

# Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Education Forum

Keynote Address by Dr Rhonda Galbally, AO

6 September 2011

## **Acknowledgements:**

- Thank you Catherine and good morning everyone
- I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we are meeting and pay respect to their Elders past and present.
- You have heard the Senator speak about education and how it sits with the National Disability Strategy and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.
- I am pleased to acknowledge Mr John Walsh who was the Associate Commissioner, to the Productivity Commission Inquiry.
- I would like to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate the Senator on how quickly government moved in publicly releasing the Productivity Commission's final report into Disability Care and Support last month.
- Only one week after the release, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed on the need for major reform of disability services in Australia through a National Disability Insurance Scheme.
- Every Australian deserves to have confidence that if they acquire a disability or if their children are born with a disability they will receive the care and support they need.
- All governments need to work together on this to make it a reality.
- The Productivity Commission's Report refers to education as one of the main complementary services to the NDIS and a critical support outside the NDIS.

- And of course you would take it as a given that every Australian deserves to have confidence that their child will receive the maximum learning and development that they need for their future as a fully participating member of the community.

### **Why is the Council working so hard on education out of all of the issues in the NDS?**

It's because our large membership of 30 hears all day everyday about how education is failing children with disabilities in every corner of Australia.

I went to every state of Australia – chairing public hearings as the prelude to the development of the National Disability Strategy – the result of these consultations was published by the Government as a report called Shut Out.

On the back cover the Australian Government placed the words – forgotten, rejected, excluded, discriminated against...SHUT OUT.

And these words applied most particularly to children with disabilities trying to be educated ... or rather as it the case in Australia, not being educated.

Stories such as:

- Students being placed in what was called a sensory room – all day. The sensory room is another name for a holding bay and students are placed in there as right-offs – uneducable –someone has decided that they have no capacity to learn and develop – no hope. The truth behind students being placed in sensory rooms or rooms with other euphemistic names that imply delightful stimulation, is that the system fails these students. It fails them because of a singular lack of knowledge and skills by teachers. And of great importance is the a lack of any systematic obligation on schools to teach students with a disability and ensure that they learn and develop to the maximum.
- In the same vein I heard numerous stories about adolescents spending their days dancing to wiggles songs, or learning to clean their teeth, but not learning to read or write or become numerate.
- I met older adolescents who wept because they had never been taught to read and write and they knew they had missed out on vital skills for their future, that was now one of being condemned to adult day training program – holding pens for adults with a disability.
- I heard about students who did cert 1 courses at school in senior years and then repeated the cert 1 at TAFE college..... again and again.
- I heard about student's work experience in later years of school, where the purpose of work experience is to give all students a taste of possible work environments for them for the future – to inspire them for the tertiary education.

- These students with disabilities were given the work experience of cleaning the staff room of their school or looking after the younger children in the same school they had been in for 12 years. These students didn't want to be cleaners and child carers – they wanted to be in hospitality.
- I met numerous families from all over Australia whose child had to travel 2 or even 3 hours a day one way to go to school because the local school would not take them and they had been conned into thinking that the special school at the end of the 2 hour journey would give them a better education – they were not told of the research findings from all around the world that show that all students achieve better learning outcomes from mainstream schools
- Yes families were “counselled”
  - Oh it's in the best interest of your child to go to the special school 2 or 3 hours away.

Parent want to do their best, and similar to their child having to go to hospital – they are dependent on high level, evidence-based advice.

Instead right across Australia parents are being manipulated and misled into agreeing to nightmare solutions for their children – not just about travel time, also leading to much inferior learning and development outcomes - equipping them for a non-future – and unlike with hospitals if the wrong advice is given - the wrong advice to parents has no consequence for the adviser – just for the child and the parents where the consequences are catastrophic.

- Thousands of students with a disability are suspended or expelled from school every day of the year. This is more likely to occur when the child does not meet the diagnostic criteria for an integration/ aid. This means that these students arbitrarily and artificially fall out of the in-group who get access to what can be quite effective babysitting that keeps children quiescent and well-behaved – but not necessarily learning anything.
- In fact, I found out that the school with the largest single enrolment of students with disabilities is the school for distance education – without any integration aids as there's no need for quiescent students as they're not in a classroom at all.
- In 2008 AIHW identified 20% of students with a disability in distance education
- Then I heard about the students where their learning can be assisted with technology and equipment ranging from ramps to get into the schools lifts to communications tech and Ipads with their brilliant learning apps.

- I heard about thousands of students who didn't have access to actually be able to physically get into the local school. And I heard about many students who didn't have access to quite cheap, appropriate technology for their auditory, visual and communication needs.

So not only is their learning and development compromised, also the very accuracy of the early childhood testing is in grave doubt – and these are the tests where the results can sentence children to a shocking non-education future – and then to no future.

## **The Reform Agenda**

None of these stories will be a surprise to you. You know that this system – the system addressing the education needs of children with disabilities must also and urgently undergo major reform – similar to the productivity recommendations for the disability service system.

We're all here today because we are all very concerned with the terrible situation in Australia of education for children with disabilities.

It is a time bomb waiting to go off – and the shame of it will show up as soon as the NDIS starts to roll out. It will then no longer be able to be hidden behind the fortress-like walls of education departments around Australia.

Apart from human rights and doing what is right, education departments also have a strong imperative to seriously tackle education for children with disabilities. It is one the fastest growing expenditure lines in education budgets. And the way it is being spent is so wrong and leading to such injustice.

So what would a reform agenda look like and what are the components?

### **1. The Agenda is about Learning and Development not Disability**

The reform agenda should be first, foremost and only about learning and development for all children. The agenda is therefore not about disability.

When disability is the starting point the focus inevitably becomes that of assessment of the individual – and at present this is diagnostically based assessment.

