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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NSW INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Independent schools in New South Wales are making a significant contribution to the education of students with disability and other learning difficulties. Data from the 2015 Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on school students with disability show that nationally, the number of students with special educational needs in independent schools is consistent with the sector's enrolment share of 14%.

Almost one in five students across Australia has special educational needs. Students with disability account for 18% of total student enrolments in government and non-government schools and 18% of the national independent school population.

While the data on the number of students are not fully reliable, as discussed in Part I below, it shows that the contribution by NSW independent schools to the education of students with disability is proportionate. It is also of long standing, drawing on a history of private commitment to special needs education dating back to the establishment in 1860 of the first special school in the state, still operating today as the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children. More than 150 years since its establishment, recognition of the needs and rights of students with disability and learning difficulties has expanded greatly, substantial public funding has been provided, and in recent years particularly, professional understanding of what delivers the best schooling outcomes for these students has grown.

The striking feature of special needs education in all school sectors has been the great expansion in numbers of students with a disability or other learning difficulties enrolled in mainstream schools, reflecting a change in the nature of special education. Virtually all schools in Australia have some students with identified learning difficulties enrolled. Independent schools in NSW are no exception. For the 387 independent schools in the state, addressing special education needs is part of their normal responsibilities.

This kind of diversity is a distinguishing feature of the student body of all schools. While the public discourse on education tends to focus on differences between schools and sectors and the communities they serve, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regularly observes that in most OECD countries, there is more variation in achievement within schools than between schools. Analysis of the performance of the cohort of 15 year olds undertaking the three-yearly international Programme for International Student Assessment

(PISA) tests in 2015 shows that on average, as a percentage of the average total variation in science performance across OECD countries, 69% is attributable to within-school differences , and 30% to differences between schools. In Australia, within-school differences are relatively high, at about 92%, and between school differences slightly lower than the average, at about 25%, although still considerably higher than Finland, for example, at less than 10%. Lower between-school differences signal a more equitable schooling system and considerable diversity of the student body in individual schools and thus in most classrooms.

Recognising and planning for diversity and responding to individual difference is therefore a necessity for all schools and teachers. This necessity is underlined for students with special needs if they are to have the opportunity to participate in the same school experiences and master the same academic content as their peers. For these students, individual differences call for a range of adjustments to the class and school environment as well as high levels of professional skill and knowledge.

Aside from the adjustments and adaptations required to accommodate individual learning needs however, the important dimensions of a quality schooling experience for students with special educational needs are recognisably similar to the qualities that lead to good schooling outcomes for all students: that is the skills, knowledge and attitudes of teachers; a school culture that values diversity, inclusion and achievement; accountability, linked to high expectations for all; a quality curriculum; and parental engagement.

Part I: How many students have special educational needs?

This analysis of the contribution of independent schools in NSW to the education of students with special educational needs takes a broad approach to defining 'special needs' and uses the terms students with disability, students with learning and behavioural difficulties and students with special needs interchangeably. All come within the scope of 'special needs' as they all call for adaptations to be made by schools and by teachers in the skills and strategies they use in the classroom. A breakdown of the data however showing changes over time is only possible using a narrower definition, so the initial analysis is done on this basis.

Counting students with disability – the state definition

Counting the numbers of students with disability and special needs in Australian schools and categorising them has for many years been a fraught enterprise. Jurisdictions have used different definitions, some more restrictive than others, resulting in highly variable prevalence rates for students with disability being reported, depending on the approach used. In NSW, the definition of students with disability used in the annual school Census and in the administration of Commonwealth Targeted Programs until they ceased in 2014 depended on using a medical diagnosis as a guide, with the result that the numbers reported were generally believed to fall well short of a true representation of the challenge for teachers attempting to address the wide range of learning needs in their class.

Official reports on students with disability have often given two separate figures: the number of students having a confirmed disability against departmental criteria – intellectual, physical, hearing, vision, mental health and autism – and the number of students with additional needs relating to learning difficulties and/or behaviour disorders, including ADHD, dyslexia, language or communication delay. The differences between the two approaches are starkly demonstrated in the statistics for NSW government schools in 2015: under the state definition, there were about 91,000 students with disability, representing 12% of the public school population; the broader NCCD definition results in a figure almost twice that number, and a proportion close to the national figure of 19.4% of government school students.

Under the state criteria, which continue to be used for both state and Commonwealth statistical collections, 8,219 students with disability were enrolled in mainstream NSW independent schools in 2015. A further 3,344 students were enrolled in Special Schools and Special Assistance Schools. In total, in 2015 the 11,563 students with disability made up 6% of enrolments in the sector.

A major issue mainstream schools in all sectors have had to confront in relation to students with disability has been the sustained and rapid growth in numbers, particularly since the introduction of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, which requires educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of students with disability, unless the changes needed would cause major difficulties or give rise to unreasonable costs. While some of the differences in numbers over time may be due to changes in data collection methods and a different approach to reporting of disability, the order of magnitude of the increase since the enactment of the disability discrimination legislation is clear. In NSW independent schools, since the year 2000 numbers have increased by almost 200%, far outstripping enrolment increases generally, which rose by 24%. This trend is illustrated in Table 1.

The growth in students with disability seen in NSW independent schools is mirrored in the national data, which show a 179% increase in students with disability in independent schools over a similar period.

TABLE 1: **Students with Disability in NSW Independent Schools 2000 to 2015**

(using NSW state definition of disability)
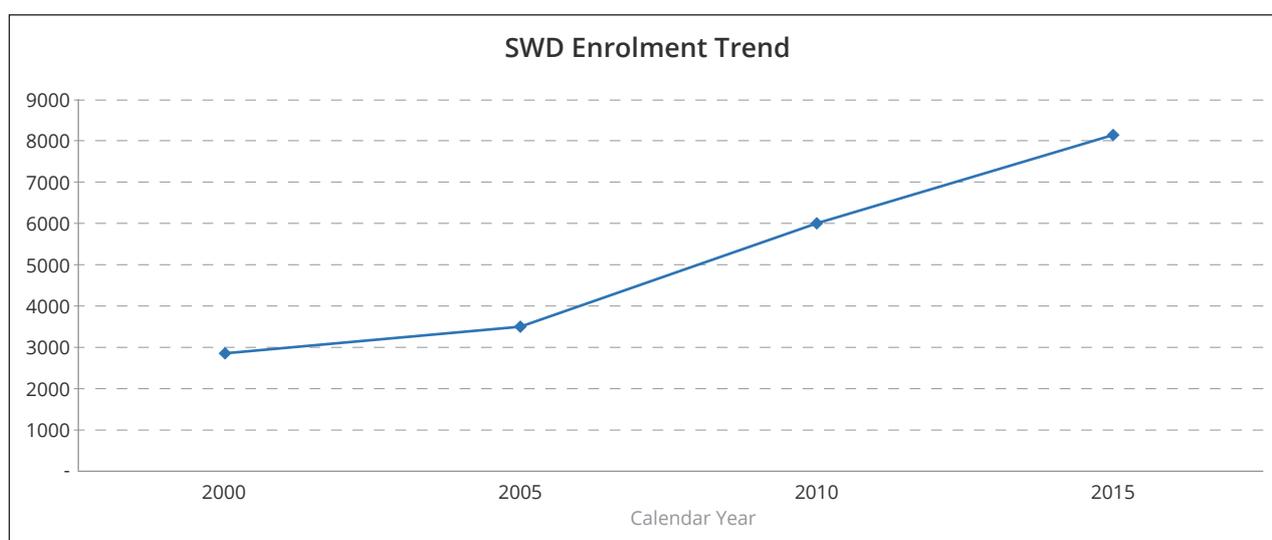
Categorising students with disability – the state definition

