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Current Developments in Education Policy for Students With Disabilities in Australia

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Washed by the Pacific and Indian oceans, Australia has 34,218 kilometers of coastline and a landmass of 7,617,930 square kilometers. The nation is a federation of six states—Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Tasmania, and Western Australia—and two territories—the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the Northern Territory.

Australia was claimed by Britain in 1778 and founded in 1788. The country was first settled through penal transportation to the Botany Bay colony of NSW. The gold rush in the early 1850s brought new immigrants and new prosperity to the various colonies. On January 1, 1901, the six colonies joined to become a federation and the Commonwealth of Australia was formed.

Australia is a constitutional monarchy with a federal division of powers. It uses a parliamentary system of government, headed by Queen Elizabeth II as the Queen of Australia. The Queen is represented by her viceroys in Australia: the Governor General of Australia and governors for each state.

THE SOCIAL FABRIC

Australia has over 22 million people. The urban population is nearly 90%, which makes Australia one of the most urbanized nations globally. All of Australia's major cities rate very highly in global comparative livability surveys. Melbourne reached second place on *The Economist's* 2008 World's Most Livable Cities list (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). Australia was ranked second in the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index (UN, 2009).

Almost 90% of the population is of European descent. Most Australians are descended from colonial-era settlers and post-Federation immigrants from Europe and other parts of the world. The vast majority of immigrants came from the British Isles, and the people of Australia are still mainly of British or Irish ethnic origin. In the 2006 Australian census, the most commonly nominated ancestry was Australian (37%), followed by English (31.7%), Irish (9%), Scottish (7.6%), Italian (4.3%), German (4%), Chinese (3.4%), and Greek (1.8%).

Australia is a free market economy defined by a neo-liberal ideology. It has a high gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and a low rate of poverty. It was ranked third in the 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, and is globally the 13th largest economy out of 196

nations. Australia has the 11th highest per-capita GDP (similar to that of the United States).

EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Education in Australia is primarily the responsibility of the states and territories that manage the school system within individual states, provide funding, and regulate the public and private schools as well as postsecondary institutions. Both public schools and private schools exist in each state. While the curriculum taught in each state or school may vary, the learning areas are the same in all.

Education is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 15 to 17, depending on the jurisdiction. The academic year in Australia varies between states and institutions but generally runs from late January/early February until mid-December for primary and secondary schools. Postcompulsory education is regulated within the Australian Qualifications Framework, a unified system of national qualifications in schools, vocational education, and training (Technical and Further Education, or TAFE) and the higher education sector.

Schools in Australia are based on a three-tier structure: government schools, Catholic schools, and independent schools. Government schools educate about 65% of Australian students; some 35% attend Catholic and independent schools. Regardless of whether a school is part of the government, Catholic, or independent systems, it is required to follow the curriculum frameworks of its state or territory.

Preschool

Preschool (also known as kindergarten) is relatively unregulated and not compulsory. Preschools are run by the state and territory governments, except in NSW, Victoria, and South Australia where they are administered by local councils, community groups, or private organizations. Fiscal and administrative responsibility for preschools in NSW and Victoria rests with the Department of Community Services and the Department of Human Services, respectively. In all other states and territories, responsibility for preschools rests with the relevant education department (The Structures of Preschool Education in Australia, 2007).

Preschool is offered to 3- to 5-year-olds. Attendance numbers vary widely between the states. In general, some 86% of children attend preschool centers.

Primary and Secondary Schools

Primary schools cover 7 years, or 8, if one includes the prep grade, or preschool for 5-year-olds. The name for the first year of primary school varies considerably between the states and territories. For example, what is known as kindergarten in ACT and NSW may mean the year proceeding the first year of primary school or preschool in other states and territories. Some states vary as whether Year 7 is part of the primary area or not.

Secondary schools cover 6 years for 12- to 17-year-olds. More than 74% of students stay at school until Year 12, the final year of secondary schooling. Year 12 examinations are

externally administered by the relevant states and territories. All students who sit for the final Year 12 examinations are ranked. These scores are used for university admission (99.9 score for medicine or 95 for the commerce faculty at the University of Melbourne). The score of 95 means that the candidate, ranked against some 60,000 students who sat for the Year 12 examination, placed in the top 5% in the state.

The 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked the Australian education system as 6th for reading, 8th for science, and 13th for mathematics on a worldwide scale including 56 countries (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER] 2009). The 2008 Education Index, published with the Human Development Index (United Nations [UN], 2009), listed Australia as 0.993. This is one of the highest in the world, tied for first with Finland and Denmark.