But even if the assessment shifts to functional assessment, which is where assessment is now moving for other areas of disability, there will still be a decision to be made about who is in and who is out. And it's the end part of this phrase, the out word, that is important – because a major problem is who is out for the learning and development support that they need.

**ALL CHILDREN MUST HAVE THE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT THEY NEED —INDIVIDUALLY, ORGANISATIONALLY AND SYSTEMATICALLY**

## **2. Training to be able to teach for the learning and development of all children**

All personnel having contact with a child for their education should have strong knowledge and skills in learning and development. They do not need babysitting skills, even though such skills are currently very handy for a teacher to have in a classroom – where keeping a child quiet and ‘good’ can seem like a blessing. It is not however a blessing to the child to sit quietly and learn nothing.

## **3. Separate support needs from learning and development needs**

Support for physical needs of a child with a disability, such as toileting and feeding should be undertaken by support workers (similar to workers in the service system – they may in fact be drawn from that system).

PERSONNEL ASSISTING STUDENTS WITH THEIR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MUST HAVE KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT.

A career path for a new cadre – the learning and development assistant who can articulate a new training to become a specialist –this is a key plank of the reform agenda.

## **4. Integrated socialisation as part of learning and development**

Another story I should have told you earlier in the stories section of my address is about my visit to a primary school for the AFL Foundation. A little Iraqi boy, quite disabled in an electric wheelchair, had been designated by a sports teacher as the goalkeeper in the footie match with his friend, a non-disabled little boy. A story about excellent integration principles – until the tall blond support/aid worker joins in – relentlessly following him around - looking amazing among all of the little children trying to play a game together and completely stigmatising the little boy.

## **5. Rethink attaching a support/aid worker to the child**

ATTACHING THE AID /SUPPORT WORKER TO THE CHILD CAN HAVE SERIOUS DOWNSIDES.

The delicate facilitation of play and socialisation in an integrated setting is an important aspect of learning and development and this requires skills and training in learning and development through play and integrated engagement. It will serve the opposite of stigmatising and socially isolating the child with a disability if an aid worker dogs the steps or the wheels of the child.

## **6. Clarity of expectations, outcomes and accountabilities**

AN INDIVIDUAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR THE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF EVERY CHILD, WHETHER THEY ARE DISABLED OR NOT, IS FUNDAMENTAL AND THE EXPECTATIONS SHOULD BE CLEARLY ARTICLED, CHECKED FOR SUITABLE STRETCH, SYSTEMISED AND AUDITED IN ALL SPECIAL AND MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS.

In fact, aggregation of this information could be very valuable information for MY SCHOOL. Low expectations are the curse of children with disabilities. If dancing to wiggles as a sixteen year old or endlessly learning to clean teeth and not to read and write is in the learning plan for a child of any ability – there must be some systematic accountability and automatic correction, that cannot be left to the parents as their responsibility.

## **7. Physical access and auditory and visual aids must be automatically expected to be in every school in Australia.**

All students should have access to every school downstairs with a requirement to use capital improvement funds to put in lifts and hearing loops as a priority. All schools should have as a matter of course all necessary equipment for visually impaired students

## **8. All students must be equipped with communications and other technology to ensure their fundamental right to communicate and to assist them with learning and development**

All students with a disability should have every piece of equipment that can specifically assist their learning and development. This is cost effective mechanism enabling learning to occur in the home as well as school. All testing for the learning and development plan must be done using the appropriate equipment.

I am astonished to hear that small children with communication requirements are being tested without appropriate or on some occasions any communications equipment.

## **9. Programmatic funding should be provided on a whole of school basis to enable the whole school and every classroom to teach every child to maximise learning and development rather than the current system of bolting on disability.**

## **10. Teacher training**

Mainstream teachers teaching at present should be required to undertake PD - not in special education – rather in learning and development.

It is positive that the AITS have included a standard on inclusion and education of children with a disability in the 2011 National professional Standards for teachers.

### **11. Special education**

The future of Special Ed, if it to have a future, has to become highly sophisticated, high quality learning and development specialist to support mainstream schools.

### **12. Parent need guidance and support not be left responsible for highly complex decisions, on their own**

The mantra that parents know what is best for their child's education should be understood in the context of the specialised knowledge-basis to learning and development.

Parents should be guided by specialists in learning and development, not as at present where the guidance is based on what is often cynical manipulation to not inconvenience local schools and to keep up the numbers in special schools.

### **13. NAPLAN – discriminates against children with a disability**

All school must be accountable for student learning and development outcomes outside the NAPLAN system – which is an unwieldy tool and where thousands of students with a disability are being told to stay home from school so they won't contaminate the NAPLAN results.

This also raise the spectre of more schools encouraging students with a disability to go to the special school so they will not bring down the local school score. This must be corrected as a matter of urgency.

### **14. Expectations – part of quality reporting**

An alternative to NAPLAN for students with a disability **MUST NOT BE DESIGNED TO JUSTIFY LOW EXPECTATIONS** rather a genuine accountability, assessment (of schools) standards and quality improvement system should be developed based on the learning and development rights of every child.

### **15. Disability Awareness**

A disability awareness program similar to its ok to be gay should be carefully developed, making sure it does not stigmatise.

### **16. MY SCHOOL**

MY SCHOOL must have inclusion measures assessed by a survey –asking questions such as how included do you feel?

**WORK MUST BEGIN TO BE DEVELOPED A MODEL TO APPROPRIATLY REPRESENT THE POSITIVES OF INCLUSION FOR MY SCHOOL.**

**17. Five funding streams**

- Support service
- Learning and development specialist
- Aids and equipment – technology
- Teacher PD
- Programmatic funding

**18. Culminating in A National Partnership on Learning and Development  
– COAG, new money.**