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The Inclusion Lottery: who's in and who's out? Tracking inclusion and exclusion in New South Wales government schools

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Abstract

The last few decades have witnessed a broad international movement towards the development of inclusive schools through targeted special education funding and resourcing policies. Student placement statistics are often used as a barometer of policy success but they may also be an indication of system change. In this paper, trends in student enrolments from the Australian state of New South Wales are considered in an effort to understand what effect inclusive education has had in this particular region of the world.

Keywords: behaviour; disability; education policy; inclusive education; special education; special education needs

Inclusion implies change. To say that inclusion is occurring means that the participation of some students in mainstream schools has increased. It comprises two linked processes: it is the process of increasing the participation of students in the cultures and curricula of mainstream schools and communities; it is the process of reducing the exclusion of students from mainstream cultures and curricula. (Booth 1996, p. 89)

The Inclusive/Special Education Spectrum

Educational terms can have different meanings in different contexts. No term is more contested than “inclusion” (Graham & Slee 2008) therefore it is necessary to indicate which of the various discourses of inclusion inform our analysis. While recognising the broader scope and meanings of the term in relation to social inclusion and equity (Gill 2008; Taylor & Singh 2005), here we concentrate on policies and practices specifically relating to students with disabilities and how these may work to exclude certain groups and individuals through the bureaucratic management of “inclusion” (Liasidou 2008; Slee & Allan 2001). Even within this specialised area of research however, further distinctions are required to clarify our approach. For example, to some who write about inclusive education the enrolment of students with disabilities in special schools or support units within “mainstream” schools is evidence of their inclusion. To others, this is still segregation and, therefore, not inclusive. Indeed, members of the latter group argue that the very construction of norms that sustain notions of the regular or “mainstream” school is where the construction and

exclusion of difference begins (Graham 2006). Judgement as to whether systems have realised “inclusion” therefore depends on where one sits on the inclusive/special education spectrum, and whether “inclusion” is about placement or philosophy or both.

In simple terms, the inclusive education movement is geared towards a re-conceptualisation of schooling through deep change to school cultures, structures, practices and logic (Ainscow 1995; Carrington 1999; Slee 1995; Thomas & Loxley 2001). A different discourse of inclusion emanates from special education¹ and the difficulties presented by “full inclusion” have often been used as the ultimate trump card in the inclusive/special education debate (Kauffman & Hallahan 1995). To further complicate matters, there are distinctions within each tradition. To use Artiles’ (2003) taxonomy, “pragmatists” in inclusive education would acknowledge that children with profound disabilities can present neighbourhood schools with complicated logistical, professional and financial dilemmas, although “ideologists” would argue that the problem is the school and, if we were to transform schools, all children could be educated in inclusive settings. Special educators, pragmatists and treasury alike tend to respond to such arguments with a further trump card: feasibility, which is backed up by the enormous cost of re-engineering existing schools, structures and practices – a cost that governments fear the average taxpayer will not bear.

The result of this perpetual stand-off is a process of accommodation through incremental adjustments to physical environments and other aspects of school life (Fulcher 1990; Slee 1996). Consequently, and despite advances over the last 30 years, we are left with an unsolved problem to which trends in educational placements point and it revolves around a series of fundamental but as yet unanswered questions: If we do not embrace full inclusion, where do we draw the line? Who should be included and who shouldn’t? Where does “severe” end and “profound” begin? Are some children with disabilities less welcome in their local school than others? Who decides? It is not possible to answer these questions in the limited scope of an academic paper (if at all) but an examination of the educational placement of students with disabilities can provide us with an indication of how these questions are being dealt with in practice. To this end, we asked answerable questions of our placement data in an attempt to throw light on the philosophical problems we pose. For example, what proportion of total government school enrolments are in segregated settings? What is the make-up of these segregated populations? Have these changed over time? Are there any discernible differences by disability category? If there are any increases or decreases, is this happening across the board or restricted to particular groups? Our preliminary answers to these questions signal the need for urgent research into the material conditions affecting inclusion in New South Wales government schools and inclusive education policy construction more generally.

Approach & Methodology

This study utilises Dempsey & Foreman’s (1997) method of examining New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) publication data from yearly Statistical Bulletins but with the added inclusion of relevant publications pertaining to the 1997-2007 study period. These include NSW Government Budget Papers: Department of Education Financial sections, DET Annual Reports, as well as relevant research reports (McRae, 1996; Vinson, 2002). Data drawn from these sources include enrolment statistics for government schools disaggregated by disability category and placement type across the continuum of provision made available by DET which incorporates special schools, support classes and regular classes.² These data were mapped against total enrolments in New South Wales government schools and calculated as a percentage where

noted. Data reported in Statistical Bulletins were confirmed using Budget Papers and Annual Reports where possible to ensure accuracy.

