

An Overview of Australian Special Needs Education Systems and Policies

By

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The Australian education system's foundation is built on the National Framework's nine values for Australian Education and applies to all schooling and learning institutions from kindergarten to high school (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). These values are defined as a representation of Australian life which includes; caring and compassion, integrity, tolerance and inclusion, doing your best, respect, fair go, responsibility, freedom and honesty. With over 4 million disabled in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), with 28% of disabled students (varying) in Australia completing high school with a year 12 equivalent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) it is important that each and every single person receives a proper education schools often adopt their own principals to their school's values in cohesion with the community, parents and teachers, however the national framework for values remains consistent throughout the nation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). The framework aims to protect all students from injustice and prejudice, despite their religion, culture and abilities ranging from special needs students to disabled students. Organisations such as United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations, Education, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are aiming to improving the educational system for special need students throughout the world by identifying problematic areas and aiming to work with governments to improve the educational and health systems (United Nations, 2017). Australian government has put in place a number of policies and legislation in order to ensure that students with special needs have the same 'fair go' as every other student that is institutionalized in the Australian education system by outlining what the government plans to achieve. Policies supporting special need students vary throughout the different stages of the educational system, but all share the same intention of to support the needs of students to the best of their ability to learn and improve their quality of life (Australian Curriculum, 2017).

The Australian system developing new pieces of a legislation and policies is a process that requires input from several sources internally and externally to the Australian government. For an issue to be recognised to constitute change or create a policy or legislation, the issue must be brought to the governments attention to the importance of the matter (Australian Government, 2017). When the government deems an issue of significance to the community, this is when the Australian government actively discusses the topic to find a solution. A few other departments in the public sector as well as parties dictate whether a bill is written and then proceeded to passed (Australian Government, 2017).

The starting process for any kind of policy to be created requires attention. An issue or matter can be brought to the government's attention through a number of avenues internally and externally to the governing body. Within the Australian government, Census provides the Australian government with important statistics on the Australian population (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Census is conducted in Australia Every 5 years. This provides the government with official population numbers in Australia. Although the main purpose is tax related, the information from Census provides important statistical information about the people's lives based on socio-economic status, disability, age and employment amongst other details (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Census is conducted by the Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS). The ABS analyse the data from Census and on this information are able to make informed to decision to present their findings to the government if any discrepancies are seen in the population based on the data. If the government deems the evidence put forth for a policy change or reassessment, then the matter moves on to parliament for drafting. The bodies outside of the government can be brought to their attention through a lobbying groups and activists. One of these groups is the Australian Federation Disability Organization (AFDO) (Australian Federation Disability Organization, 2017). The AFDO actively immerse themselves with the disabled community and connect them with policy makers to help identify issues the disabled community face. Although this isn't statistically based evidence it provides real understanding of issues, statistics aside. A bill detailing the proposed law will be submitted to parliament and processed in parliament (Australian Federation Disability Organization, 2017).

When a new bill is proposed there are several processes the occur in the Federal Parliament. The Federal Parliament is comprised of the acting Australian states and territories within Australia (Parliament of Australia, 2017). For a bill to be passed there has to be approval from the two houses of parliament. The legislative assembly and the legislative council. The bill is often presented in the lower house (legislative assembly) by the minister

outlining the bill. Once the bill has been approved by the house of representatives on a majority vote, the bill is released to the public to view. Here the legislation can be debated openly about the structure. Once again, the document is voted on. Two more votes are then taken to pass the bill onto the upper house (legislative council). In the legislative council the bill must undergo the same process that occurred in legislative assembly (Parliamentary Education Office, 2017). The bill is reintroduced to the house by the minister, further consulted by the community and lastly being approved after the third round of voting. Lastly before the bill is law (an act of parliament) the Governor must give it 'royal ascent'. Depending on the requirements of the newly passed law, there maybe be a set date before the law is implemented in order for the government to prepare (Journals of The Senate, 2002).

