

Bulletin



Special Issue:
Inclusive Education

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Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

THE BULLETIN

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From the President

Dr Robyn Wheldall

I hope that you and yours have been coping with our third winter of COVID. The continuing disruption to our lives is difficult and schools, where many of you work, are struggling with staff shortages and pressures in addition to the usual busy routine in education. It is easy to get discouraged during protracted periods of challenging circumstances.

Another area of protracted challenge is the effective education of students with disability. This has become one focus of the ongoing Disability Royal Commission. In line with this, this issue of the LDA Bulletin is dedicated to inclusion of students with disability. There is a range of opinions in this area, some very strongly held, and our Bulletin editor, Dr Ros Neilson, has gathered a number of contributions together that look at the issue of inclusion from a number of perspectives.

With the increasing number of students with disability in mainstream classes, regular classroom teachers and specialist teachers are teaching more students with more diverse learning needs than ever before. This is something to be applauded and welcomed provided there are adequate resources and expertise available to the classroom teacher. It can be very challenging for a classroom teacher to meet the needs of all the learners in her or his class. Expertise in meeting the educational needs of students with disability is held by special educators who are well-versed in evidence-based practice for students with learning challenges. Special educators and other allied professionals have an important role to play in working with classroom teachers and support staff to ensure that a student's educational, social and communication skills are developed to maximise the opportunities for each individual student.

My own experience working and collaborating with special educators and academics in this area for over 30 years has been that they are deeply committed to ensuring the effective inclusion of students with disability in the least restrictive environment possible. Many have been at the forefront of this movement in Australia and are deserving of our gratitude and admiration. There is a good way to go but we have made substantial progress in this area over recent decades.

I am, however, personally concerned that this issue is taking on a binary characteristic, that if we support inclusion and the sanctity of the rights of children with disability we have to eschew or reject a mixed offering of educational settings for these students. Surely a tailored approach that meets the needs of the individual child and their families offers the best outcome – choice is important. To have choice, we need to acknowledge the benefit of, and resource, various educational settings. Effective provision is not about location but about what meets the needs of the individual student.

It should also be noted that the students who are at the core of the LDA mission – students with learning difficulties – are *always* included in mainstream settings but their need for expert support is no less pressing. For this reason, LDA's mission is pertinent to all students who have barriers to learning, whatever their circumstances. Effective education is crucial for all students, and especially for those who will struggle to achieve what they are capable of without the support of professionals employing evidence-based approaches.

I hope you find this issue of the Bulletin thought-provoking and we look forward to hearing your responses.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my colleagues in the LDA Executive and Council who have stepped in to fulfil my responsibilities as LDA President while I have taken leave to care for my husband who is experiencing a challenging time in terms of his health.

I would also like to thank Dr Roslyn Neilson, who has been our Bulletin

editor over the past two and half years and who has indicated that this is her last issue as editor. We are so grateful to Ros for her dedicated and generous work in this area, ensuring that the Bulletin continues to be a huge source of important professional learning for our members and the broader educational community. Thank you, Ros! With best wishes to all,



*Dr Robyn Wheldall
President, LDA*

Dr Robyn Wheldall, BA, Ph.D., MAICD, is an Honorary Research Fellow of Macquarie University, a Founding Director of MultiLit Pty Ltd., and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit.

In this issue of the Bulletin...

Ros Neilson, Editor, LDA Bulletin

This issue of the Bulletin, with a focus on inclusive education, is an unusual one, and it requires a longer-than-usual editorial introduction. This issue was prepared during the period when the focus in the *Disability Royal Commission* being conducted in Australia was on a series of Public Hearings relating to disability and education. A number of the concerns aired in the Education Hearings have fallen directly within the remit of LDA, particularly those relating to literacy instruction and communication support for students with disability.

Exchanges within the Commission and on social media at the time have, however, made it clear that the inclusion of students with disability in general education is currently a very divisive issue. While there is unanimous support for aiming for best outcomes for students with disabilities, and there is general agreement that more needs to be done at the level of teacher education, there is nevertheless quite passionate disagreement about how the best outcomes might be achieved. At the core of the controversy are arguments for and against retaining the present system of 'special schools' and 'special classes' for students with disability, outside of the general education system.