A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics was used to examine patterns in the data. Rather than comparing trends across the 11 year period, we elected to compare enrolments for 1997 with enrolments for 2007.³ The results address changes in the total number of students enrolled in special schools and support classes. In order to drill down into the reasons behind any changes, the percentages of enrolments in both types of segregated settings that constitute each category of diagnosed disability are compared between 1997 and 2007. Although raw numbers of enrolled students could be compared across the 11 years, enrolments in special schools and support classes were not static across this period. A comparison of raw numbers is therefore inappropriate. A more suitable analysis is to compare proportions of enrolments. To this end, the z test of two proportions was used to compare percentages of enrolments for each category of disability. Following these comparisons we address the change in the number of students with a disability enrolled in regular classes. Again, although raw numbers of enrolled students could be examined, total New South Wales government school enrolments varied across the time period in question. Following the analysis for special schools and support classes therefore, z tests comparing percentages of students enrolled who were classified as having a disability in regular classes were again employed.

Trends in Educational Placement in New South Wales government schools (1997-2007)

Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs)

Schools for Specific Purposes are special schools purpose-built for the enrolment of students with disabilities requiring a high level of support. In the early 1980s, annual SSP enrolments were above 5000 (0.7% of total enrolments) until a steady decline from 1986 reached a low of 3673 (0.5%) in 1998. The aforementioned study by Dempsey and Foreman (1997) looking at the 1986-1994 period, reported what was then a gradually decreasing trend. Since 1999 however the trend reversed and SSP enrolments gradually increased until reaching 0.6% (4278 students) of total enrolments in 2007. It is important to note that this overall increase in SSP enrolments cannot be attributed to natural population growth. Indeed, while the number of students enrolled in SSPs increased, total enrolments in New South Wales government schools decreased by 3.5%. This expansion is interesting because an increase in enrolments did not occur across the board; that is, the enrolment of students in particular diagnostic categories decreased while others increased - some substantially so.

Changes in the populations within Schools for Specific Purposes: Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in SSPs for each type of disability from 1997 to 2007. Due to the small numbers of students enrolled with Physical, Hearing and Visual disabilities, numbers are summed for these three groups. All analyses for both Schools for Specific Purposes and Support Classes (in next section) are for the percentage that each disability category constitutes of *total enrolments within each setting*.

