

Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability

Education and Learning Issues Paper

Submission by Autism Spectrum Australia (**Aspect**)

January 2020

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Australia (**Aspect**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Education and Learning Issues paper issued by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (**Issues Paper**). Our submission does not address a specific question in the Education and Learning Issues Paper; rather we have provided comments that relate to a number of elements in section 3.3 *Education and inclusive societies*.

2. Background

Aspect operates one of the world's largest autism-specific education programs for children and young people on the autism spectrum. Our specialist education teachers work with multi-disciplinary teams (occupational therapists, speech therapists and psychologists) to develop intensive autism-specific programs within small classes that have a high teacher to student ratio and teacher aide support.

Aspect's autism practice is underpinned by an autism-specific approach called the Aspect Comprehensive Approach (**ACA**). Through this approach, our goal is to support our students to develop the skills they need to become as independent as possible and to enable them to succeed in the wider community. The ACA encapsulates more than 50 years of Aspect's expertise in providing services to children, young people and adults on the autism spectrum and is continuously reviewed against the most up-to-date research to ensure all of our autism practices result in positive outcomes for those who choose our services.

3. Our practice

In line with the ACA, each student at an Aspect school, with the support of their parents, teachers and other professionals, develops their own individual plan (**IP**). An IP highlights the learning style, unique strengths and interests of an individual student, identifies targeted education goals and outlines strategies to be used within a positive learning environment to help achieve those goals. Learning programs in both main Aspect campuses and satellite schools are conducted in line with each individual student's IP.

Our schools work on a ‘transitional model’ that aims to provide Aspect students, from primary school through to high school, with the skills they need to move into a mainstream education or other specialist environment. As a registered independent school, we deliver the Australian curriculum while working to each student’s autism-related learning needs, individual strengths, interests and aspirations.

Aspect has nine main campus schools operating in NSW and SA. Aspect’s NSW schools also operate ‘satellite classes’ in mainstream school settings.

A satellite class is an autism-specific class operated by an Aspect school and located in a host mainstream public or independent school. There are 113 Aspect satellite classes currently operating within NSW Department of Education and Catholic, primary and secondary mainstream schools. In the infants and primary classes, satellite class students are provided with specialised teaching in an Aspect ‘homeroom’, with opportunities for supported integrated activities in mainstream classes. In secondary schools, students may complete some lessons within regular classrooms and some in the Aspect homeroom, or receive the majority of their lessons in the homeroom.

Homerooms provide a quiet, autism-friendly learning space where students can be supported with day-to-day organisation strategies and helped to manage their social emotional regulation. Homerooms also provide a central place for students to seek specialist assistance, as well as a structured social sanctuary at break times.

Each year a number of Aspect students transition from satellite classes into mainstream settings or other generalist settings, with Aspect taking responsibility for, and supporting each transition. These transitions involve careful, detailed and collaborative planning with the student, their family and teachers. Consultative support is provided to the receiving schools by Aspect for 12 months following the student’s transition.

Over the years, Aspect has transitioned thousands of students into mainstream education. The table below shows the number of students transitioned by Aspect into mainstream education during the years 2015 to 2019 (inclusive) and the percentage that these numbers represent of our total cohort.

Years	Number of students transitioned	Approximate percentage of total cohort
2019	197 (approx.)	Not yet available
2018	222	38%
2017	225	40%
2016	238	46%
2015	219	50%

4. Inclusion and autism

Aspect has long recognised the unique learning styles of children and young people on the autism spectrum, who may present with communication, social and behavioural characteristics that impact on successful learning within a 'one size fits all' approach to education.

Inclusion in mainstream educational settings, as set out in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (**CRPD**), is important to ensure choice, equality and remove discrimination; and can be beneficial to both the student with disability and all others in the classroom when appropriate accommodations are made and needs are met. However, the 'inclusive education' paradigm of the past three decades does not always recognise the diverse needs of individuals on the autism-spectrum, and the benefits that the segregation and integration approaches can have in accommodating the needs of students on the autism spectrum, particularly in areas that are not always feasible in mainstream. Providing autism-friendly environments and teaching strategies promotes skill development in students to be able to navigate more mainstream settings and where possible, facilitates the successful transition of such students into the mainstream education setting.

In our experience, to create a truly inclusive education system the focus cannot simply be on the transition from segregated or integrated settings to inclusive education, as such an approach does not necessarily recognise or accommodate the complex needs of someone on the autism spectrum, where greater social, sensory and cognitive accessibility and accommodations may be required. In our view, an inclusive education approach cannot operate in isolation of existing evidence-based strategies and approaches. A truly inclusive model should incorporate and recognise the benefits of a range of educational settings and provisions including separate autism-specific intensive schools and integrated satellite classes to mainstream fully inclusive settings.

For instance, satellite classes provide an alternative model of educational inclusion, enabling children and young people on the autism spectrum to become familiar with a mainstream school environment and learn new social skills at their own pace, with studies showing that this can lead to more successful long term transitions for students into mainstream schooling environments. (Keane et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2019; Saggars et al., 2016). Satellite classes provide students on the autism spectrum with the benefits of inclusion within a mainstream setting, combined with the support and understanding of a specialist school.