By far the majority of these students fit within the two categories of cognitive and social/emotional difficulties. This is where the greatest increase has occurred. The main contributor to the increase is the rise in the number of students with autism-related disorders, a trend that is Australia-wide and is also common to a number of OECD countries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has suggested that the prevalence of autism in Australia increased by 79% in the three-year period 2009 to 2012, and an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare survey found that almost one in seven children in 2012 to 2013 aged four to 17 had mental health disorders. The reasons for this development are unclear. After examining the international data and reviewing relevant academic research, the OECD remains unsure whether the increase in autism-related conditions is due to the use of broader diagnostic criteria, which lead to a higher reported prevalence, better identification of autism-related disorders or a true rise in incidence. These questions continue to be debated within the health and education research community.

For NSW independent schools, as for schools nationally, the number of students with physical and sensory disorders has remained fairly stable. Although smaller in number, these disabilities can require considerable adaptation by schools.

Another factor contributing to the growth in the number of students with disability in independent schools in NSW is the changed nature of independent schooling. As enrolments have continued to grow – from about 10% of school students in the state in 1991 to 13.5% in 2001 to 16% in 2015 – independent schooling has become more diverse, catering for a more socially heterogeneous community in an increasing number of small, low fee schools. Almost half (47%) of the independent schools in NSW have enrolments of less than 200 students and almost two-thirds (64%) of schools have an SES score of 104 or less, placing them in the low to average range of socioeconomic advantage. Most of the enrolment growth in the sector over the past fifteen years has taken place in low fee schools serving middle and lower socioeconomic areas of the state, although the majority of schools (61%) and the majority of enrolments (84%) are still in metropolitan Sydney.

The 8,219 students with disability in mainstream independent schools, under the state definition, are fairly evenly divided between primary and secondary education. Well over half these students (61%) attend schools in the metropolitan area, while the remainder attend schools throughout the state including rural and remote schools, which do not always have ready access to specialised staff and outside professional support.

A striking feature of the statistics is that 70% of the students with disability in NSW mainstream independent schools are boys. This preponderance of boys in students with special needs is a universal phenomenon with the greater differences found in relation to learning difficulties rather than physical disability. Across OECD countries, substantially more boys than girls have a disability or learning difficulty requiring additional support in school. In international studies, this overrepresentation of boys is explained in terms of 'the three Bs' – biology, behaviour and bias:

- biology – emphasising genetic or biological differences between the sexes, taking in the evidence that male children are more prone to illness and trauma
- behaviour – highlighting male/female behavioural differences, whereby male students externalise their feelings in school more openly than females
- bias – where school-related gender bias, a perception that boys are more visible in the classroom and more likely to be singled out as problem students or to be alienated by the structures and processes of schooling, is held responsible.

As the OECD concludes, it is probable that all three factors play a part.

Counting students with disability – the broader scope

The data on the 8,219 students with disability in mainstream independent schooling, following the state definition, in reality cover a subset only of students with special learning needs, accounting for less than half their present number in NSW independent schools when compared with data from the NCCD collection.

The NCCD represents the joint efforts of the Commonwealth and states to come up with a nationally consistent and broad definition of students with disability to provide a true national picture and to increase the capacity of school authorities and schools to meet the educational needs of students

with disability. From 2013 to 2015, the NCCD has been progressively implemented. The broader definition it adopts relies on the professional judgement of teachers on the adjustments they need to make for students with additional learning and support needs. The data from the NCCD need to be used with caution as they are not considered truly nationally consistent or reliable. When releasing the data the Commonwealth Education Minister described them collectively as "'very disappointing", stating that "This data . . . hasn't come to a credible landing point just yet." The Commonwealth recognises that "the quality of the NCCD at school level is still evolving" and that "the NCCD data quality needs to mature". Only high level data have been publicly released, giving national and state statistics on the numbers of students with disability and their distribution by category of disability and the level of educational adjustment required. Sectoral data are only publicly available at the national level, although school authorities have access to some more detailed data which, while not regarded as sound enough for publication or deep analysis, are used to inform the discussion that follows.

Table 2 shows the distribution of students with disability nationally by sector. Nationally, the NCCD data show that the independent sector accounts for 14% of total student enrolments and 14% of all students with disability. The government sector, with 65% of enrolments nation-wide, has 70% of all students requiring an adjustment and the Catholic sector, with a 20% enrolment share, has 16% of the total number of students with disability. Data available to AISNSW show a similar picture for NSW. The data also suggest that the total number of students with disability in NSW independent schools is more than double the 11,563 students counted for school Census purposes.

Categorising students with disability – a different approach

Internationally, different approaches are used to describe the nature of disabilities and special learning needs affecting students' progress at school. Generally now there is a shift away from identification on the basis of disability type involving medical diagnosis towards a focus on the kind of special education provision that needs to be made, representing a shift in emphasis to what can be done educationally.

The NCCD adopts this approach. The nationally consistent definition encompasses four broad categories of disability – cognitive, physical, sensory and social/emotional. Nationally, 18% of the total student population has a disability. By far the largest category of disability, accounting for 9.8% of all students, is cognitive difficulty, defined as a disorder or malfunction that results in a person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction. The next most common category, accounting for a further 4.1% of total students, is social/emotional, defined as a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour. Research studies show that it is these emotional and behavioural difficulties that present some of the greatest challenges to classroom teachers. Physical disability accounts for a further 3.4% of the national student population and sensory for 0.7%.

NSW independent schools follow this national pattern with the majority of students with disability in the sector categorised as having cognitive or social/emotional difficulties.

TABLE 2: National distribution of students with disability by sector (NCCD 2015)

	Enrolment share of sector	Students with disability as % of total student enrolments in sector	Students with disability in sector as % of total students with disability
Government	65%	19.4%	70%
Catholic	20%	14.4%	16%
Independent	14%	18%	14%
All sectors	100%	18%	100%

* Some figures may not add due to rounding.

TABLE 3: Distribution of students with disability by sector and by category of disability as percentage of total student population

Disability Category	Explanation of Disability Category	Government schools	Non-government schools	All Sectors
Cognitive	Total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions. A disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction.	10.9%	7.8%	9.8%
Physical	Total or partial loss, and/or malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the body. Presence in the body of organisms causing or capable of causing disease or illness.	3.3%	3.5%	3.4%
Sensory	Total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions. The malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person's body.	0.8%	0.6%	0.7%
Social / emotional	A disorder or disease that affects the person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour.	4.5%	3.5%	4.1%
Total		19.4%	15.3%	18%

* Some figures may not add due to rounding.