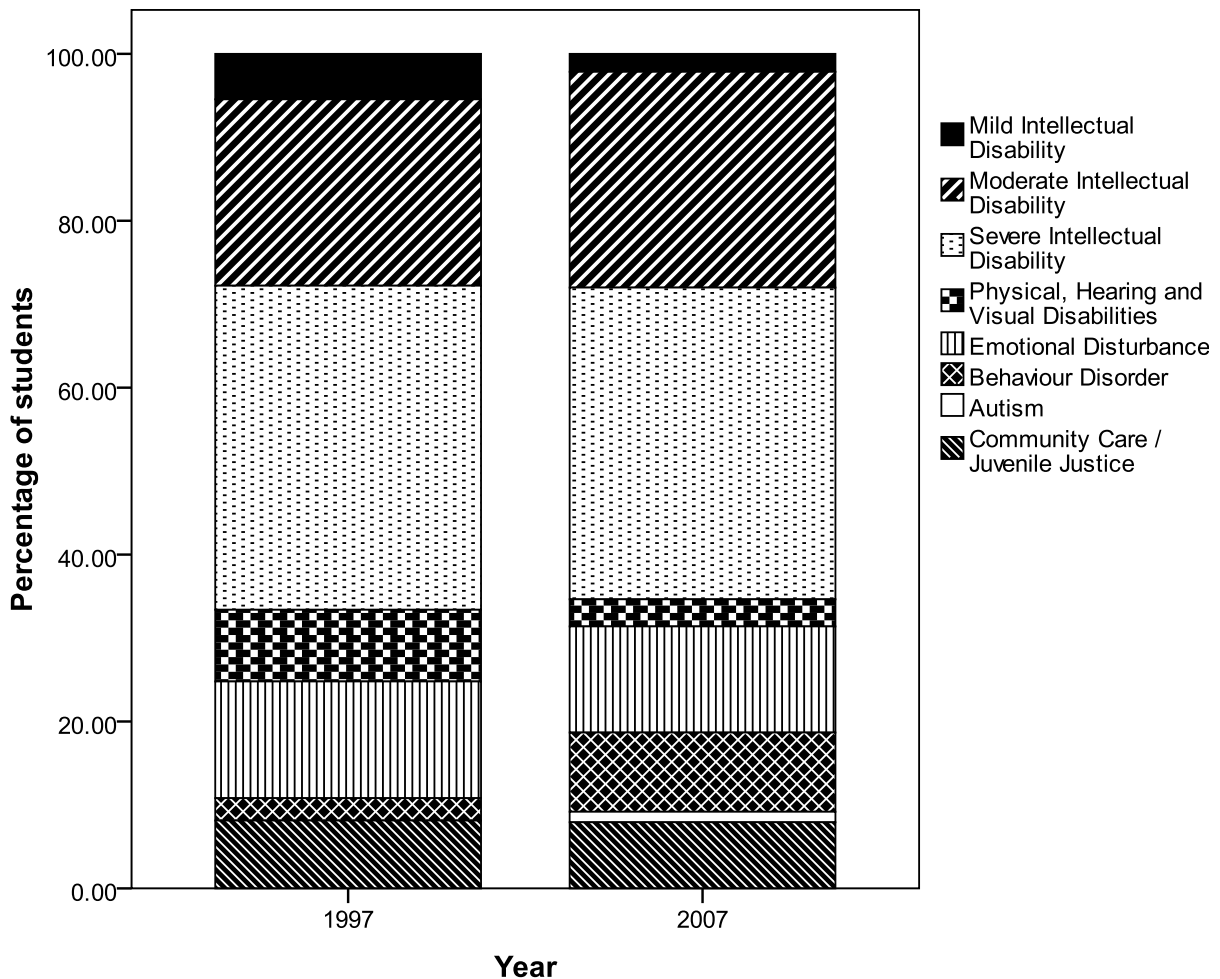


Figure 1. *Percentage of students in Schools for Specific Purposes by disability category in 1997 and 2007.*

Enrolment data suggests that the characteristics of students served by Schools for Specific Purposes in New South Wales have changed in the 1997-2007 period. For example, there was a 60% decrease in the percentage of enrolled students with mild intellectual disability, ($z = 7.75, p < .001$). This decrease was mirrored by a 60% drop in the percentage of enrolled students with physical, hearing and visual disabilities ($z = 8.68, p < .001$). While there was a sizeable increase in the enrolment of students with moderate intellectual disability (increase of 34%, $z = 3.11, p < .01$), the most dramatic increase is seen in children diagnosed with behaviour disorder. Between 1997 and 2007 enrolments of children diagnosed with behaviour disorder increased by 254%, $z = 12.40, p < .001$.

There were no significant changes in the percentage of children diagnosed with severe intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance or autism in Schools for Specific Purposes (all $z < 2.00, p > .05$). Although the increase in autism looks striking, it must be noted that the autism category was only introduced in 2004. The relevant comparison for this category therefore is between the 2004 and 2007 figures. It should be noted that although there is no significant change in severe intellectual disability when calculated as a proportion of the SSP population, there was a raw number increase of 12%. This increase is masked however by the overall increase seen in the SSP population. Lastly, although not a major focus of this paper, there was no significant change in the proportion of children enrolled in the community care / juvenile justice category. It can be seen

therefore that the overall increase in the SSP population is mainly as a result of increased enrolment of children with a diagnosis in the moderate intellectual disability and behaviour disorder categories.

Support Classes (SCs)

Support classes are separate classes in some regular schools for students with a confirmed diagnosis of disability eligible for support in New South Wales government schools. Placement into support classes is allocated on a district basis. Similar trends noted for Schools for Specific Purposes are evident in data relating to support classes. Overall, enrolment in support classes in NSW government schools has continued to increase since Dempsey and Foreman's review of the 1986-1994 period (from 1.5% of total enrolments in 1997 to 1.7% in 2007, $z = 8.76, p < .001$).

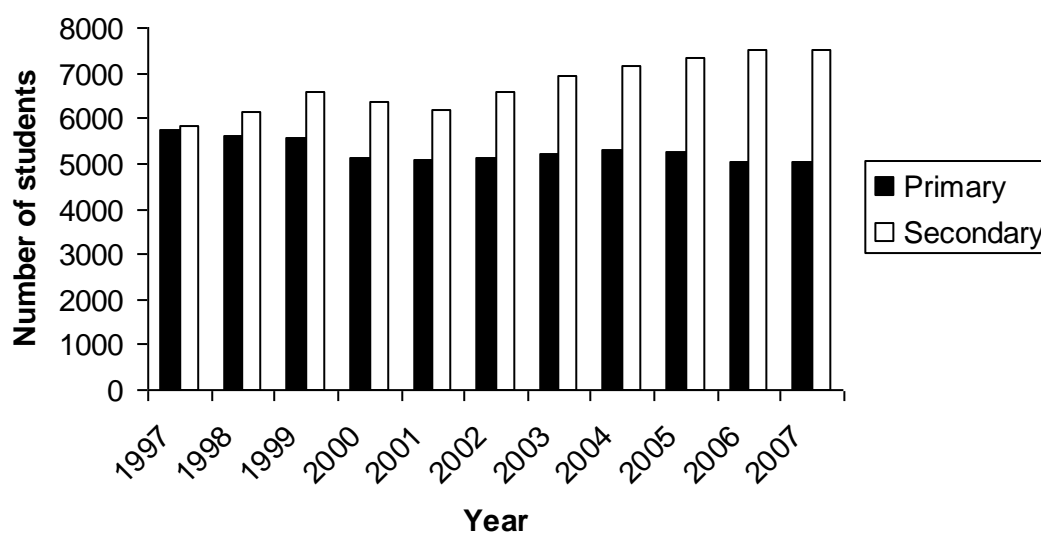


Figure 2. Number of students enrolled in Primary and Secondary support classes from 1997 to 2007.