Higher Education Sector

There are 38 government and 2 private universities in Australia. The federal government funds the public universities but is not involved in setting curriculum: Each higher education institution designs its own programs and curricula. A relevant professional body must endorse a course for it to run. Typically, a university degree takes 3 or 4 years to complete, followed by master's (1 to 2 year) and doctoral (2 to 4 year) programs.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN AUSTRALIA

Students meeting Australian government criteria for disability status are referred to as *students with a disability*. The term *disability* includes individuals with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, vision impairments, hearing impairments, language disorders, autism, pervasive developmental disorders, chronic medical conditions, and multiple disabilities. Some students also have other forms of disadvantage, whether it is isolation, poverty, being indigenous, social deprivation, and so on.

There are about 100,000 students with disabilities in Australian schools, both special schools and regular schools. Some students with disabilities are educated in special schools that provide a very important educational environment for those students. There are about 20,000 students in these separate special schools—that is, about 15 to 20% of all children with disabilities. The remainder—about 80%—attend our regular primary and secondary schools.

Recent years have seen a very significant increase in the number of students with disabilities being mainstreamed into government schools. Interestingly, about two-thirds are in primary schools (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

The identification and assessment of students with disabilities play an important role in the initial stages of pedagogy. Clearly, the identification of a child with a disability or a learning difficulty needs to occur at an early stage to maximize cognitive developments and social benefits to the individual and the family. In Australia, access to specialist resources addressing special needs is available at the school level. During the identification and assessment stage of students with disabilities, schools use specific disability criteria. An example from the state of NSW is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn Program for Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Categories of disability	Relevant details
1. Cognition (intellectual)	Full-scale score on a standardized, restricted psychometric (IQ) assessment at or below the second percentile and accompanied by associated academic and adaptive behavioral delays
2. Sensory (hearing)	Permanent (sensorineural/conductive) hearing loss of 30+ decibels with resultant communication difficulties
3. Sensory (visual)	Permanent vision loss of 6/24 or less in the better eye corrected, or less than 20 degrees field of vision
4. Physical	Ongoing physical condition (e.g., cerebral palsy, osteogenesis imperfecta, spina bifida) that significantly limits functioning and independence in mobility, personal care, and undertaking essential learning tasks
5. Mental health (social/emotional)	Mental health problems at a level of frequency, duration, and intensity that seriously affects educational functioning; behaviors must be evident in home, school, and community environments (a diagnosis of ADD [with or without hyperactivity] is not included)
6. Pervasive developmental disorder (autism)	Diagnosis indicating a pervasive developmental disorder (e.g., autism) or disability affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction that significantly affects the ability to learn; diagnosis must also include a clinically significant adaptive behavioral delay
7. Language disorder	Expressive and/or receptive language disorder with a scaled score of 70 or less on a restricted, standardized speech pathology assessment (i.e., the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals [CELF])
8. Chronic medical	Chronic medical condition that affects functioning and/or independence so that a student is highly dependent on another or access learning

THE PURSUIT OF INCLUSION

In recent decades “the dominant issue in special education has revolved around the education of students with special needs in general classrooms and neighbourhood schools, variously encompassed under the terms *inclusion*, *inclusive schooling*, *inclusive education* or, occasionally, *progressive inclusion*” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2010b, p. 87). Although definitions abound, inclusive schooling for students with disabilities can be defined simply as

“instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of children and youth who are exceptional” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2010b, p. 87). Educational institutions should cater to all students, including those with disabilities. The main aim of inclusive schooling is to empower children and youth who have physiological, cognitive, and emotional differences that change substantially the way they learn, respond, or behave.

The 1980s heralded a remarkable international commitment to the inclusion of persons with disabilities into society and schools. As Winzer and Mazurek (2010a) observed, “School systems were prompted to abandon special schools and special classes and instead create socially just communities where students with disabilities could be included into neighbourhood schools and general classrooms” (p. 3). Then “as policy makers and educators around the world adopted the notion that all children had the right to be educated together, they set out to recast the functions, content, processes, and structures of schooling” (p. 3).