LDA has a long tradition of presenting Bulletin readers with articles relating to teaching practices that are supported by research evidence, but which remain, in the eyes of some, controversial. Particularly salient examples have included championing explicit systemic phonics instruction, commenting on the preparation of teachers for reading instruction, and

critiquing programs such as Reading Recovery and Levelled Literacy. This issue on inclusion delivers no less. It includes several articles that may strike some readers as relatively controversial – but what is unusual about this Bulletin is that it is anticipated that different readers will have different reactions to different articles, along with different degrees of confidence in the research evidence presented along the way. This is a particularly complex area.

This Bulletin has, therefore, been compiled in the spirit of enabling a good range of the stakeholders in this important topic to have their voices heard. This allows a space for those wish to express concerns about what might be lost if the system moves away from the retention of special schools and special classes. It also allows a space for those who carry out research and advocate to achieve a move towards full inclusion of students with disability in the general education system, to outline the rationale and the means for achieving it. All contributors were asked to try to present their own case in positive terms rather than arguing against those who disagree.

For readers who are already well involved in the field, it is hoped that this issue of the Bulletin will give them the chance to think more carefully about approaches with which they may not finally agree. It also is hoped that this Bulletin will provide a wide-ranging introduction to those of us who have not specialised in the area of support for students with disability, and will allow us to think more carefully than we may have been encouraged to do in our initial training, about the ways in which learning is best supported for *all* students.

This topic of inclusion is introduced with the voice of Dr Graeme Innes AM, the Australian Disability Commissioner from 2005 to 2014, who has generously given permission for LDA to reprint a speech he gave to the Victorian Academy for Teaching and Leadership's Principal Conference on 31 May 2022.

The next group of voices to be heard come from what many LDA members

feel is their traditional base.

Three articles have been contributed by highly experienced Special Educators who support educating students with disability in mainstream settings as much as possible, but still feel that a range of educational settings for students with disability is needed. Coral Kemp discusses the complexity of interpreting research reported in the area of inclusion. Sally Howell presents a 'lived experience' article that provides a voice for teachers who are concerned about the challenges of full inclusion. Ann Ryan, a long-standing LDA Consultant, discusses the role of specialist teachers in supporting students with disabilities in a range of settings.

Kate de Bruin then introduces the voices of those who argue for full inclusion for students with disability. Kate provides an account of her own experience of teaching students with disabilities, and provides some of the historical background of the inclusion movement, and how it currently looks in other countries. Sue Tate and Mary Sayers define full inclusion and cover the roadmap that inclusion might take. Their article is followed by some comments from young people, referring to their own experiences. Another voice from a young person follows, with Jacinta Conway interviewing a student about the lived experience of having dyscalculia. Jade Hand discusses inclusion and the NCCD (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with a Disability), pointing out the strengths and challenges inherent in the system. Suzanne Carrington discusses inclusion from the point of view of leadership in schools. Haley Tancredi and Gaenor Dixon address issues relating to collaboration with allied health professionals to enhance student



inclusion. A speech pathologist's perspective on meeting inclusion challenges and opportunities within the Queensland Education Department is provided by Bronwyn Reguson, and this is followed by an article provided by Maree Neilson and Jennifer Peach, of the Queensland Department of Education's Reading and Writing Centre, describing an award-winning initiative that supports the inclusive education of students with literacy difficulties.

An essential reference follows: Kim Knight and Jacinta Conway have contributed two independent reviews of the seminal book edited by Linda Graham (2020), *Inclusive Education in the 21st Century*.

And finally, in this last edition of the LDA Bulletin that I will be editing, I have taken the liberty of publishing a book review that I have written of a children's picture book, that I feel takes ideas about inclusion to the level of poetry: Jackie French's *Josephine Wants to Dance*.

The issue on inclusion is rounded off by what was a culmination of the highly successful and inspiring conference that LDA hosted in March 2022, on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. At the end of that conference, Jackie French, as chair of the Discussion Panel, inspired participants to contribute to a 'Manifesto', or public statement, highlighting the critical advocacy issues involved in ensuring that every child becomes a successful reader. A large number of participants and LDA members submitted contributions, and these have been edited by Jackie French and Julie Scali for the purpose of being published in this LDA Bulletin. We hope that this manifesto, *'Every Child a Reader'*, lives on and can be used by others in their advocacy for equity in education. Many thanks are due to Jackie French and all those who made submissions.