As shown in Figure 2 above, much of the increase in support class placements has been in the secondary years ($z = 16.97, p < .001$) with a small but significant decrease in use by primary (or elementary) schools ($z = 5.07, p < .001$). Similar to the changing face of Schools for Specific Purposes however, enrolments carrying particular disability classifications appear to have increased substantially while others have remained remarkably steady. It is therefore helpful to view primary and secondary sectors separately as different forces appear to operate in each.

Changes in the populations within Primary (K – 6) Support Classes: Figure 3 gives the percentage of students in both primary and secondary support classes for each type of disability in 1997 and 2007. The percentage of students enrolled in primary school support classes diagnosed with mild intellectual disability decreased by 27%, $z = 14.24, p < .001$, while the percentage diagnosed with severe intellectual disability decreased by 38%, $z = 5.24, p < .001$. Enrolments of students with physical, hearing and visual disabilities decreased by 43%, $z = 7.50, p < .001$. The decreases seen in enrolments of children with a behaviour disorder and a language disorder however were non-significant (both $z < 2.00$).

Despite the overall drop in enrolments in primary school support classes, dramatic growth is seen in particular categories of disability. Between 1997 and 2007 enrolments of students with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance increased 139%, $z = 6.87$, $p < .001$. Enrolments with a classification of moderate intellectual impairment increased by 41% ($z = 12.19$, $p < .001$). The introduction of the autism classification in 2004 saw a 61% increase from 2004 to 2007 in the number of children enrolled in primary support classes under the autism category, $z = 5.61$, $p < .01$.

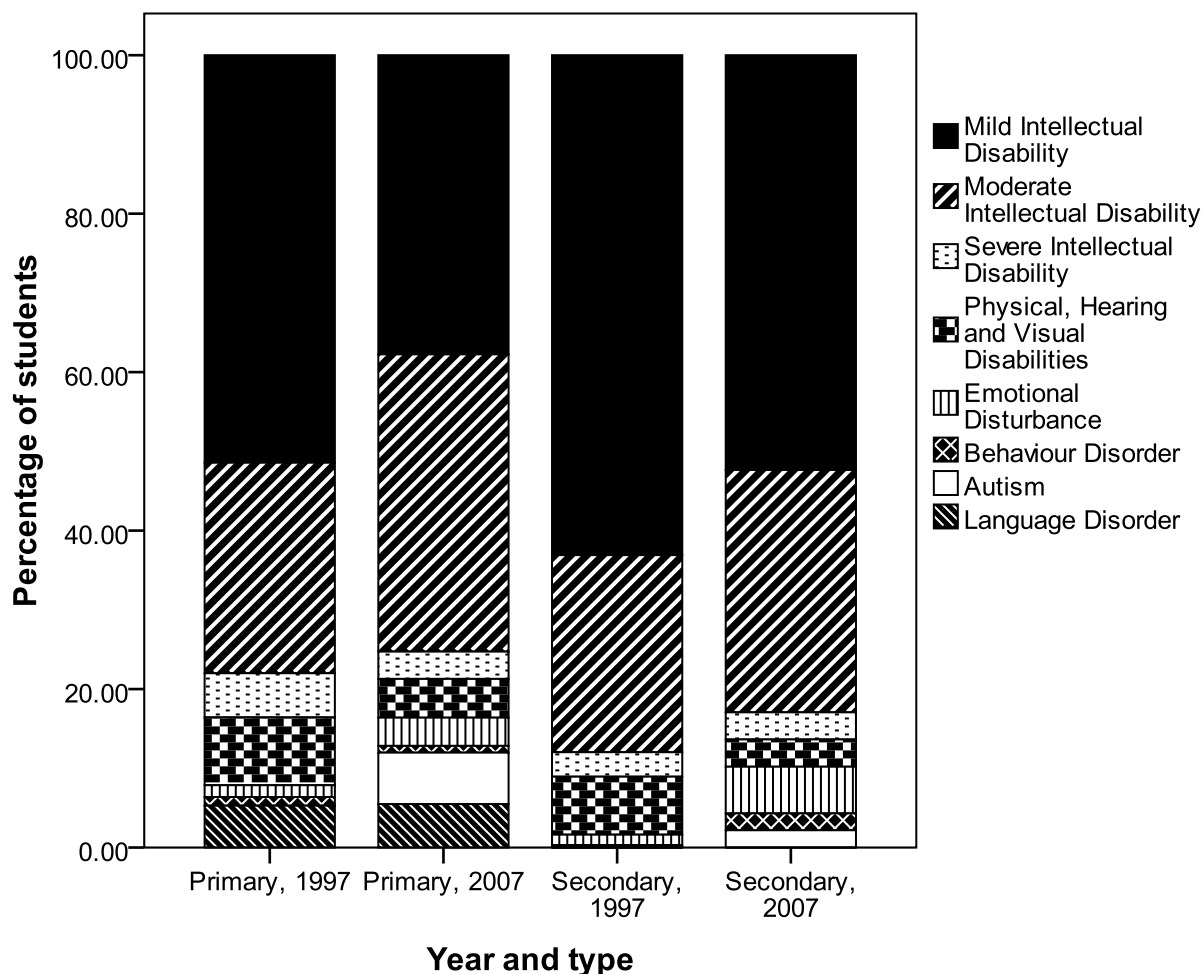


Figure 3. *Percentage of students in primary and secondary Support Classes by type of disability in 1997 and 2007.*