There are number of different sectors that work for the government which moderate legislation. The Health and Human Services department is responsible for working with families, health, unemployment, elderly, migrants, refugees, students and Indigenous Australian that require help from the government (Department of Human Services, 2017). Specific Laws relate to students with special needs, allowing special need students to access services granted by The Health and Human Services department. Depending on several factors such as severity of disability, type of disability, family income and others, determines the level care they receive from the government. Legislation within the educational system also have an impact on special needs students access to meet the standard level of education that every Australian is entitled to (Department of Human Services, 2017). Currently there are several policies pertaining to aiding a wide variety of disabilities in the education system over a range of different years and developmental stages, each playing an important role to ensure equality of education for everyone

WHO coined the first international classification in relation to disability in 1980 and have since developed the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). This classification system was the basis for the structuring of policies in relation to special need students around Australia inside and outside of the classroom. The ICF provides a multidimensional concept of what it means to have a disability based on the individual's ability of self-care ranging from 'mild' to 'profound'. Mild being an individual has no problems with self-care and profound being where an individual is dependent on constant aid. The United Nations branches of Children's Education (UNICEF and UNESCO) also plays a role in development of disability of children's rights. The United Nations Conventions of The Rights Of Children states in Article 23 "Children who have any kind of disability should

receive special care and support so that they can live a full and independent life.” (UNICEF, 2017). From this, a policy can be adjusted and formulated to help these students who require more assistance with their education in the classroom. The ICF also identifies the different array of disabilities ranging from hearing, physical, visual, developmental, and psycho-social and from this the Australian government has been able to provide institutes to cater to varying special needs of each individual to ensure all students have an equal right to learning.

An important piece of legislation helping support the special needs community is the Disability Services Act 1986 (2017, pg. 3). The significance of the Disability Services Act 1986 is that it's focus is on “the achievement of positive outcomes for people with disabilities, such as increased independence, employment opportunities and integration into the community.” This was aimed to be achieved by having services that are made to meet individuals needs and goals within the community. These services are designed to promote individual's competence, image, and capabilities, such as working and studying. The programs are also intended to promote participation within the community through physical and social integration. This aimed to removing social stigma of people with special needs. Especially kids and adolescents, socializing is an important part of development hence the importance of school functions and other communal events (Federal Register of Legislation, 2017). Before the Disability Services Act 1986 the special needs community had no such rights.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (Nation Disability Incentives Scheme (n.d.) is intended to provide the disabled community with the tools to support themselves. The insurance scheme also gives families the choice and control over what services they require. The national disability insurance scheme is government funded aimed at aiding the disabled from a range of different disabilities so they can improve their quality of life. Services are available to individuals depending on if they are full-time workers, students. The NDIS works with the clients to select the best help for them. (Nation Disability Incentives Scheme (n.d.). Prior to the national disability scheme, recipients received a set amount of funding regardless of the disability and severity. This means some recipients who needed costlier services were paying them ‘out-right’ resulting in families cutting costs in other parts of their lives. This would have been a problem for students who may need extra provisional care in the schools.

One of the more recent policies that has been updated in Australia is the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2014). This Disability

Discrimination Act 1992 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2014) revolutionised the treatment of the disabled across Australia, but the education system. Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (2014, Pg. 25) “It is unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the grounds of the person’s disability by refusing or failing to accept the person’s application for admission as a student”. Prior to this any institution was able to refuse the admittance of any child that was deemed disabled. Students who suffered from minor impairment to either sight or hearing may not have been refused admittance as compared to those who suffered a severe impairment that required full time care and within the school grounds. This would have been based on those educators wouldn’t be able to include or tend to the special needs students learning style/capability. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (2014, pg. 25) also states that “It is unlawful for an education provider to discriminate against a person on the grounds of the person’s disability by developing a curricula or training courses have a content that will exclude the person from participation”. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2014) indicates that all students must be included and in all types of learning despite their impairment or special need. Depending on the needs of the students, there have been institutions established that whole heartedly accommodate for special needs. Institutions are sorted by specific special needs, such as the Insight Education Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired. This centres education is structured around the primary school year levels with vision impairment. Institutions also operate and the mentally impaired level for adolescents. These institutions maintain the right that all students deserve equal and quality education.