The NCCD makes provision for schools to identify the different levels of adjustment required to meet students' needs, ranging from a low level of adjustment, described as 'support within quality differentiated teaching practice', through 'supplementary' and 'substantial' to 'extensive' adjustment. The distribution of students according to the level of adjustment required is illustrated in Table 4. For the government and Catholic school sectors, the most frequently reported level of adjustment was the second level, 'supplementary,' accounting for 30% and 10% respectively of students with disability, compared with 21% and 4% requiring the lowest level of adjustment. For the independent sector as a whole, students with disability were equally distributed between the two lowest levels of adjustment. The NSW independent schools statistics run parallel to these national figures with the lowest level of adjustment accounting for the largest number of students with disability in the sector.

While the statistics on students with disability between years are not directly comparable using NCCD data, the categorisation of the largest proportion of independent school students in the lowest level of need for adjustment appears to represent a change from recent years. In 2012, under the state criteria about one-third of students with disability in NSW Independent schools were defined as having high support needs, and to represent an increasing proportion of special needs students.

The broader scope of the NCCD is consistent with the approach used by the OECD in examining differences between countries in making provision

TABLE 4: Distribution of students with disability by sector and by level of adjustment as percentage of total students with disability, nationally

Level of Adjustment	Government schools	Catholic Schools	Independent Schools	All Sectors
Support within quality differentiated teaching practice	21%	4%	6%	31%
Supplementary	30%	10%	6%	46%
Substantial	12%	2%	2%	16%
Extensive	7%	1%	1%	8%
Share of all students requiring adjustment	70%	16%	14%	100%
Share of all Australian school students	65%	20%	14%	100%

* Some figures may not add due to rounding.

for students with special needs. Given the difficulty of getting internationally comparable data, the OECD collects data on students in schools who are receiving additional resources to help them access the curriculum. The OECD definition encompasses students with disability and learning difficulties, but it also includes students with disadvantages arising from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. In most OECD countries, the larger numbers of students receiving additional resources for disability are in the category of specific learning difficulties or behavioural and emotional disorders. Accepting the difficulty of making reliable and valid comparisons between countries, it is interesting to note the range for the proportion of students with learning difficulties, which in 2007 spanned from below 1%, in Japan, to over 20% in Finland.

Part II: Where are students with special educational needs educated?

In contrast to today, special education historically was a separate enterprise conducted almost entirely in separate schools and outside the public education system. Many children with a disability were excluded from education altogether. The first provider of special education in NSW, set up in 1860 as the Deaf and Dumb Institution, was run as a private charity. Initially located in Liverpool Street, Sydney, after

several moves it relocated to its current main campus at North Rocks in 1963, officially known then as the Royal New South Wales Institution for Deaf and Blind Children and now as the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC). From an initial enrolment of seven deaf children, numbers waxed and waned over the years, affected particularly by rubella outbreaks in the first half of the 20th century, until the introduction of vaccination programs in the 1970s. Student numbers are now around 100, having risen as high as 285 in 1972.

The state government began to contribute towards special education soon after the establishment of the RIDBC. An early target for public funding was 'neglected and delinquent' children in 'reformatory' schools. A later focus was on seriously ill children and children with physical disabilities in hospital schools and through correspondence. During the 1930s, special classes were established at some primary schools for children with mild intellectual disability, while more severely disabled children continued to be educated by voluntary associations, until the 1970s when the state government became more involved in making provision for all children, in mainstream as well as special schools, with a policy of integrating as many children as possible into ordinary classes or special units or classes in ordinary schools.

Mainstream schooling

At present, the majority of students with special educational needs attend regular schools. In NSW public schools, most students with disability attend either a regular class in a regular school, a support class in a regular school or a support class in a school for specific purpose. In 2015, about 80% of students with disability were enrolled in regular classes. The remaining 20% were mainly enrolled in support classes with a small proportion – about 5% – attending special schools.

Under the state definition of disability, about 70% of students with disability in the independent sector in NSW in 2015 are in mainstream classes, a smaller proportion than the 82% in independent schools nationally. This is a reversal of the situation in 1992, when the *Disability Discrimination Act* was introduced, when the number of students with disability in special schools was twice the number in mainstream schools. Extrapolating from the NCCD data, which do not distinguish special school from mainstream enrolments, it appears that close to 90% of students with special needs are attending regular schools and participating in mainstream classes. Separate support classes for students with disability are not common in NSW independent schools.

An inclusive approach to educating students with special needs began in Scandinavian countries in the late 20th century and has gradually become the norm in most countries, framed by various international agreements, programs and declarations and national laws, mainly developed since the 1981 United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons.

In Australia, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* sets the frame for students with disabilities to be offered the same educational opportunities as others, with schools required to make reasonable adjustments so that students with special education needs experience a quality education. The *Disability Standards for Education* under the act are a guide for schools in ensuring they are compliant with the legislation and provide the necessary support. The nationally consistent data collection is founded on this legislation and the standards.

While the main increase in numbers of students with disability has occurred since the enactment of disability discrimination legislation, it would be wrong to see independent schools' growing role in special education simply as a response to this legal obligation. The processes of legislative change both reflect and bring about changes in social attitudes, as evidenced by the trend to greater participation by young people with disability in education in all school sectors. Independent schools see it as part of their responsibility to the communities they serve to do the best by all children, responding to individual differences and special needs as part of the total school experience they offer.

While the widespread acceptance of inclusion is generally attributed to a human rights agenda, it is also driven by educational imperatives. The rationale for an inclusive approach takes in the broad goals of schooling, which involve personal growth, social and emotional development, the development of dispositions towards learning, and general wellbeing. The aim is for good school and post-school outcomes in education, employment and independent living. The principle is that students with special educational needs are best educated in the most typical, least restrictive setting possible, able to access the general curriculum and participate as part of the whole school community.

A tension exists between the principle and practice, where teachers confront the difficulty of educating a wide range of students in the same setting, particularly at the point where they have to address the significant challenge of students whose behaviour disrupts lessons. This is frequently raised as a concern by teachers, who consistently rate students with emotional and behavioural difficulties as a major source of anxiety in their professional practice, followed closely by students with severe learning difficulties. Teachers are generally supportive of the concept of inclusion but see that successful inclusion is influenced by the nature and extent of disability. Behavioural difficulties and high level needs are seen as especially demanding of a teacher and disruptive for other students, whereas physical and sensory difficulties for example are considered by teachers to be easier to accommodate. Teacher attitudes towards disability have been identified as a critical factor in determining how well schools support students with disability. Positive teacher attitudes are associated with better academic and social outcomes for special needs students.