Changes in the populations within Secondary (7–12) Support Classes: During the period 1997 to 2007, the percentage of students with physical, hearing and visual impairment decreased by 53%, $z = 8.60$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3).⁴ While the percentage of students enrolled in secondary support classes categorised as having a mild intellectual disability also decreased by a significant 17% ($z = 10.61$, $p < .001$), there was a raw number increase in students diagnosed with mild intellectual disability (increase of 313 students). This relatively small rise is masked however by the much larger increase in total enrolments in secondary support classes, resulting in a significant proportional decrease. There was also a small increase in the enrolment of students with severe intellectual impairment (recording a non-significant increase of 11%). While enrolments of students with moderate intellectual disability increased by 23% ($z = 6.20$, $p < .001$), growth in the enrolment of students with a diagnosis in the area of “mental health” dwarves the representational growth of

all other groups: autism grew by 280% ($z = 7.95, p < .001$), emotional disturbance increased by 348% ($z = 11.45, p < .001$), and behaviour disorder rose by 585% ($z = 7.63, p < .001$).

Students with disabilities in regular classes (SWD REG)

It is difficult to find detailed statistical information on the enrolment of students with a disability in regular classes but as well as listing the total number of students in support classes and special schools, annual New South Wales Government Budget Papers list the number of “students in government schools receiving special education support in integrated settings” (see <http://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/bpapers>). These figures show that there has been significant growth in the number of students with a confirmed diagnosis of disability eligible for support in New South Wales government schools over the last 15 years. For example, in the 1993-94 Treasury papers, 4400 students (0.58% of total enrolments) were listed in this category (see Figure 4 below). In the 1997-98 financial year, the percentage of students with a disability in regular classes receiving special education support funding rose slightly to 0.7%, until more than doubling to 1.6% the following year (1998-99: $z = 51.90, p < .001$). Publication of the 1999-00 financials saw another increase to 1.8% of total enrolments ($z = 10.16, p < .001$) which rose again in the following year to 1.9% (2000-01: $z = 8.69, p < .001$).

These small but steady increases were minimal however when compared to the extraordinary jump recorded in the 2002-03 budget papers, where 2.8% of total enrolments were suddenly carrying a diagnosis of disability eligible for “special education support in integrated settings” (NSWGovt 2003, p. 8). This equated to a 41% increase (in the order of 6183 new children) from the previous 2001-02 financial year ($z = 33.23, p < .001$). While this timing neatly coincides with the release of recommendations resulting from the *Inquiry into Public Education in New South Wales* (Vinson, 2001), rapid growth in the identification of students in regular classes with a confirmed diagnosis of disability eligible for additional support funding in New South Wales government schools has continued each subsequent year, reaching 3.5% of total enrolments in the 2006-07 financial year (all year to year increases were significant at the .001 level with the exception of the non-significant increase between 2005-06 and 2006-07).⁵

