes required for effective implementation, followed by subsequent recommendations to cement cultural shift towards inclusion by sharing community knowledge and employing clear guidelines for expectations, and ensure inclusive practices by strengthening educator capabilities by integrating mentorship, training and resources.

Educator concerns and confusion regarding their obligations are amplified by inexperience and lack of confidence for inclusion implementation. The obscurity of resources and guidelines aligned with the DSE presents a barrier for improving educator capabilities for inclusive practice. This paper will investigate the Australian Government’s ([AG], 2005) claim to “clarify and elaborate [educators’] legal

obligations” in the DSE (p.4), subject to the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) which outlaws discrimination against individuals with disability (AG, 1992; Iacono et al, 2019).

Attitudes to inclusion vary among secondary educators. Due fragmented knowledge (Subban et al, 2021; Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018) misinterpretation (Graham, 2020) and concerns for implementation occur despite philosophical alignment. The Salamanca Statement by UNESCO (1994) conveys *all* students’ right to “inclusion and participation” (p.11), supporting mainstream inclusion and rebuking segregation of students with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994; see also de Bruin, 2020), corroborated by large-scale research correlating inclusion with “superior social developmental outcomes” for *all* students (de Bruin, 2020, p.59). Despite this, exclusion and segregation of ‘special’ schools is still prevalent practice (de Bruin, 2020; Graham, 2020; Iacono et al., 2019). The DSE omits mention and definition of *inclusion*, instead measuring compliance by “participation” (AG, 2005, p18) in lieu of inclusion for *all* students. This defaults to ableist models of education, granting marginalised ‘outliers’ stigmatising ‘adjustments’ and rejecting contribution to learning from these students (Gale et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2020). Secondary teachers’ self-efficacy positively correlates with enthusiasm for inclusive education (Subban et al, 2021) whilst misconception of inclusion impairs confidence for implementation (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018). Teachers’ concerns for inclusive pedagogy include academic performance, under-resourcing, insufficient training, and preparation (Merga, 2020; Round et al., 2016; Subban et al. 2021), prompting uncertainties about ability to implement; with teachers under 40 years of age expressing lowest confidence (Subban et al. 2021).

A social model (DESE, 2020) distinguishes disability from low expectation (Graham et al., 2020; Iacono et al., 2019), focussing on curriculum, assessment and environmental deficits; not the student. Equitable learning environments benefit present and future well-being, and academic performance of *all* students (Merga, 2020; de Bruin, 2020). Teachers require clarification of inclusion concepts and practice with immersion in inclusive environments to build self-efficacy (Subban et al., 2021) for systemic removal of participation barriers in classrooms (de Bruin, 2020; Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018). Graduate teachers require guidance (DESE, 2020; Subban et al., 2021) from capable educational leaders to become “motivated educators [with] understanding of their obligations” (DESE, 2020, p.27) for inclusive practice. Educators must understand learner diversity to successfully implement inclusive education (AITSL, 2018; Graham et al., 2020; Merga, 2020; Subban et al., 2021), but often lack adequate guidance (Merga, 2020), or knowledge of available support to decipher the DDA and DSE (DESE, 2020; Duncan et al., 2020).

Widespread confusion exists regarding what constitutes “reasonable adjustment” (AG, 2005, pp.10-11) and “unjustifiable hardships” (DESE, 2020, p.36), along with availability of data (Iacono et al., 2019) and funding for adjustments (2.2.9; DESE, 2020). Multiple factors determine “reasonable adjustment” (Section 3.3; AG, 2005) including the nature of students’ disabilities, cost, time, benefits, stakeholders affected (AG, 2005) and assessment adjustments (Duncan et al., 2020). There lacks systematic measures to determine what is “reasonable” (DESE, 2016; Duncan et al., 2020). The DDA outlaws “failure to make reasonable adjustments” (AG, 1992, p.10)

as discrimination on the grounds of disability, but the onus is on individuals with disabilities (AG, 1992, p.10) to prove resulting disadvantage. Furthermore, the DSE excuses non-compliance if conditions “impose unjustifiable hardship on the provider” based on indiscernible effects and circumstances of the adjustment, and compliance to an indeterminable “maximum extent” possible (AG, 2005, p.26). The unclear expectation in this clause causes misinterpretation by providers making the claim (AG, 1992, p.14). Families express scepticism about the reliability of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCDD) which directly impacts funding for adjustments. Responsibility for funding vacillates between the NDIS and providers (2.2.9; DESE, 2020, p.43) without clarification. Systematic alignment of the DSE to guidelines for practice is required for educators to access, interpret and practise the standards. Educators and teachers-in-training can also benefit from partnerships with families when gathering data (Iacono et al, 2019) to inform and improve inclusive practice (DESE, 2020), equipping them with knowledge to support families in navigating the system.

The Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning is urged to consider the following recommendations for reform, reflecting equitable learning in NSW secondary schools in alignment with the DESE Review (2020). Recommendations assume enactment in consultation with students with disabilities; including students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, families, educators, and “national peak disability and education bodies” (DESE, 2020, p.iv).

Inclusion is “misinterpreted in [...] policy and practice” (Graham 2020, p.12). Recommendation 4 of the DESE Review (2020) seeks to clarify understanding of inclusion by improving “Exemplars of Practice,” and developing support documentation for providers, subsequently distributing these to educators (DESE, 2020, p.vii). The current DSE Practice Exemplars (DESE, 2016) address inclusion insufficiently, providing merely two secondary education case studies highlighting adjustments for participation; not inclusion, exemplifying shortened assessment responses, aide support for *integration*, and *segregation* to avoid peer comparison. Contrastingly, this recommendation aims to improve communal efficacy by obligating educators to partner with families to share case-studies, assessments and exemplar data with the NCDD. International evidence suggests that “special educators had greater collaboration efficacy, while classroom teachers had greater behavioural efficacy“ (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018, p.309), attributing great power to combining educator knowledge. The significant growth of “students with disabilities being educated in regular schools” (Round et al., 2016, p.185) indicates a positive projection for inclusion, displaying positive correlation with teacher self-efficacy (Subban et al., 2021). The DSE adjustments must include, clearly define and reflect the complexities of inclusion and decentralise ableism, as a precursor to developing aligned support documentation. The “Know your responsibilities” document (DESE, 2020, p.vii) should define and clarify perplexing terms such as ‘reasonable adjustment’ and ‘unjustifiable hardships,’ supported by procedure for escalation. Furthermore, it should outline the collective social and academic benefits of inclusion for students; with or without disabilities; and practice implications for teachers (de Bruin, 2020). This comprises inclusion as a process for *all* students to develop “interpersonal skills” (de Bruin, 2020, p.68) and a place for “cooperative learning” (de

Bruin, 2020, p.68; Gale et al., 2017). These developments will contribute towards inclusion by improving educator knowledge and infrastructure for pre-service training and assessment.

The next recommendation focusses on educator capabilities, combining Recommendation 5 and 7 of the DESE Review (2020, p.vii-viii) to ensure educators and graduate teachers from all sectors have suitable induction and training for support of students, aligned with the DSE and accreditation (DESE, 2020). Enactment involves allocation of resources and funding for mentored training programs, and review of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers ([APST]; AITSL, 2018). The Melbourne Declaration emphasises professional mentoring to strengthen capabilities (MCEETYA, 2008) and improving partnership with students, families and educational stakeholders to optimise student learning. Training programs must be consolidated to include all government endorsed resources, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and documentation outlined throughout this paper, focussing on building collective pre-service and teacher efficacy. Thorough review of the APST is required to align principles of inclusion (Graham et al., 2020) with DSE practice. The standard descriptors need adjustment to encompass *all* “students [...] needs” (1.5); identifying legislative documents including the DSE (1.6, 6.2), *responsive* “teaching strategies” (1.5, 3.2), and *inclusive environments* (4.4), supported by *equal* “partnership” with parents and carers (3.7; AITSL, 2018, pp.10-17). Identification of *inclusion* and *full* “participation” goals (1.6, 4.1) including specification of differentiation for *equity* (1.5; AITSL, 2018, pp.10-17) will assist elimination of discrimination against students with disabilities (AG, 1992, p.1). Furthermore, specification of *inclusive* and *accessible*

requirements will set clear expectations for capabilities to integrate inclusion into teaching practice; for example content and ICT selection (2.2, 2.6, 4.5), activities and assessments (4.2, 5.1), and planning, programming and sequencing (2.3, 3.6, 3.2; AITSL, 2018, pp.10-17).

These recommendations aim to incorporate community knowledge and resources into guidelines for obligations and practice to collectively elevate educator knowledge and capabilities, and streamline training for educators and graduates. The barriers to inclusion addressed necessitates educator obligation clarity for best practice to support students with disabilities and family networks. Cohesive resources, training, and consultation with the community is paramount to elevating educator efficacy with the DSE and perception of inclusion. Adequate funding to review and develop these resources is imperative to achieving reform. It is “vital to cultivate an inclusive culture within schools” to precede an inclusive society (de Bruin, 2020, p.69). By deconstructing an ableist culture and replacing it with one of inclusion; supported by capable educators and community endorsement; students with disabilities will be able to thrive within communities that address their needs, not as *special* but as a human right to be met.

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