I would like at this stage to extend my sincere thanks to all contributors to this issue of the Bulletin; it has been a privilege to learn from you. I have appreciated the tolerance of those LDA members who may feel this issue has strayed beyond their traditional base. My special thanks and warm good wishes go to Kate de Bruin for her patience in teaching me so much about the area of inclusion, and for introducing me, and many LDA members, to the vibrant network of people who work and advocate in the area.

I will be retiring from LDA Council after several busy years of work, and

I would like to thank LDA for trusting me to edit the LDA Bulletin over this period. I have learned an invaluable amount from the contributors with whom I have corresponded in my role as Bulletin Editor, and I hope that readers of the Bulletin have done so as well. I send my best wishes to the next editor; I encourage LDA members to keep contributing ideas and suggestions; and I encourage readers of the Bulletin who are not yet LDA members to join the association in order to support the continued production of resources like this.

Dr Roslyn Neilson
Retiring Editor, LDA Bulletin

Inclusion: An introduction

In this article, **Kate de Bruin** introduces the set of articles that argue for full inclusion of students with disability. She starts with a personal perspective, then discusses the need for systematic change in the education system.

I spent most of my time as an English teacher working in a large outer-suburban high school with around 2,000 students. The school was located in an area of high economic inequity; part of our cohort came from the area near the bay and lived in multimillion-dollar mansions, while the rest lived only a short distance inland in the low-income housing estate. Many of the latter came from families who were third-generation unemployed, and the suburb in which the school was located was a synonym in my city for drug addiction, poverty and disadvantage. Despite this, the school itself was a sought-after school which had to strictly apply the zoning rules. The principal and leadership team had undertaken a stunning “turnaround” of a formerly disadvantaged school, realised a vision of educational quality for the kids of this suburb, and built a school culture of high expectations as well as quality teaching. I loved working at that school.

It was a heady environment to work in. The principal backed teachers with energy and ideas that aligned with his vision of lifting the local kids out of poverty and disadvantage and placing them on trajectories for success. You needed only to go to him with a vision and a plan and he would support you to make it happen. The

results were extraordinary. I see my former students now in high-profile jobs: senior journalists for the national news broadcaster; high-profile lawyers, internationally-successful performing artists. The kids that are less publicly visible are the ones that I spent a good deal of my time working with: the kids with disability. But they are there, living and working in strong and connected communities and relationships. It should not be extraordinary that this is so, but nonetheless it is.

When I went into teaching, I did not have those kids uppermost in my mind. I was freshly-minted from an honours thesis in literature and had pictured myself working with senior students and teaching fine literature. And while I did get to do that, I also taught a number of students who needed me to have skills and knowledge that I had not been equipped to teach with. These were kids with disabilities and learning difficulties who couldn't access the curriculum and who never would unless something changed. I became determined to be that change.

I vividly remember a day looking helplessly at the set texts I had to teach the following term. They were good books but completely inaccessible to the students in my classes who couldn't read with enough proficiency. In that year alone, across my English teaching allotment (including a year seven class, two year nine classes and a year eleven class), there were the following students identified with disabilities who would struggle to read their texts: three students with intellectual disabilities, one with hearing impairment, one with dyslexia, two with diagnosed language difficulties and one with attentional difficulties, and one with cerebral palsy who used a wheelchair and a head pointer to type. There were also a significant number of students who were refugees from the war in Bosnia and one refugee from Iraq. Together, these students represented the greatest challenge to my professional skillset. I had not been prepared to teach them in ways that would benefit them. I had been given a very generic initial teacher

education that had not focused on anything like student diversity or evidence-based practices. I was, upon reflection, woefully underprepared for my job.



But some important attributes that I had were tenacity and commitment to be a good teacher for all my students and a determination to find a way through my dilemma. One of those ways was to get trained in running reading intervention which I subsequently did and which I have written about [here](#) (de Bruin, 2021). And while that was really effective and we taught *all* of those kids to become competent readers, that didn't help them while they were cycling through their two years in intervention – they couldn't read the books that they had to deal with right there and then. It also offered nothing for the student who was a wheelchair user as she couldn't hold the books and there were no digital or audio copies of them. She didn't need intervention – she needed reasonable adjustments. Collectively, these students couldn't access the material being put in front of them – the textbooks, novels and worksheets provided across the curriculum.