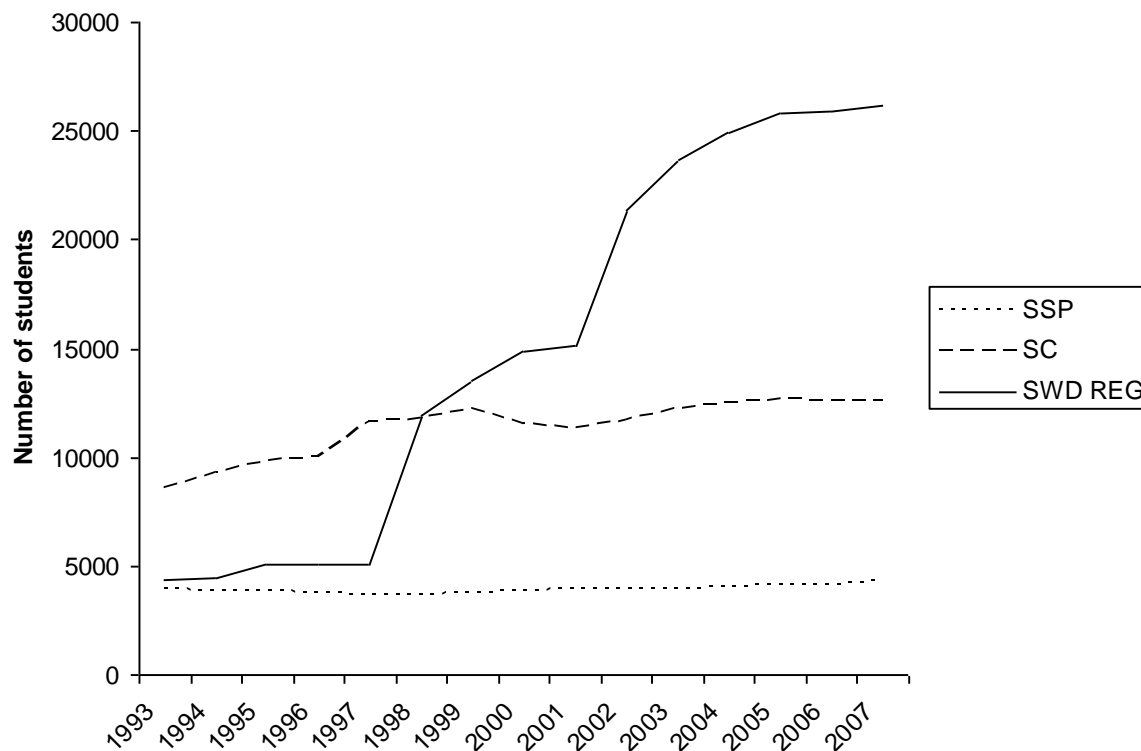


Figure 4. Number of students enrolled in Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs), Support Classes (SCs) and the number of students with disabilities in regular classes (SWD REG) from 1993 to 2007.⁶

Inclusive Education in New South Wales

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) is Australia's largest public education provider enrolling 738,636 students. According to DET, 27% are from language backgrounds other than English, 20% are in disadvantaged schools receiving priority funding, 11% are in programs supporting English language learning, 5% identify as Indigenous, 2% have refugee status, over 4.5% have a confirmed disability,⁷ and a further 8% have additional learning support needs (DET 2008). New South Wales government schools therefore serve a diverse student body, however increased growth in the identification of special educational needs indicates that this diversity is becoming recast as "disability". Disaggregation of enrolment data reveals considerable variance across gender, socio-economic and geographic indicators (Dempsey 2007) and, as shown through our analysis here, there have been significant increases in the diagnosis of disabilities in certain categories of disability: namely social, emotional or behavioural disorders.⁸

Since 1997, the percentage of students with a diagnosis of disability eligible for additional support across the continuum of provision in New South Wales government schools has more than doubled, rising from 2.7 to 6.7% of total enrolments. As a consequence, special education costs have increased by 218% in the same time period. It is important to note that this rise in costs occurred at the very same time as total enrolments *decreased* by 3.5% (DSE 1997; NSWGovt 2008). In other words, New South Wales government schools enrolled 25,537 *fewer* students in 2007 than they did in 1997 (see Figure 5). Despite this decrease in overall student numbers, special education services have increased to the point where they now represent 12.8% of total recurrent payments for New South Wales government schools – up from 7.2% in 1997 (NSWGovt 2008). The question is, why?

