

Terms of Reference:

*c) the availability and adequacy of services provided by the Commonwealth, State and local governments across health, **education**, disability, housing, sport and employment services.*

I am a retired primary school teacher, having finished teaching at the end of 2014. In the last 11 years of my 29 year career I taught in the junior part of the school – Grade 1/ 2, Grade 1, Grade 2 and Prep. In that time I taught 7 students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, and some not diagnosed when I was teaching them, in grades ranging from 16 to 27 students.

These were not the only students with learning problems and / or behavioural problems. I would estimate that there were probably 5 - 6 other students in each grade that had other problems, some with aides but most not. This impacted greatly on **all** the students who needed extra assistance **and** the other students who all received less individual time and support from the classroom teacher.

I found that even when diagnosed, students were not provided with the support they needed. Integration Aides were provided only for a few hours a week to a few hours a day depending on the classification given to the student. ASD students never get full time aide support. An integration aide is also needed in the playground and this is included in their time allocation, thus there is less time for support in the classroom. Classroom and playground support are equally important for the students' well being and progress, both socially and academically.

In my experience Integration Aides were usually employed by the day or half day. They were not allocated to one student to reduce the student being reliant on one person, especially important if the aide was sick. Thus the aide assisted several students during the day. For some students this can be very hard as they do not know which aide will be with them. Some students find it hard to adjust to having many aides helping them. I believe that for most students two aides is enough to break reliance but provide them with continuity, especially in the early years of schooling. I have known them to have five aides and this does not count replacement aides for when an aide is ill.

When an integration aide is employed for the day they are not necessarily able to assist during the early part of the day when the core subjects are usually taught. A student may have an aide during an afternoon serial story when they are not particularly needed but not for mathematics, reading or spelling. As the aim is to make the student part of the class it is not good for them to be taken out of the normal classroom routine for special lessons with the aide as they miss out on the other classroom activities which often involve socialisation. They also feel different and that they are being treated differently, or being punished.

When teaching Prep I found most students with ASD have not been diagnosed or assessed prior to starting school. This means there is no extra support for the child in this important time of adjusting to school at the beginning of the year.

Before a student can be assessed there are a lot of forms and questionnaires that need to be filled in by the teacher. These are important to the assessment of the student and but are very time consuming and are completed in the teacher's time. Students need to have a variety of assessments and there seems to be a lack of staff to provide these assessments in the education system. Thus it takes a long time for these to be completed. Then their cases need to be considered before support is provided. This can take most of the school year, again denying the student much needed support in the early days of their schooling, vital in providing the groundwork for the rest of their education.

Also in the early part of the year the teacher is getting to know the students and it can take a while to identify these students. You need to have observed consistent patterns of behaviour before any formal testing can even be requested. When I was teaching there were set dates to have your requests into the Education Department and this also put a lot of stress on the assessors, staff and parents to have all the paperwork completed by a set time. If you missed the cut off date then you had to wait for the next date, which could be the next year.

As I did my teacher training a long time ago I am not sure how much study is now provided for the teachers in identifying and teaching of ASD students. It is possible to do post training study. However these opportunities are limited and the cost is borne by the staff member or the school. Sometimes schools cannot afford for many staff to attend these sessions in any one year so it can take some time for all staff to attend.

There are also opportunities for staff and parents to access information sessions on how to help ASD students, such as the Melbourne Autism Expo 2016. However, teachers usually have to attend such sessions in their own time.

Like most government funded services there is a limited budget and therefore there is a grading system so that the most needy receive the funding. Unfortunately this means there are also many students who need this vital support do not receive sufficient funding or receive no funding at all.