Mainstream schools present unique challenges for a student on the autism spectrum – with large physical settings that can be noisy and chaotic, large class sizes that restrict individualised support, and an increased emphasis on unspoken social rules and academic progress as students' progress through the upper primary stages of learning and into secondary education.

In addition, the results of the Australian Autism Cooperative Research Centre Educational Needs Analysis Survey (Saggars et al., 2016) indicated that teacher knowledge about autism within a mainstream school is limited, they are unsure how to best support students on the autism spectrum and that there is a lack of suitable resources and relevant professional development.

Parents are also concerned about mainstream schools not being able to address what some have referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ ((Ishaq, 2018; Myles & Simpson, 2001; Sulaimani & Gut, 2019), those social and more general life skills, such as self-care, self-regulation and speech and language skills, which are not taught directly but are nevertheless critical to the progress of young autistic people who may not acquire them in the usual ways. Some parents opt for a special school placement for their child either in the belief that access to high-level expertise on autism will ensure that staff will better cater for their child’s individual needs, or because they have already tried a mainstream placement and felt that it had failed (Brede et al., 2017).

Article 24 of the CRPD states that children with disabilities should not be discriminated against, and that they should be able to participate in the general education system, via “inclusive education”. In Australia’s application of inclusive education however, largely governed by the Disability Standards for Education (2005), the onus is still on the student to adapt to the mainstream education offering, with “reasonable adjustments” made. It should be noted that many students on the autism spectrum require “significant levels” of accommodations and adjustments with very few mainstream schools equipped to provide for these students with high-support needs. This principle of “inclusive education” can also be in stark contrast to an “identity first” paradigm, where “inclusive education” could be seen to be neglecting an essential part of who someone is (Cera, 2015). With this in mind, when the emphasis for the education of students on the autism spectrum is placed on inclusion in a mainstream setting, and not on recognising and supporting taken off their unique characteristics as an autistic person, there is the potential for emotional stress and long-term psychological damage.

The Education Issues paper cites a paper (de Bruin, 2019) which states that students on the autism spectrum have been disproportionately affected by the increase in educational segregation of students with a disability (in particular autism) and compares Australian figures with those of the US. While we agree with the factual statements made in this paper, we do not believe the paper addresses or highlights the complexities of mainstream inclusion for a student with social, sensory and cognitive issues or looks at the barriers within traditional mainstream settings. The statement in Article 24 of the CRPD also denies the right of parents to choose the school they feel is most appropriate for their child; with many parents of Aspect students opting for a more supportive, intensive, autism-specific school setting rather than a generalist mainstream setting.

At Aspect, we believe a specialised, comprehensive, multi-faceted intensive approach is required to support the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum. The approach to education for students on the autism spectrum needs to be flexible, align to the student’s specific autistic learning styles and needs, and involve a continuum of special education services that is inclusive of their strengths and abilities. This continuum includes autism-specific special school placement, small support or satellite classes staffed by autism-specialist teachers in mainstream schools, autism-specific itinerant teacher services to support students who are included in mainstream classes and full mainstream school placement – taking into account the unique needs of each individual student.

In addition, the large numbers of students who annually transition through Aspect educational services and schools, into mainstream schools (as set out in the table above), demonstrates the

important role that specialist schools play in preparing and supporting students on the autism spectrum for mainstream educational settings.

Aspect is also committed to increasing teacher knowledge of evidence-based supports and strategies for students on the autism spectrum in all schools in Australia by continuing to deliver national teacher professional development workshops ([Positive Partnerships](#) (delivered for the Australian Department of Education and Training) and [Aspect Practice](#)) and a continued program of biennial national autism and education conferences (Sydney 2014, Melbourne, 2016, Brisbane 2018, Sydney 2020). Aspect's Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP) is also continuing to research the educational needs of students on the spectrum with the aim, of translating the research outcomes into Australian schools and classes.

Aspect acknowledges the ongoing debate about the value and need for segregated settings and supports the inclusion of students in mainstream settings. However, in our view a policy of inclusion and the presence of specialist settings do not represent mutually exclusive ideals. We strongly believe that there is a need and a place for specialist educational settings to provide targeted support to those students on the autism spectrum who need it; and that parents/carers and individuals should have the option to choose the type of education that best supports the individual strengths and interests of the student, as they do with other specialised educational settings such as religious, performing arts, sports, selective and STEM schools, or Montessori and Steiner options. These options represent the right of all people to access educational opportunities that suit their needs, values and abilities, whilst ensuring the right to “continue their education without discrimination and on an equal basis to others” (Article 24 of the CRPD).

If we fail to support specialist schools, such as our autism-specific schools, we are presenting a form of exclusion to those wishing to be educated in their chosen community, by people specifically trained to understand their needs.

Aspect would welcome the opportunity to discuss its response further.

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