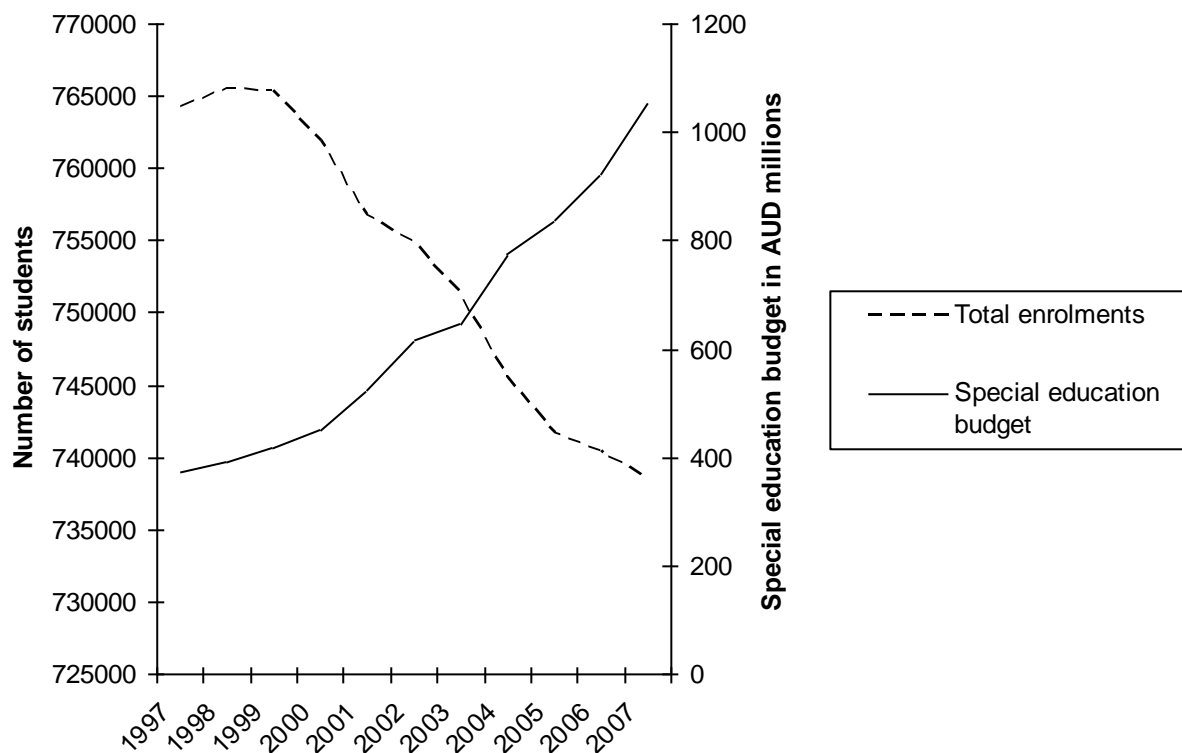


Figure 5. Total number of children enrolled in New South Wales government schools against total special education budget from 1997 to 2007.

Our analysis of the 1997-2007 period shows that there has been movement in the placement of students with disabilities but despite a drop in total enrolments in primary support classes, there has been an overall increase in enrolments in segregated settings. For example, an increase in the enrolment of students diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability was seen in both special schools and support classes. Larger increases were seen in enrolment of students diagnosed with autism and emotional disturbance in support classes than in special schools suggesting that students with autism and emotional disturbance are more likely to be enrolled in support units. Conversely, larger increases were seen in the enrolment of students diagnosed with behaviour disorders in special schools than in support classes. Interestingly enrolments of students with mild intellectual disability, and physical, hearing and visual disabilities decreased across segregated settings which, resonating with international trends (Scruggs & Mastropieri 1996), indicates greater acceptance of these students in “mainstream” classes. As noted elsewhere (Avramidis & Norwich 2002), this acceptance remains contingent on individual student characteristics and type of disability. The largest rises have been in enrolments of children diagnosed with behaviour disorders, emotional disturbance and autism.

At the same time that this shift and growth in segregated populations has been taking place, the number of children in regular classes with a diagnosis of disability eligible for additional support funding has increased exponentially. Taken alone, this increase in enrolments of students with a diagnosis of disability eligible for support in regular classes might suggest that the move to include has met with considerable success in New South Wales government schools; however, our examination of the enrolment trends for segregated settings raises some serious questions. For example, if the proportion of enrolments in Schools for Specific Purposes and Support Classes has

been increasing since the late 1990s, and the number of students with “normative”⁹ disabilities such as hearing, vision and physical impairment have either decreased or remained stable; then one question looms large: What *is* happening in mainstream schools with respect to the identification and diagnosis of students with “non-normative” categories of disability and why?

Let us put it another way. Research over the last two decades has provided little evidence that students are transferring from segregated to inclusive settings (Dempsey 2007; Dempsey & Foreman 1997; McRae 1996; Vinson 2002), casting doubt over claims by various stakeholders that “mainstream” schools are buckling under the rise in “integrated students” (APPA 2008; Gavrielatos 2002). Indeed, the majority of students with a diagnosis of disability in regular classes have not been “integrated” at all for the students typically receiving “integration” funding are those who tend to be ‘enrolled in regular classes regardless of the supports available’ (Dempsey & Foreman 1997, p. 214). Further, and more disturbingly, our analysis suggests that efforts to desegregate have been offset by a flow from the other direction due to segregation within the mainstream itself; particularly with respect to the labelling and exclusion of children with emotional or behavioural difficulties.¹⁰ This scenario echoes Farran and Shonkoff’s (1994, p. 148) warning that,

...when schools exclude those who are demonstrably in need of special help (e.g., those with physical and/or medical needs), they focus on an increasingly homogenous group of children. As more and more types of children are excluded... smaller differences among the remaining children will be accentuated, and new categories will be developed for “poorly motivated” children, children who are “differently interested”, or those who are “questionably socially tractable”.

At this point, we would like to return to our discussion of the inclusive/special education spectrum and Booth’s (1994, p. 89) contention that, “to say inclusion is occurring means that the participation of some students in mainstream schools has increased.” This, unfortunately, is where most systems come to a grinding halt; satisfied with a reduction in the enrolment of students in special schools. Yet, in addition to increasing participation, Booth speaks of the importance of decreasing exclusion. This, we think, is a critical factor. Just as “inclusion” is so much more than physical placement, “exclusion” starts well before troublesome students become relocated to support classes and special schools. Indeed, we fear that the students represented in our analysis are but the visible tip of a relatively uncharted ice-berg.

Given that physical placement in a “mainstream” setting does not guarantee inclusiveness, placement statistics may not tell us much about “inclusion.” They can however point towards increasing *exclusion* and, in that, they become a sobering indicator that all is not well with the current system. Ultimately, these statistics shine a light on what we call the “canaries in the coalmine” – increasing numbers of children who are being diagnosed with social, emotional or behavioural disorders and subsequently directed towards “special” programs conducted in settings archived from the daily life and business of “regular schooling.” Therefore, whilst New South Wales may have made some improvement in the participation stakes for students with mild intellectual impairment and physical disability, we would argue that they have not done as well in preventing exclusion: particularly with respect to students who go on to develop very challenging behaviour. We would argue that this is less a characteristic of contemporary childhood “disorder” and more an effect of retrospective models of support provision that are more concerned with the substantiation of need than the prevention of it.