The special needs education system is organised differently to other education systems across Australia. Policies range from state to state and from school to school. Due the number of different disabilities education is organised accordingly to the severity and type of disability. There are institutes dedicated to specific needs of special education students to ensure students get the education they need to develop an independent working career (Australian Curriculum, 2017). School curriculum also varies from school to school based on the special needs of the students aimed educating students in a manner that will be most beneficial to them, and the skills required for the future (Australian Curriculum, 2017).

In Victoria, students who suffer from a minor impairment such as acute hearing disability, visual loss or mental disability who can work and learn effectively in the mainstream school system (public system) who don’t require full-time care and assistance are not required to learn in a special need institution (Victoria State Government, 2017). Students

who suffer from severe disablement that require full-time care and are unable to be catered for facilities and educator training. Institutes are divided by the special need of the students. These institutes are broken down into the following: Autism, Hearing impairment, High needs, Intellectual disabilities, behavioural disabilities, multiple disabilities, vision impairment, speech/language disabilities and physical disabilities (Australian Schools Directory, 2017). This schooling system is used for kids across all years from infancy (kindergarten) through to adolescents.

In accordance with the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Department of Education and Training, 2015) school curriculums are a set of learning goals and experiences students are expected to learn throughout their time in a schooling institution (Australian Curriculum, 2017). Due to students' special needs, some students will experience tasks differently to others. Tasks where students would be required to observe a particular experiment may not be as well received by students with vision impairment. Likewise, if a particular task involved students physically moving around a class may not be used to teach students with a physical impairment (Molina, 2017). Teachers trained in special needs educations design tasks that are appropriate for special needs learning that are the most effective across different developmental stages (Victorian State Government, Education and Training, 2017). In the mainstream schooling system, teachers might fail to accommodate for special needs students. This way students are provided with the best learning curriculum better suited to their skills and ability that would be most useful for them. The schooling curriculum would vary between different developmental stages from infancy to adolescent (Australian Curriculum, 2017).

School policies within Australia require for a teacher to work in special needs schools they are required to be trained in the pedagogy of special needs care and education (Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2015). The policy ensure teachers are trained in educating special needs students in a manner that best suits the special needs children. In the mainstream schooling system, this is not a requirement of teachers, meaning that some students with special needs may not receive the attention they need to learn effectively in class (New South Whales Education Standards Authority, 2017). Schools are also required to have the appropriate facilities and tools for students to learn effectively. Within the mainstream system of schooling wheelchair access and disabled bathrooms are required by law. This means that students can access all areas of the school without assistance (Disability

Discriminating Act 1992, 2017). These policies are placed in all educational institutions across Australia, ranging from early learning centres to high schools.

Being disabled can create a sense of isolation amongst special needs students. Being disabled can limit a student's participation in everyday activities ranging from sports, conversation and in some cases simple everyday tasks such as eating (Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meara & Harris, 2007). To combat the feelings of isolation and poor mental health is through community involvement. Friends are a great source for support and help as well as creating a feeling of belonging. Friendship is an important part of developing social skills and breaking down the barriers of stigmas surrounding disability by spreading awareness about disability (Boydell, Gladstone & Crawford, 2002).

The disability awareness programs in Australia are run by the Health and Human Services. The disability awareness training aims to inform participants of the facts about disability and raise awareness of the disabled community. By dispelling myth and stereotypes of the disabled community the feeling of awkwardness can dissipate. The program also aims to inform participants of disability legislation and equality, so the general population have an understanding of what it means to be disabled (Victoria State Government Human Services, 2014). Organizations such as EPIC Assist (2017) provide information seminars at schools as well providing several other services in spreading awareness about disabilities and how to assist special needs students.