Inclusion and educational outcomes

Evidence about the impact of an inclusive approach to special education on academic results, either for students with disability or for regular students, is not conclusive, largely because of the huge variability

in individual circumstances and the many factors other than disability that impact on achievement. Reassuringly, and perhaps at odds with much general discussion, academic research studies for the most part conclude that inclusion is not likely to impact on overall school performance or on the majority of students without special needs. Many schools manage to be both high achieving and inclusive.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence to say categorically that inclusion is better for student outcomes, research findings suggest positive results in terms of higher academic achievement, better behaviour and better participation when students with special needs are integrated into mainstream classrooms. There are studies showing the benefits of inclusion, for example one study that compared a group of middle school children in inclusive classes with their peers in a special education setting showed significantly higher achievement for the students in inclusive classrooms. On the other hand, other studies have not found clear benefits for inclusion per se and have found that whereas some students obtain better academic outcomes in inclusive settings, others perform better in other types of setting.

Academic studies examining the limits to an inclusive approach to special education have used the example of students with autism spectrum disorder to show that for their distinct needs, a mainstream education may not always be the best solution. Students with autism may be academically able but they typically experience difficulties in social interaction, communication and imagination and are more vulnerable to bullying and social isolation. Their inclination is likely to be at odds with what is described as 'the noisy, bustling and chaotic environment of secondary mainstream schools' and they may therefore make greater progress in a school setting that can take greater account of their preference for routine, predictability and low sensory stimulation.

Studies on the impact of special education have similarly come up with mixed results. Some research finds that special education programs have either no effect, or a negative effect, while there are also robust studies that indicate that such programs on average have a significantly beneficial effect on performance. One large-scale study in the USA, which concluded that special education programs did boost the academic performance of students with disabilities, found that these positive program effects were much larger for learning disabled and emotionally

disturbed students, whose particular 'disability' was likely to impede classroom performance, than for speech impaired students. Other studies of individual students with learning difficulties have found that the fit-for-purpose environment of a special school and the scope there for more individual attention and instruction have had significant beneficial effects.

The question of whether and when a child with special education needs is better served in a mainstream school or in a school especially equipped to meet their specific academic, social and physical needs is not one that can be answered categorically for all students with disability. There is no one best place or one best way for all students. While the OECD regards a high proportion of special needs students in special rather than mainstream schools as a sign of the failure of mainstream schools to accommodate diverse needs, academic research suggests that no approach – not inclusion in a mainstream class, education in a special support class in a mainstream school, or segregation in a special school – can be said to be effective for all students with disability. Rather than the question of placement in a mainstream or special school, the real issues at play in determining where and how a particular student will learn best are the nature of the student's special needs and the quality of instruction. The choice between a special or mainstream school at a particular stage in the education cycle can only be resolved on an individual basis, taking into account the individual needs of each student and parental preference, with guidance from special educators and other specialists.

Effectiveness therefore depends not on the setting but on the characteristics and needs of a particular student and also on the quality of the education experience. The setting itself is less important than what goes on within the setting. Dramatic differences in achievement for students with special needs have been found to be associated particularly with variation in the quality of teaching, whatever the location, just as is the case for mainstream students.

The research is unequivocal on two points – first, that languishing in a mainstream class without special attention and support is not useful for any student with special learning needs, and second, that specialised interventions need to be based on the individual student's needs. Effective teaching strategies and an individualised approach are the critical ingredients of special education, whether in mainstream or special schools.

Special schools and special assistance schools

The general conclusion from the research is that special schools, offering highly specialised intervention and support, continue to have an important place in the education of a small proportion of students with disability. They can be particularly important for students with high and complex support needs.

There are 28 independent special schools in NSW with enrolments of 2,079 students, and a further 23 special assistance schools, with 1,267 students. This number includes 10 Catholic special and special assistance schools which operate outside the NSW Catholic system. This accounts for more than half the 91 Independent special and special assistance schools in Australia, and compares with nine special schools in Victoria, indicating a greater reliance on special schools in NSW than in other jurisdictions. This is explained in terms of the history of special needs provision in the state and is seen as an important dimension of parental choice. While the majority of parents choose mainstream schooling, there are others who feel their children need a more specialised setting, at least on a temporary basis, with for example a lower student-teacher ratio, special provision for therapy, staff with specific expertise, or a more intensive approach to behavioural regulation.

Most of these schools have very small enrolments. Only eight special schools and one special assistance school have more than 100 students enrolled. Twenty-seven of the 51 schools have fewer than 50 students. The majority of these schools are in metropolitan Sydney, with others located in the Riverina and Hunter districts and on the north, central and south coasts.

Special schools also exist within the government and Catholic school sectors. In the public system in NSW, there are 113 special schools (62% of them in Sydney) and in the Catholic system, seven.

For the most part, special schools provide especially designed and tailored programs to meet the specific educational requirements of students with high needs. Special assistance schools, on the other hand, provide an alternative, supportive school environment for students with particular social, emotional or behavioural difficulties for whom mainstream schooling is not accessible or appropriate. Some special assistance schools cater specifically for young people who are homeless, at risk, grappling with drug or alcohol problems, young parents or exiting juvenile detention. They generally offer both academic and vocational opportunities.

A number of the 28 independent special schools in NSW cater exclusively or in large part for students with autism spectrum disorder who represent the majority – around 60% – of the students in special schools. The four special schools catering specifically for students with a sensory disability have quite small enrolments and represent 9% of the students attending Independent special schools.

The majority of students in special schools – 63% – are primary students. The special assistance schools by contrast cater mainly for adolescents who have been unable to cope with or have been formally excluded from mainstream education in both the government and non-government sectors. All but one of the 23 special assistance schools are secondary only.

Consistent with the mainstream population of students with special educational needs, 77% of the enrolments in special schools are male, while the enrolments in the special assistance schools are more evenly balanced between boys and girls, with 54% of students male and 46% female.

By and large, independent special schools charge no or low fees, relying on Commonwealth and state funding and community donations and support. They are typically very resource intensive, with student-teacher ratios of 2 or 3:1, and per student expenditure three to four times the national average for the independent sector ($18,880, more than half of which, on average, comes from private contribution).

Beyond their commitment and responsibility to their students, special schools have an important role as centres of expertise and excellence, making their knowledge and specialist resources available to mainstream schools, freely or at a cost. This is common practice for independent special schools in the state which use technology to provide their specialised support to families across the state, offer short-term intensive intervention programs for individual students, and provide assessment, consultancy and training services to assist mainstream schools. The RIDBC, for example, offers specialist educational services, in the form of specialist trained teachers and technical support personnel, specialists in communication modes such as Braille or AUSLAN, and other therapeutic services to independent schools in the state which have students with significant vision or hearing impairment enrolled. Giant Steps Sydney, set up in 1995 to bring world's best practice to the education

of children with autism, is now a leading educational centre for children with autism and their families and disseminates research findings, contributes to professional development and training activities offered to the broader community of health and education professionals, and hosts students from other schools as part of its outreach services.