Australia was influenced by myriad streams of the progressive pedagogy movement. These included:

- *The American experience.* In the United States, the first major federal legislation authorizing funds for compensatory education was the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I (ESEA). This was replaced by the 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA), which continues to be the “cornerstone of America’s compensatory education efforts” (Passow, 1997, p. 85).
As a form of inclusive pedagogy, mainstream education for students with disabilities was promoted with the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL94-142), amended in 1990 as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This legislation and its amendments have served, and continue to serve, as a model piece of legislation for other countries as they provide education for students with disabilities (Winzer, 2006).
- *U.K. influences.* The *Report on the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People in England* (Warnock, 1978), known as the *Warnock Report*, offered reinforcement for much needed policy reform.
- *International agencies.* The 1981 International Year of the Disabled Person offered a significant policy drive by drawing worldwide attention to special education.
- *The European experience.* The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* on special needs education was the outcome of more than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations who met in Salamanca, Spain, from June 7–10, 1994. Participants considered the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education—namely, enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs.

As policy reform initiative, the Salamanca declaration continued the spirit of similar education reforms in the area of compensatory and special needs. It asserted the significance of inclusive pedagogy when it decided that “Regular schools with inclusive orientations are the most effective means of combating discrimination,

creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994)

UNESCO’s later report, *Overcoming Exclusion Through Inclusive Approaches in Education: A Challenge and a Vision* (2001), expanded the theme. UNESCO stated that

schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups. (UNESCO, 2001)

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Prescriptive legislation of the ilk of the American IDEA is not in place in Australia. However, as a nation committed to multiculturalism, Australia follows the principles of cultural diversity and a pluralist democracy. Therefore, commonwealth legislation and the policies of state governments on social justice, antidiscrimination, and equality have had a significant influence on educational provisions for students with disabilities (Westwood, 2001).

The commonwealth government of Australia showed little interest in special education until the reformist Gough Whitlam Labor Government was elected in 1972. During its 3-year rule, the government introduced a series of policy documents and legislation, including antidiscrimination laws. At the policy level, the government adopted integration as its preferred way of meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities. More significantly, it established the influential policy think tank—the Commonwealth Schools Commission—which became a major influence through its support of research and policy initiatives, as well as a vehicle for the commonwealth government’s policy of supporting integration (Winzer, Altieri, Jacobs, & Mellor, 2003).

In 1992, the commonwealth government passed the Federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA; Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.) that came into effect on March 1, 1993. The DDA made it against the law for an educational authority to discriminate against someone because that person has a disability. Critically, a person with a disability has a right to study at any educational institution in the same way as any other student. This includes all public and private educational institutions, primary and secondary schools, and tertiary institutions such as TAFE, private colleges, and universities (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

In 2004, the Disability Discrimination Amendment (Education Standards) Bill 2004 (Parliament of New South Wales, 2005) amended the DDA of 1992. The 2005 amendment, known as the Disability Standards for Education, plays a significant role in educational placement in Australia in general. The amendment came into being because there was the need to mandate compliance with the disability standards mandated in 1992 and to ensure that the provisions of the draft disability standards for education were fully supported. The main aim of the amendment was to explain and clarify the legal

obligations of education and training service providers as well as the rights of people with disabilities under the seminal DDA of 1992.

The Disability Standards of 2005 (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2005) set out to ensure that students with disabilities have the same rights as other students in a number of interlocking areas:

- *Educational equity.* The standards give students and prospective students with disabilities the right to education and training opportunities on the same basis as students without disabilities. This includes the right to comparable access, services, and facilities, and the right to participate in education and training without discrimination.
- *Accommodations.* The rights to equity are not merely formal. Education providers have a positive obligation to make changes to reasonably accommodate the needs of a student with a disability. A reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities is defined as a measure or action taken to assist a student with a disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students. In determining whether an adjustment is reasonable, an education provider should take into account information about the nature of the student's disability, his or her preferred adjustment, and any adjustments that have been provided previously (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2005).
- *Stereotypes.* An aim of the standards was to overcome discrimination based on stereotyped beliefs about the intellectual and cognitive abilities of students with disabilities. Accordingly, all students should be treated with dignity and enjoy the benefits of education and training in supportive environments that value and encourage participation by all.
- *Harassment and victimization of students with disabilities.* Education providers are obliged to put in place strategies and programs to prevent harassment and victimization. They must ensure that staff and students know not to harass or victimize students with disabilities, or students who have associates with disabilities. An education provider must take reasonable steps to ensure that staff and students know what to do if harassment or victimization occur (Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department, 2005).
- *Direct and indirect discrimination.* Direct discrimination occurs when a person discriminates against another person on the ground of a disability, and as a result treats, or proposes to treat, the aggrieved person less favorably than the discriminator would treat a person without the disability in circumstances that are not materially different. Indirect disability discrimination is when a person discriminates against another person on the ground of a disability of the aggrieved person if the person (the discriminator) requires, or proposes to require, the aggrieved person to comply with a requirement or condition that is likely to result in the effect of disadvantaging persons with disabilities.