Education institutions and disability support groups such as Afford (2017) and Autism Awareness often bring the community together through organised events. It isn't uncommon for special need and mainstream education institutions to host family days. Family days involve a school organised event either at the school or local park, where families can meet one another as well as allows students to socialise in a comfortable environment. The benefits of an event organised by the school creates a safe and comfortable space for parents to help support one another including allows for their children to socialise with others who may or may not have a disability (Milner & Kelly, 2009).

EPIC Assist (2017) and People with Disability (PWD) (2017) are organizations that aim to actively involve members of the community with disability to get involved. EPIC Assist organises group events such as horse riding, meet and greet days so other members of the community can actively interact with one another. PWD is a service that works with maintaining fair and equal treatment amongst members of the community from all ages that require help or assistance and offer the opportunity for the disabled community to get

involved with all the legislation that is involved with disabled care in schools. This way all members of the community can know their rights within the educational system and what it means to be independent (People with Disability, 2017).

The Australian Health and Human services directly work with the disabled within the community by providing specific services and incentives to help bridge the gap between disability and education within schools. The Australian Health and Human services are achieving this by using money provided by the government and distributing between community services and medical expenses for disabled students to ensure they are receiving an adequate education (Health and Human Services, 2017)

Community buses are provided to the disabled across Australia based on the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (2005) and the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002). Community buses are equipped with regulation seating and safety for wheelchair bound individuals. Depending on the type of disability, those who are required to take a community bus provided by Link Community Transport (2017) due to the severity of their disability, they are eligible to ride for free. Link Community Transport (2017) work as an independent operator as well as with corporations and institutions through contract work.

The Australian Health and Human Services (2017) also provide a range of carer options for students. The Child Disability Assistance Payment is an annual allowance given to family to help pay for carer support for their children who are 16 years of age or under. The care can vary based on the service the child needs, whether it is aids, therapies, or respite. This service is beneficial for students from early learning to middle school adolescents. Unfortunately, it doesn't cover adolescents who are attending schools that are aged 17 and 18.

Disabled students sometimes require medical treatments or devices to aid them. This includes hearing aids, eyes tests, glasses, wheelchairs, oxygen support and any other accessories that help students with day-to-day life. The Australian Health and Human Services subsidises these accessories as they are expensive necessities to a student's mobility and learning. These devices are covered the Australian Disability Insurance Scheme. All students who are classed as disabled are eligible for these perks providing doctors provide a medical certificate stating the individual needs the equipment (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2017).

Australian Disability policy has been affected and developed over years of organizations and activists such as UNICEF, WHO and UNESCO through various avenues of research and public attention. Services that are directed at aiding disabled students across Australia vary state to state but the main policies such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2014), Disability Services Act 1986 (Federal Register of Legislation, 2017), the Nation Disability Insurance Scheme (Nation Disability Incentives Scheme (n.d.) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005, (Department of Education and Training, 2015) is applied to all student across the country. These policies are non-specific to age or gender. Children from infancy to adolescents are covered by these policies. Specific policies that relate to special needs students vary from school to school, where the public system educates special needs students differently to those who attend specific special need educational institutions. The Australian Health and Human Services provides a range of benefits for the special needs children through community buses equipped to transport special need students, carers and subsidising special needs equipment and devices to necessary for students to learn and function independently in everyday life. There are a number of established help and support groups throughout Australia aimed helping families and students breaking down social barriers between the general public and the special needs students within schools in order to improve the mental and social health of students as socialisation is an important aspect of education. The Australian government is always looking for better ways to aids special needs students and the disabled community by reassessing disabled care every 5 years and the assignment of money in the sector to ensure special need students are meeting an adequate education in Australia.

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