Part III: Knowing what works

Post-school outcomes for students with disability in terms of further education, employment and independent living are measurably less favourable than for their peers. To improve these outcomes, research studies have examined in detail the various elements in the school experience that can make a difference. Unsurprisingly, the factors that have been shown to be critical to the success of an inclusive approach to special education are similar to well-recognised dimensions of a quality schooling for all – the capacity of schools and teachers to adapt to the variable needs of a diverse student body with high quality differentiated teaching, and a school ethos that welcomes and caters for diversity, sets high expectations for all and develops strong family-school partnerships. Special schools are most successful in improving outcomes for their students also through teacher quality, in particular through the expert knowledge of their staff in the specific type of disability or developmental or behavioural difficulty their students experience.

Quality teaching

For all students, teacher quality is without doubt the greatest in-school influence on outcomes. The most effective teachers are recognisable by their capacity to use a range of teaching strategies appropriate to individual students, their knowledge of assessment and how to use it to remediate and extend students and their ability to build positive relationships with students and manage the classroom environment. Effective teachers also set high expectations for all students to succeed, collaborate with colleagues and engage in continuing professional development. These skills are especially important in teaching students with special needs.

Teaching practices

Research studies on the impact of different factors on the education outcomes of students with special needs show that, as in mainstream education, it is variation in teacher quality that is most responsible

for differences in achievement, although outside the control of the school and education policies, student and family variables are also important influences. Given the different circumstances of each student with disability in the general education classroom, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work for all students – the critical ingredient of effective special education is an individualised approach. All teachers need to be well prepared for a diverse range of students, flexible in their preparedness to respond to individual differences and equipped to use a variety of teaching practices and techniques that they can adapt to promote learning for individual students.

In the classroom, this flexibility and variety can be built into the design of lessons, content delivery and assessment practices. In practice, this translates into being flexible in how content is presented, whether through auditory, visual or tactile methods or using assistive technology or explicit instruction; using varied ways to engage students in learning, whether in small groups or cooperative learning, with ongoing monitoring; allowing different ways for students to express what they know, through projects, papers, presentations and other means. Lesson plans need to be accessible for diverse learners, and monitoring, feedback and the opportunity for additional instruction are also important.

Some teaching practices have been found to be particularly important for making inclusive education effective. The OECD identifies as essential the effective monitoring of progress, encompassing explicit and systematic instruction, an understanding of the critical factors associated with progress in academic areas such as reading and Mathematics, and the provision of many opportunities to practise and obtain feedback. A main difference in teaching students with learning difficulties is the need to be more direct and explicit, more intensive and more supportive. High quality instruction for students with special needs is also likely to involve small group instruction, emotional support through encouragement and feedback and supervised independent practice.

The most critical factor overall however is an individualised approach, and the development of individual education programs, as required for students with disability by the disability standards. All the research evidence points to the use of individual plans and programs as the hallmark of effective special needs education. A planned individualised approach, which identifies the needs unique to each

student and outlines the adjustments and procedures needed to maximise their access and participation, determines necessary support services, and builds in periodic review, evaluation of progress, and resetting of goals and strategies, has long been commonplace in special schools, and is equally critical for special needs students in regular classes.

While teachers' skills in adapting the curriculum to meet individual student's needs and goals in a diverse class are the key to improving outcomes for students with special needs, the success of inclusion as a policy depends on teachers being able to use these strategies at the same time as they meet their equal responsibility to the other students in their class including high achievers. Teachers and parents often express concern about the effect of having special needs students, especially students with behavioural difficulties, in mainstream classes. Research suggests that with high quality teaching, this concern is misplaced. Differentiation on the basis of individual educational need and using progress monitoring to inform teaching and learning have been shown to have the potential to promote gains in all students, increasing the achievement level of students with disability or at risk of failure at the same time as raising the scores of typical students and students labelled as gifted and talented.

Teacher capacity – initial training and professional development

Managing the range of differences present in most classrooms is recognised as one of the greatest challenges for teachers. A common scapegoat for the variation in teachers' capacity to meet this challenge is the adequacy of teacher preparation, with the inference that teacher training programs fail to give teachers the skills necessary to cater adequately for the diversity of students in the regular classroom.

The need to strengthen teacher education programs in Australia to build the capacity of teachers to adopt a student-centred approach and to respond to student diversity has been a theme of the many official reports on special education needs and students with disability over the past decade and more. Education authorities are addressing these issues in various ways in their responsibilities for initial teacher education programs including through accreditation processes and the development of graduate teacher standards. Two of the five priority areas in the national accreditation standards developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching

and School Leadership are 'classroom management' and 'students with special needs'.

Teacher preparation courses in NSW have had a mandatory unit in special education since 1994. A recent evaluation study of the state's teacher preparation programs established that they all include in different forms training in classroom management and teachers' responsibilities for students with special needs. The focus is mostly on strategies for working with a diverse range of students in the classroom rather than on specific disabilities, although in some courses teaching strategies for particular disabilities are highlighted, and many pay special attention to autism spectrum disorder as a result of demand from schools. There is also recognition that the NCCD requires teachers to have a clear understanding of the educational needs of all their students.

Particular deficiencies of teacher preparation highlighted in recent reports are training in explicit instruction and phonics, which are acknowledged to be important strategies for the early literacy development for many special needs students, and the development of good classroom management skills, with techniques and strategies for dealing with challenging behaviours. It is unrealistic to expect that graduate teachers can be prepared for all the special educational needs they will encounter in the classroom, hence the need for continuing professional development opportunities to fill the gaps and to keep up to date with more recent evidence and experience.

Surveys of teachers in Australia and elsewhere have established that many teachers are concerned about their lack of expertise and want more training to increase their understanding of specific learning difficulties and how best to address them and build their confidence in adopting the best strategies. The OECD's cross-national studies on students with disability show that a high priority for professional development is important for the success of inclusion, but suggest that this as an immense challenge for school authorities, given the coverage needed and the variable quality of professional development programs.

Some overseas research studies have found no evidence of professional development having a positive impact on teachers' capacity to enhance gains in achievement for students with disabilities, although evaluations of professional development initiatives in Australia have identified many beneficial

outcomes from particular programs. A study of the More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative (2012 to 2014), which focused mainly on professional development, demonstrated that many activities funded under the program were effective in building the skills of teachers and school leadership teams and in creating a critical mass of teachers with the skills and understandings to sustain the changes put in place. The study concluded that the various professional learning activities undertaken by school authorities succeeded in building the capacity of schools and teachers to improve the learning experiences of students with disability mainly by increasing the engagement of school leadership in implementing inclusive practices, emphasising whole of school responsibility for students with special needs and focusing on learning outcomes for all students.

Independent schools in NSW participated in the initiative through expansion of the consulting services provided to schools by the AISNSW and through professional learning activities designed to increase understanding of the requirements of the disability standards and the new data collection system and build the confidence and skills of classroom teachers to meet the learning needs of students with disability. The program was judged as having met those objectives.