Another key education policy document came in the form of the *Adelaide Declaration on the National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century* that arose from a discussion paper

(1998) reviewing the Hobart Declaration (1989) and superseded these earlier documents. In April of 1999, state, territory, and commonwealth ministers of education met as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in Adelaide. At that meeting, ministers endorsed a new set of national goals for schooling, which were released as the *Adelaide Declaration* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006).

A later education policy document (which now supersedes the *Adelaide Declaration*) was the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2008). It sets the direction for Australian schooling for the next 10 years and also addresses inclusive education. The education policy goals were developed by education ministers in collaboration with the Catholic and independent school sectors and following public consultation on the draft declaration (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2008).

INCLUSION IN PRACTICE

Australia is developing its own unique view of inclusive education (Winzer & Mazurek, 2010b). Although legislation specifically targeted at special education such as that in the United States does not appear, recent education policies in Australia promote equity, inclusion, human rights education, and social justice. Following these policies and global trends in inclusive education policy reforms, all educational institutions in Australia today prefer an inclusive pedagogy approach. At the same time, due consideration is given to the level of impairment involved in the special needs of an individual student.

Compared to other Western nations, the inclusive movement arrived relatively late in Australia (Van Kraayenoord, 2002). It was not until 2001 that the actual terms *inclusion* and *inclusive schooling* appeared in the lexicon (Winzer et al., 2003). They supplanted the word *integration*, which had been used to denote the least restrictive but most appropriate educational placement for each student with a disability (Gannon, 1991). Today, the term *inclusive education* is emerging in education policy used to articulate the rights of students with disabilities, impairments, and learning difficulties to participate in the full range of programs and services and to use any facilities provided by the education system (Meyer, 2001).

The commonwealth government has an overarching concern with integration and specific policies for discrimination as we have discussed above. But each Australian state and territory has its own unique responses to inclusive education policy reforms. The momentum and practice differ dramatically (Winzer et al., 2003), and there exist considerable curricular and classroom pedagogy variations in Australia among schools. We can see the flavor of this in recent policy discussions and in two examples from different systems.

A 2003 meeting of the Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) identified the challenge of ensuring that all students (including students with disabilities and special needs) are recognized and catered for in curriculum options across Australia. It then established a Curriculum Working Party to review the range of curriculum responses being developed in the states and territories for students with special education needs.

At the policy level, the working party identified a significant consensus from members regarding curriculum issues for students with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN). They found that “strategic vision, research activities and national leadership in curriculum are missing for SEN,” and that there were considerable variations state by state in how to authentically include all students. The working party chided that “there is an ongoing tension that inclusion implies that all students will fit and be able to access the generic product, whilst providing curricula that is not broad enough to accommodate the needs of all students—therefore *‘all’* does not in fact mean all.” Because curriculum does not provide supporting documents and resources that meet the full range of student and specific needs, they stressed that inclusive schooling for students with disabilities in Australia should address the diversity of needs, rather than planning one curriculum for all (ASEPA, 2003, original italics).

The State of Victoria

The state of Victoria adopted a comprehensive integration approach in special education following the report of the ministerial review of educational services for the disabled (Victoria, Department of Education, 1984), known as the *Collins Report*. The controversial *Collins Report* was influenced by education reforms in special education, notably from the United States and the United Kingdom. The report proposed five major principles: rejection of the concept of ineducability; children’s right to education in a regular classroom; transfer of children and resources from the special school’s sector to regular schools; non-categorical service delivery; school-based resources; and collaborative decision-making.

Despite its pedagogical significance, the *Collins Report* failed to define the term *integration*. Instead, it referred to two aspects of policy and practice, both of which identify processes (Reed, 1990). They were a process of increasing the participation of children with impairments and disabilities in the education programs and social life of regular schools in which their peers without disabilities participate, and a process of maintaining the participation of all children in the educational programs and social life of regular schools (Victoria, Department of Education, 1984).

However, the report laid the groundwork for extended discussions. For example, the Victorian social justice framework for schools in 1991 identified seven groups whose needs should be monitored, including students with disabilities (The Social Justice Framework/State Board of Education [and] School Programs Division, Ministry of Education Victoria, 1991). In a 1997 review, integration became the main education policy and pedagogical principle.