Conclusion

Since the 1994 *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education* (UNESCO 1994) the notion that schools should be inclusive has gained international momentum (OECD 1995; 1999). From the mid-1990s (McRae 1996), New South Wales instituted specific processes to facilitate the inclusion of students with a disability in their local school. But, to return to the definitions outlined at the beginning of this paper, interpretation of success depends on where the analyst sits on the inclusive/special education spectrum. Enduring problems and questions confronting many contemporary educational systems aiming for inclusiveness were outlined earlier (see p. 3) and it was argued that an examination of the educational placement of students with disabilities can provide an indication of how these questions are being dealt with in practice. The most perplexing of these questions was: If we do not embrace full inclusion, where do we draw the line?

The trends discussed in this paper indicate that this line is being drawn ever more lightly and that a shrinking conception of normality has taken hold in our schools. Resonating with research into teacher attitudes, this analysis of placement trends in New South Wales indicates that “troublesome” children are less welcome in their local school than those with mild disabilities, or those whose diagnostic classification attracts significant teacher aide time. As found by a UK study into *The Costs of Inclusion* (MacBeath, Galton, Steward, MacBeath, & Page 2006) however, this does not constitute evidence that “inclusion has failed” (Halpin 2006), rather it suggests that a narrow, instrumentalist view as to the purposes of education in a modern society continues to prevail; preventing the re-conceptualisation of schooling that a rapidly growing number of students so clearly require.

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¹ The fundamental distinction is the primary locus of change: special education concentrates on changing the child whereas inclusive education focuses on changing the system.

² These pre-existing categories are used for analytical purposes only and bear no relation to the authors' philosophical position as stated in the introduction to this paper.

³ On the surface it might appear that more than two time points are needed to adequately address change. It should be noted however that our focus is not on change trends across time, but rather the absolute differences between enrolments in 1997 and 2007. Hence an examination of these two time points is sufficient for our purposes.

⁴ No students with language disorder were enrolled in secondary Support Classes across the 11 year period.

⁵ Unfortunately, the format of NSW Treasury Budget Papers has changed in the years following the 2006-07 financial statements and individual costings are no longer articulated.

⁶ Given the erasure of individual costings from the Education Budget, the figure for 2007 (26,154) has been estimated from information gained through various sources, including inquiries to DET Disability Programs. The DET acknowledge approximately 33,000 students with a confirmed diagnosis of disability with access to Funding Support, and 55,000 students with additional support needs with access to support through the Learning Assistance Program

(LAP). There are approximately 10,000 students with a disability now in LAP who used to be counted in Funding Support, which equates to a total of about 43,000 students with a disability in New South Wales government schools, despite how they may now be defined administratively. If we subtract the number of students in SSPs and Support classes, we are left with a figure of approximately 26,154. The 2007 DET Annual Report notes that “more than 14,000 students with a disability” are supported through Funding Support).

⁷ This percentage should be treated with caution. In 2004 the DET changed how they describe students with a disability; that is, 4.5% refers to students with a “confirmed” diagnosis of disability causing *moderate to severe* impairment in a category recognised and supported through Funding Support. Since 2004, students with a disability considered to have low support needs are no longer supported through Funding Support and are now supported through the Learning Assistance Program. The 4.5% (approx. 33,000) listed by the DET therefore represents students with a disability in the moderate to severe categories, *not all* students with a disability receiving special education services in New South Wales government schools. The other 8% (approx. 55,000) incorporates children with a disability considered to have low support needs, as well as children with learning difficulties, reading/language and attentional disorders. Within this 8% are approximately 10,000 students with a disability who were previously supported through and counted in budget costings for Funding Support, but who now receive special education services through LAP, if and when required.

⁸ It should be noted that such variation does not necessarily reflect different rates in the *incidence* of disability but often differences in identification, categorisation and enrolment (OECD 1999). These are themselves affected by practitioner attitudes and capacity, policy design, resource allocation approaches and school assessment practices.

⁹ We draw here on Sally Tomlinson’s (1982) seminal work in the “sociology of special education” to distinguish between normative and non-normative categories of disability. Normative disabilities are those that few can or would argue with as requiring additional support or adapted instruction: severe intellectual impairment, cerebral palsy, classic autism, and vision and hearing impairment. The non-normative category of disability is not so clear-cut. Many of these children could be described as “canaries in the coal mine” for their “disability” has been formed through negative and repeated ‘experiences of failure in their early encounters with the educational system’ (Farran & Shonkoff, 1994, p. 148).

¹⁰ An explicit recommendation arising from the *Inquiry into Public Education in New South Wales* called for the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) to reduce segregation by absorbing at least a third of students in support classes into regular classes over 5 years (Vinson 2002, p. 266). As shown in our analysis, however, enrolments in support classes have since increased from 1.5% to 1.7% of total enrolments.