Positive outcomes in schools were also reported from a recent professional learning initiative led by AISNSW, the Early Literacy Project, which commenced in 2015 with the aim of promoting the explicit teaching of early literacy skills. Early intervention and explicit teaching were at the heart of the project which was assessed as having worked well in extending teachers' knowledge of explicit instruction and increasing their understanding of early literacy precursor skills and how to support them in the classroom.

Teacher professionalism

The way teachers are able to practise their profession – the autonomy and independence they have in adapting their teaching to the needs of their students – is recognised as a key factor in quality teaching generally, and is particularly important for students with special needs. Greater teacher professionalism, where teachers are given scope for autonomy and innovation within the framework of a national curriculum, the authority to manage student behaviour, and adequate time to prepare lessons, collaborate with colleagues and plan for the most effective use of support staff, is associated with improved performance across the board.

One of the distinguishing features of the Finnish education system, which has enjoyed international

Special needs education in Finland

Teacher quality is well known to be the main pillar of Finnish education success. Teacher quality underpins another key feature of Finnish education, an individualised approach whereby every child is considered to have special needs. The Finnish system gives high priority to personalised learning and to comprehensive support systems for learners who struggle at school.

The assessment of each student's particular learning needs is a natural part of the everyday teaching and learning process for Finnish teachers. Not unlike the NCCD approach, teachers identify learning difficulties and problems and the need for special support at any time, and support is categorised by level – general, intensified or special – with intensified and special support being based on careful assessment and long-term planning in multi-professional teams and on individual learning plans.

Support often takes the form of part-time withdrawal from the mainstream class, focusing on the core subjects of literacy, mathematics and foreign languages (important in the Finnish context) and on behaviour. Withdrawal teaching is mostly done on a temporary basis and for short periods, and seems to be achieved without stigma.

A high proportion of students (about 15%) receive intensified or special support in a year, while many more (29%) receive some additional support or remedial teaching. The additional support can take many forms, from team teaching to small group and individual sessions to placement in special classes. Each student in special education has a personalised learning plan based on the school curriculum, which adjusts expectations accordingly.

The result is that in the Finnish system, special education is hardly something special but a natural part of the everyday teaching and learning process. Almost half of the students leaving comprehensive schooling at age 16 have been engaged in some sort of special education, personalised help or individual guidance at some point in their schooling.

success for many years, is the high quality and professionalism of the country's teachers. Teachers in Finland enjoy high levels of authority and autonomy and are entrusted with considerable pedagogical independence in the classroom. Teachers and schools have considerable autonomy to organise their work within the national core curriculum and to decide on practical approaches to meet individual needs. The cornerstone of the approach is personalised learning combined with comprehensive support systems.

An individualised approach of this kind is demanding on teachers and time-consuming. It calls for expertise as well as collaboration with colleagues, family and sometimes outside professionals. Teachers repeatedly cite time constraints as a barrier to catering for students with special needs, as well as to giving adequate attention to non-disabled students. They highlight their need for more time – time for individual planning, lesson planning and preparation, collaboration with colleagues, professional development and engaging with families – as essential to working with a class of diverse students. Research studies substantiate teachers' perception that having adequate non-teaching time is a key factor in the effective management of classroom diversity.

Providing that time has been found to be a significant step towards improving student outcomes. One of the distinguishing features of the high achieving East Asian countries (Shanghai, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore) in recent cycles of PISA testing is their focus on investing in teacher capacity. These countries have accepted that improving teacher effectiveness is time-intensive, and have freed up a significant amount of non-teaching time, enabling teachers to engage in activities known to have a large impact on student learning including preparation for lessons, teacher collaboration, classroom observation and giving feedback. The trade-off for more non-teaching time is larger classes. Finland too is known to give teachers time every day to plan, learn and reflect on teaching with other teachers.

While it is tempting to believe that teachers could manage better if they had fewer students – especially fewer disruptive students – in their class, all the evidence points to the greater importance of teacher capacity. Research on high performing education systems shows that there is more value in giving teachers the time and space to improve collaboration, prepare for lessons, reflect on what works for which students and give feedback than in having smaller classes.

The model adopted in the new national collection of data on students with disability relies on teacher professional judgement and has already been observed to be making a contribution to improved outcomes for students. The way that the data is collected means that teachers themselves are required to make evidence-based decisions about individual students needing reasonable adjustments to access education, and to assess the level of adjustment to be provided and the broad category of disability under which the student best fits. In this way, the process of identification assists teachers design solutions and monitor progress.

Specialist and support staff

With such a large proportion of students having special learning needs, extensive reliance on specialist staff is not an option. Not everything can be accomplished in a mainstream setting however and specialist staff with knowledge of specific pedagogies that work with particular disabilities and learning difficulties are much in demand.

Finnish schools are well served with additional specialist teachers to offer support, to the extent that a new profession of special education teachers has emerged, with almost 20% of new teachers being special education consultants. Special education teachers are available as a resource in all schools. This situation looks enviable in Australia, where schools experience difficulties in recruiting qualified special education teachers and concern is frequently expressed about the inadequacy of special education preparation in teacher education programs generally.

For independent schools in NSW specialist support is available through the AISNSW, whose small team of special education consultants is able to respond to requests from schools for assistance with the development of individual student plans, determining what adjustments are needed in schools, completing applications for government funding and providing best practice advice. Some, mostly the large, independent schools, have specialist staff and learning support teachers, but smaller metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools have greater difficulty accessing special education expertise when they need it and rely heavily on the AISNSW resources.

Some research studies show a positive causal relationship between special education qualifications and the performance of students with learning difficulties, although the results do not hold across the board because the nature of learning difficulties

varies to such an extent. Research has found that where they are most effective, it is the strengths of qualified special education teachers in lesson planning and preparation, behaviour management and instruction techniques that have the greatest impact on the achievement of students with special needs. More experienced teachers in mainstream classes also tend to have more achievement gains through these same capacities. The evidence indicates that as teachers' experience with students with special needs increases, so does their confidence and their effectiveness.

Teachers themselves identify a need for more support from teaching assistants and teaching aides, especially aides with the capacity and experience to deal with specific learning difficulties, as important for them to be able to address the learning needs of all students in a diverse class. They see the lack of such support as a barrier to curriculum access for students with learning difficulties. If additional specialist services and support are available however, the evidence suggests it is necessary to look at how they work within the school and classroom. Teacher aides and support staff are associated with better outcomes when they operate in support of the classroom teacher's strategies and where they have the necessary skills, but not where they lack those skills or where they are used as a substitute for the teacher's role. Reliance on teacher assistants to provide instruction and to function as the 'primary' teachers for students with disability has been shown to have unintended detrimental effects, limiting the student's access to qualified instruction, interfering with peer interaction, stigmatising the student and promoting dependence, thus undermining the objectives of inclusion.

School leadership and culture

A positive school culture, which is generally understood to encompass the social dynamics of a school – the tone set by school leaders, the relations between principal, teachers and students, the sense of community, teacher and student morale, norms among peers, a sense of safety and respect and a drive for achievement applying to all students – is associated with higher academic results and greater student wellbeing across all schools and students.