The 2001 Meyer report recommended that special schools continue with an enhanced role to provide for children whose disabilities need longer support and to provide research opportunities in collaboration with local schools on the development of strategies that strengthen inclusive education (Meyer, 2001). Currently, Victoria maintains a dual system of regular and special schools. The complex of special schools thrives alongside inclusive programs with much collaboration and interaction.

New South Wales: The Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

The Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn can be regarded as a pragmatic model of inclusive pedagogy that addresses the diversity of needs of students with disabilities.

For the purposes of identification and resourcing in ACT and NSW Archdiocesan schools, *students with a disability* is the term applied to students with special needs (disabilities; Archdiocese, New South Wales, n.d.). In the Archdiocese, students with special needs and disabilities are identified according to the Australian government criteria and as determined at the state level. They also have an eight-level scale to address the specific needs of students with disabilities. They include the following forms of disabilities: cognitive, sensory, visual, physical, mental health (social and emotional), pervasive developmental disorder, language disorder, and chronic medical condition (see Table 1).

The *Student Centred Appraisal of Need* (SCAN) mechanism is an ascertainment and planning process to determine student needs and assist in making adjustments for students with disabilities in ACT schools of the Archdiocese. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written plan developed at school level to plan for, review, and assess the learning needs of students with disabilities. The IEP, developed in collaboration with parents, is a key element of a school's response to meeting needs of every student with disabilities. Schools offer their own IEP for each special needs student. The annual IEP summary is a Catholic Education Office (CEO) requirement for system accountability and planning processes.

An Individual Planning Tool (IPT) is an ascertainment and planning process to determine student needs and assist in making adjustments for students with disabilities in the NSW schools of the Archdiocese. The IPT process will be gradually introduced into NSW schools from 2010. The Literacy Numeracy and Special Learning Needs program is an Australian government initiative to provide educational systems with supplementary resources to support better learning outcomes for students with special needs. The Archdiocese distributes these resources to schools on an annual basis to support students with disabilities and students with special needs (other than disabilities).

TEACHERS AND PEDAGOGY

The research literature on teaching students with disabilities has broadly and widely documented the nexus among teacher training, teacher perceptions, teacher attitudes, teacher discrimination, and teacher efficacy that affect classroom pedagogy. Critical areas—among many others—are teacher rejection of the principles of inclusive schooling and teacher lack of knowledge and skills (Winzer, 2008).

Some teachers dislike the principles of inclusion. Winzer (2006) observes that

Many teachers reject the demands that all teachers be prepared to teach all children, dispute inclusion as a universal template that assumes that only one solution exists to the various challenges faced by children with special needs, are unwilling to accept the loss of the safety valve called special education, and prefer the present system. (p. 33)

Teachers' perceptions of teaching children with disabilities and their attitudes toward inclusion are significantly influenced by their own perceived levels of efficacy, particularly in the teaching of children with disabilities in their classrooms (Hsien, 2007; Winzer & Mazurek, 2010b). Many teachers lack skills. Research findings from across the globe indicate that schools and teachers are struggling to respond to students with special

needs and to provide authentic, relevant, empowering, and worthwhile schooling for such students (e.g., Aniftos & McLuskie, 2003; Wills & Cain, 2002; Winzer & Mazurek, 2005; Zajda, 2011).

Australian teachers have reported that they found the inclusion of students with special needs to increase their workloads and spoke of their increased stress and lack of support (Chen & Miller, 1997; Forlin, Haltre, & Douglas, 1996; Klassen, Usher, & Bong, 2010). A recent study in Western Australia (Anderson, Klassen, & Georgiou, 2007) found that many teachers seemed willing to move toward greater inclusive practices although many were ambivalent or angry about the problems associated with the day-to-day practice.

Teacher Training

Level of training is significantly correlated with the level of confidence in teaching inclusively. It follows that the nature and the quality of teacher training for inclusive schooling for students with disabilities is a major factor affecting teacher attitudes and teacher efficacy (Romi & Leyser, 2006; Winzer, 2006; Winzer & Mazurek, 2010a, 2010b).

Reports from Australia claim that young teachers are not trained effectively to work with students with special needs (see Milton & Rohl, 1999). In a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey, more than 60% of Australian teachers wanted more development than they received (OECD, 2009). It is not surprising that a recent study (Anderson et al., 2007) found that the number one request by teachers was for more training and professional development in inclusion-related topics. In particular, teachers wanted more training in a variety of disabilities.