Nowhere is school climate and culture more important however than in addressing special education needs in mainstream settings. Accepting that educating students with disability is an issue for

the whole school, not just for individual teachers, is of primary importance. In the best schools, the ethos of accepting and valuing diversity permeates from the top down, in a setting that provides a safe and ordered environment, fosters a sense of connectedness and engagement and focuses on doing the best for all students in terms of social and interpersonal skills as well as academic achievement. Strong leadership, fully committed to inclusion, is essential to effectively meet the needs of students with disability, by giving teachers greater confidence in their ability to deal with diversity, supporting collaborative approaches and encouraging investment in teacher release for professional learning, planning and lesson preparation.

A policy of inclusion puts the onus on each school to recognise and support diversity. It is possible to have integration of students with disability, in the sense of physical placement in mainstream classes, without real inclusion, which entails acceptance, participation and valuing diversity. Research literature on special education shows that the way in which inclusion is understood and accepted by the school community is a crucial factor in effectively addressing special needs. An individualised approach, with an individual learning plan, may be the critical ingredient of special education in the classroom, but an individual education plan does not solve all problems. A quality schooling experience for students with special educational needs is also dependent on acceptance by classmates and opportunities to play a full part in the wider life of the school including extra curricula activities.

The ethos and values of independent schools are important factors in their overall effectiveness, linked to parental satisfaction and high achievement. Analysis of the 2012 PISA data show that students in NSW independent schools have more positive perceptions of their schooling experience than the national average on several important aspects of classroom practice and school climate, namely disciplinary climate and classroom management, teacher-student relations, teacher support, the student orientation of teachers and a sense of belonging. These are some of the distinguishing characteristics of a supportive school climate that are associated with better school and post-school outcomes for all students. Longitudinal studies confirm that a positive school experience, regardless of achievement, can make a significant difference

to how well young people fare in their post-school lives. Studies of the schooling experience of students with disability have identified three factors – rigour, relevance and relationships, all components of a positive school climate – as having particular importance in shaping students' views of their education and strongly influencing their post-school outcomes.

Accountability

Accountability for performance is another important component of quality schooling, serving as a means to assess the value of public investment, to identify needs and to observe what works best for good school outcomes. At the individual school level, accountability is used to demonstrate to parents that the school is fulfilling its commitment to meet the academic, social and affective objectives of schooling for their child.

Accountability practices and inclusion can be seen to work against each other if the main focus of accountability is on absolute measures of student outcomes. A tension can exist between a standards agenda, where schools are held to account for their results in standardised tests, and an inclusion agenda, which would support the fullest participation of special needs students including in standardised tests. This tension is most notable in systems with high stakes testing. The concern is that where there are consequences for schools and staff from a testing regime, they would feel pressured to exclude students who would perform badly to maximise results.

The Department for Education and Skills in England responded to this concern in 2004 by funding a study which explored the relationship between achievement and inclusion, to see whether in practice, inclusion affected school performance. The study concluded that there are many school-level factors other than the proportion of students with special needs that determine a school's average performance. Some highly inclusive schools achieved high scores in national assessments while others did not perform so well.

The results of this study are consistent with a body of more recent research literature, which has found either positive or neutral effects on the achievement of non-disabled students when placing pupils with special needs in mainstream schools.

Measuring the achievement of special needs students and assessing the impact of particular interventions is a difficult exercise, given the variation in individual situations. It is generally accepted that accountability measures for students with special needs should assess the difference schools and teachers are making, and focus on progress and student gains. Students with learning difficulties are likely to be beginning at a different level from their classmates, so that what matters is the opportunity to access the curriculum and make progress, at a pace that works with appropriate support. Age and prior attainment are the starting points for developing expectations and setting goals.

The OECD's PISA results show students with special needs have mean scores that are lower than typical students. For the first time, the PISA tests in 2003 allowed tracking of students with special needs. Their participation in the testing program, at less than 2% of the PISA population, was considerably lower than their participation in schooling, which at the time ranged from 5% to 15%. On average, they scored 50 or more PISA test points below typical students in all test areas. The OECD considers the best approach to accountability for special needs students is to assess the learning process, examining the provision of additional resources to those who need them and assessing the value of particular approaches.

In countries with an inclusive approach, it is usual to offer accommodations in student assessment for students with special needs. This is so in NAPLAN testing. All students in mainstream schools are encouraged to participate in NAPLAN, but there is provision for reasonable adjustments or accommodations to be made for students with special needs, including students with mild intellectual disability and communication or behavioural disorders. The special assistance that can be provided is meant to reflect the kind of support and assistance the student normally receives in the classroom. Students with significant intellectual or functional disability may be exempted from one or more of the tests. The expectation, consistent with the goal of NAPLAN at the school level to provide valuable information about a student's progress against national standards, is that the achievement of students with high support needs should be measured against the content and outcomes of their individual learning plan rather than against achievement standards.

The NSW Higher School Certificate also incorporates flexibility for students with special needs in the examination process. Special support is available to

students in all school sectors to assist them complete particular examinations. The system for determining who can be supported in this way relies on an independent panel assessing individual applications in a rigorous process. The applications are assessed 'blind', and so they are sector-neutral. Each year about 10% of HSC candidates from independent schools have used these provisions, consistently higher than the proportion of students in public schools. An investigation of this issue in 2013 found that some schools were better at identifying and meeting the needs of students with disability.

While research findings about the impact of particular approaches to educating students with disability are sometimes contradictory or inconclusive, all the evidence is agreed on the value of early intervention. Early identification of learning difficulties is especially important as children's achievement in early primary school is a major predictor of achievement and behaviour through middle and high school. A considerable body of research shows a link between early childhood education programs and lower rates of special education placement. Early recognition of learning difficulties and social and behavioural problems allows professional support to begin as early as possible. Otherwise, problems tend to accumulate and the education gap widens.

This applies in particular to reading skills and underlines the value of the nationwide phonics assessment and numeracy screening check for Year 1 students announced in January 2017 by the Commonwealth Government. A program of this kind, based on the knowledge that the early identification of students struggling with reading helps avoid the cumulative effects of poor literacy skills, has been running in the United Kingdom since 2012 and has been shown to have had significant beneficial effects.

Curriculum

Curriculum adaptation rather than a separate curriculum is recognised as best practice in meeting the unique needs of students with disability in the mainstream classroom. As noted previously, all the research evidence points to the use of individual plans and programs, based on the agreed curriculum and developed on a case by case basis, as the hallmark of effective special needs education. The participation of students with disability in mainstream classes formalises the expectation that they should have access to the general curriculum and underlines the importance of teachers' skills in adapting the

curriculum to their individual needs, without which these students are likely to fall further behind.

Historically, some students with disabilities were taught different content from their peers. The Australian Curriculum is intended to be inclusive. Its objectives are the same for all students but it is designed to offer flexibility for teachers to tailor their teaching in ways that provide rigorous, relevant and engaging learning and assessment activities for students with special education needs. The principle is that most students with special needs can engage with the curriculum if necessary adjustments are made to the learning activities and the way they are organised and presented, which may need to go hand in hand with adjustments to the learning environment, assessment strategies and the ways students can demonstrate their learning. It assumes that many students with special education needs will follow the same developmental progression, but not necessarily at the same rate, and maybe differently in different learning areas. Some students may not reach the standards at the same time as their peers, but they are expected to follow the same sequence. Not every student will have the same experience, but they are expected to have access to age-equivalent content.

The onus is on teachers to provide such a learning program. In mainstream schools, teachers' skills in adapting the curriculum to meet individual student's needs and goals in a diverse class, to reassess these needs from time to time and use these assessments formatively to promote further learning are paramount. Teachers are supported in this endeavour by resources produced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, which provide advice and guidance on special learning needs and include examples of content and pedagogical adjustments to enable students with diverse needs to access the curriculum. The NSW syllabus documents include advice on adapting content for students with special needs as well as supporting resources, and also include a Life Skills curriculum option for Year 7 to 12 students with significant disabilities.

Research has found that in addition to a rigorous and relevant curriculum, the provision of vocational education programs in secondary schools is linked with good employment outcomes post-school for students with special educational needs. Occupationally specific programs and work experience in the last two years of high school, designed around individual goals and needs, are

valued by students and lead to better employment and education outcomes. Students participating in such programs have identified the accomplishment of personally meaningful activities and the emergence of self-awareness and self-confidence as important benefits to them. From the student perspective, other aspects of their schooling experience such as emotional support and acceptance by classmates and relationships with trusted adults were as important as the achievement of good outcomes.

Parental involvement

Research has long shown the value of direct involvement of parents in schooling – schools with a high level of parental engagement have better outcomes. The evidence also shows that the successful education of students with disabilities is even more dependent on close parental engagement. Through the processes of choosing the best school setting, the development of individualised plans, monitoring progress and seeking additional support, the best outcomes are achieved when families are engaged as partners with the school.

Parents have the right to choose a school, and under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, schools must consider the enrolment application from a student with disability or special needs on the same basis as others, regardless of the level of supplementary assistance that might be needed, unless they can categorically prove undue hardship due to the enrolment of a student with disability. It can be difficult for parents to choose the most appropriate education setting for their child, although the tendency is for parents to favour mainstream education over special schools. For students with special needs, pastoral care and the general school climate are often the deciding factor for parents.

By definition, independent schools function in partnership with parents and this accountability to families is recognised as a strength of the sector. In many cases, schools and individual educators are the closest non-family support available to the parents of students with disability and they therefore play an important role in supporting parents to know what services are available. A strong and positive collaborative relationship between parents and school staff is an important element in the development of individual learning plans tailored to each student's needs and to the management of transitions.

Part IV: The continuing challenges for schools

Having a clearer understanding of the characteristics of students with special needs in independent schools, greater knowledge of the barriers to their success and more awareness of the important factors that make inclusive education work well helps to identify the main challenges schools face in seeking to provide a high quality schooling experience for students with disability and to indicate the most worthwhile targets for investment of limited resources.

Close analysis of the available statistics shows the large numbers of students with disability in independent schools and the nature of their learning difficulties. Under the nationally consistent definition implemented in 2015, which represents a shift from medical diagnosis to educational assessment, close to one in every five students in independent schools in NSW is reported as having a disability. The majority of these students are in mainstream schools, and the majority of these are categorised as having learning difficulties associated with a cognitive or social and emotional disorder. The largest proportion of these students require low levels of adjustment, described as either 'support within quality differentiated teaching practice' or 'supplementary'.

Special schools and special assistance schools in the sector – 51 schools in total with 3,346 students enrolled – provide specialised education programs for students with high and complex support needs. The majority of students in special schools have learning difficulties associated with autism spectrum disorder.

The research evidence throws light on the main barriers to success for students with disability and the main features of schooling that are related to better outcomes. Major barriers to student success are low expectations, an uninspiring and restricted curriculum, negative attitudes, segregation with stigma and teacher capacity. Many of these barriers are addressed through national policies and programs such as a policy of inclusion, a range of initiatives promoting teacher quality, a national curriculum designed to be inclusive and flexible and a national testing regime that emphasises the achievement of basic skills against national standards and makes provision for students with special needs. The onus nevertheless falls on schools to create a climate that values diversity and promotes a sense of orderliness and respect, setting high expectations

for all students. Effective leadership is needed to promote inclusion in practice and to assist classroom teachers by providing specialist support, professional development opportunities and the additional time that is essential for them to develop and review individual plans, monitor progress and consult with colleagues, specialists and family. Above all, responsibility rests with the classroom teacher to identify learning difficulties early and build their own skills in managing a diverse classroom and meeting specific educational needs.

Given the critical importance of teacher capacity to effective special needs education, and knowing that the main concentration of students in the sector calls for adjustment to 'quality differentiated teaching practice', it is apparent that successful inclusion calls for heavy investment in teacher quality. The greatest challenge for school authorities is in providing professional development that builds awareness of the approaches that work best in managing diverse classrooms and creating a positive and supportive school climate for all students. It is not a criticism of current staff or teacher education programs to conclude that continuing high quality opportunities are needed for teachers to build these capacities as well as develop specific skills such as explicit instruction, phonics teaching and curriculum adaptation for particular needs.

The expert consultancy and professional development services that AISNSW has traditionally provided to independent schools have made a significant contribution to schools' capacity to improve the education experience and outcomes of students with special needs. Changes in school funding arrangements from 2014, whereby supplementary funding for disability is provided direct to schools rather than through the AISNSW, as before, means the sector has lost some of its capacity to provide these professional services and support.

The absence of a pool of funding of this kind for the sector will affect all schools and is particularly difficult for smaller independent schools with one-off enrolments of students with disability.

While the investment that would have the widest reach would be in professional development and in teacher time, the adequacy of resourcing for schools to make the adjustments needed for students with disability, and the flexibility of funding to meet needs as they arise, are also issues for the sector. The unfairness of the funding gap, whereby students with disability in non-government schools have a lesser entitlement to public funding than their counterparts in government schools, has been acknowledged, but the implementation of new school funding arrangements has failed to resolve the differential, despite the intention of the new model to fully publicly fund loadings for disability.

The independent sector has a number of long-standing concerns about the adequacy and distribution of funding for disability under the new arrangements: the funding level of special schools; the amount of the disability loading, which is not only a lesser amount for independent schools but is not differentiated by level of disability or need; and the timing of the determination of the entitlement to supplementary funding, which means that schools do not receive any additional funding until well into the school year. A more recent concern is with the reliability of the statistical evidence used as the basis for funding students with disability – the NCCD is not yet sufficiently robust or reliable. These continue to be important issues to pursue as school funding arrangements are reviewed in order to improve outcomes for students with special needs whose parents choose an independent school.

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