Some advances are evident. In the state of Victoria, major government policies have emphasized that for inclusive education reform to be successful there is need for reform in teacher preparation at the pre-service level so that teachers are better prepared for inclusive schooling for students with disabilities.

However, in the state of New South Wales it was proposed that teachers be trained to cover a broader range of needs instead of specializing in areas such as autism, language, or behavioral difficulties. The Education Minister did not believe specializations will be lost, or that online training is inadequate. She said that “110 hours of additional specialist training is something that most teachers that I’ve talked to have actually jumped at the chance to do.” Opponents argue that “The idea of using online training for just 110 hours and [then] put teachers in front of students with diverse special needs was always absurd.” (ABC News, 2009). In September 2009, the New South Wales government deferred the reform of special education in the public schools to allow time for further consultation.

CHALLENGES

As Winzer and Mazurek (2010b) point out, “Few issues have received the attention and generated the controversy and polarization of perspectives as has the movement to include all children with disabilities into general classrooms” (p. 87). Although integration is accepted policy in Australia, the issue of genuine inclusion of students with disabilities continues to be a challenge and there are still unresolved education policy, curriculum, and classroom pedagogy issues.

Australia sees a plurality of voices governed by a common concern; multiple discourses address inclusive schooling for students with disabilities. Each state approaches inclusive education quite differently so that education policy reforms for inclusive schooling contain a multifaceted diversity of educational provisions, rather than one approach.

Inclusive schooling in Australia illustrates the complexity of the inclusive reform movement, the changing agenda, and the pervasive challenges. We point to only two of the challenges below: legislative intent and teacher skills and training.

Legislation and Its Intent

The rights of students at risk and with disabilities in Australia are protected by the Education Act (1989), the Anti-Discrimination Act (1991), the Disability Services Act (1992), and the DDA of 1992 (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

The DDA of 1992 was designed to protect individuals with disabilities against discrimination, including discrimination in education. Jackson, McAfee, and Cockran (1999) observe that “the DDA is only necessary because we have to make something right for a group of people for whom the right thing is not being done voluntarily” (p. 20). However, they concluded that, despite this intent, discrimination against students with disabilities in Australia still exists. Surveys and anecdotal evidence indicate that discrimination remains a significant problem at all levels of education and in particular for children with disabilities wishing to be included in mainstream education.

Jackson and colleagues (1999) further note,

Despite these noble intentions it is apparent that there is limited awareness of the DDA in education systems at all levels. In school systems in particular the right thing is still not being done even though there is awareness of the law at senior levels. It is our conclusion that very large institutions with very large budgets and a history of getting their own way have shown that they will not do the right thing, despite the law. (p. 20)

Given the enduring history of discrimination in education, they call for multiple strategies to address discrimination. School systems “will not do the right thing in future unless principles are clearly defined, their performance is independently monitored and very powerful contingencies are placed on compliance with the law” (Jackson et al., 1999, p. 20).

Teacher Skills and Teacher Training

Teacher resistance and tension continue to be significant factors. A body of research finds that teachers in Australia experience pedagogical difficulties when teaching students with disabilities. They find the inclusion of students with special needs to increase in their workloads and cause stress. And, “While educational integration is advancing rapidly, policy makers, parents, and practitioners must still grapple with systems unready to meet the multiple responsibilities of inclusive schooling” (Winzer, 2006, p. 37). Combined with the issue of inadequate training for pre-service teachers in preparing classroom lessons that would meet the full range of inclusive schooling for students with disabilities, there is the issue of shortage of teaching resources.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Education policy and pedagogy for inclusive schooling for students with disabilities in Australia has a rich history of some 4 decades. Influenced by globalization and education reform and reflecting social justice, human rights, and inclusion, schools in Australia have adopted the global pedagogy of inclusive schooling for all (see Zajda, 2010).

Inequity in the classroom for students with disabilities continues to be a major issue globally. In order to achieve social justice in schools, learning opportunities need to be created that reinforce equity for all students. This is the essence of inclusive pedagogy and human rights education. Nevertheless, there exist inclusions, not a sole identifiable vision of inclusion. Efforts to bring about fundamental change cannot be quantified into a generic recipe (Winzer & Mazurek, 2010a).

This chapter reviewed recent education policy and pedagogy initiatives in the area of students with disabilities. It discussed education policy for students with special needs within the nexus of social justice, human rights education, and inclusive pedagogy. We conclude that education policy and pedagogy in Australia, while progressive in its intent, has much to achieve if we are to have authentic and meaningful pedagogy for students with disabilities.

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