Not willing to be defeated, I thought laterally. After scouring the internet for audio or digital copies of the novels, and conferring with the visiting teachers and speech pathologists who supported some of these students, I hit upon the idea of creating alternative formats – audio recordings of the books being read aloud and textual summaries for them to refer to. I vividly remember a day on the phone with the Copyright Agency where I was checking the legality of my plan only to learn that I was operating in a very complex area. Together we discussed the definition of disability contained within the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the state-based counterpart legislation

and policy guidance documentation. It was explained to me that while all the students would benefit from this alternative format and supporting resources I was proposing, they could not all have them. I was legally only permitted to make them one under the following conditions:

- they would be provided solely to the student eligible for this reasonable adjustment under the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act)
- that they would have already legally purchased a physical copy of the book
- they would not be made available to others ineligible under the DDA

It was that day that I first glimpsed the scale and complexity of the web of entitlements under federal law and state-based guidelines. Of particular interest to me was the “grey area” of dyslexia which, as the patient lady from the Copyright Agency explained to me, did not clearly entitle a student to an alternative format constituting a reasonable adjustment. She advised me that there was a slippage between the *intent* of the act and the *wording* of the act that made this unclear. And thus, I first met the (somewhat arbitrary and definitely unhelpful) distinction between a disability and a learning difficulty. The very rules that had been written to ensure students who experienced barriers to accessing an education had these removed through funding and reasonable adjustments, were the same rules potentially preventing me from doing just that. In discovering that funding rules of the state were inconsistent with the DDA, and this meant that no help was available for many students who needed it, I burned with rage and the unfairness of it all. I still do. It drives me every day to change the system and make it better.

I ploughed ahead to do what I could for whom I could with what I had to hand at the time. I acquired some sound-editing software and a high-quality microphone. I put out the call to staff members to read aloud a chapter of the year 7-10 English novels and record it onto their computer and write an accompanying chapter summary including key quotes for character development and identified themes. While much of that period of time was complicated and confusing, what still stands out with brilliant clarity even twenty years later is the throng of teachers that volunteered to do this task. They were from everywhere – art

teachers, science teachers, PE teachers and principals. The willingness of these educators to put their shoulder to the wheel and help to remove learning barriers for kids with disabilities helped to keep me energised. It was a spectacular exercise in innovation and collegiality. It was also a very formative experience for me and serves to illustrate the way in which we cannot be inclusive teachers for all our students unless we all work together to achieve a shared vision of a quality education for every student.

And all those efforts made me a better teacher. In learning to teach basic reading skills, learning to navigate disability law, learning to create accessible materials, I learnt about things that were essential for me to do to ensure these *few* students could access the curriculum that benefited *everybody*. Across all my classes (including my year 12s), I taught explicitly. I read aloud to them and modelled good reading. I built background information, taught vocabulary. I created scaffolds and graphic organisers. I designed for universal access. I taught the students to work in collaborative groups and pairs and support each other. My classrooms were busy and active places and all students were supported to learn and thrive *together*.

I had no idea, back then, that what we were doing was called inclusive education. It was not until a good decade after, when I returned to do further study (and then even further study) that I learnt about this movement. When I was a school teacher, it was simply a no-brainer for me. As I saw it, mass education is for every student. It is therefore incumbent on us as teachers to educate every student. No exceptions. Find a way. Make it happen.

That was what I thought then and it is not very different now, even after a Postgraduate Diploma (Inclusive & Special Education) and a PhD and ten years in academia. But I know a lot more now and I am also equipped with the knowledge garnered from reading research findings during this time. And critical to what I have learnt are the following three things, which everybody needs to know about inclusive education.

The need for systemic change in education

The first is the *need* for systemic change in education. It’s irrefutable. The mass education system that is our

mainstream schooling is 150 years old, and it was not designed for everybody. Indeed, many students were excluded from education on the basis of poverty, race and disability from the start. We need to redesign the system, not keep trying to retrofit solutions. Just like three-cuing cannot be fixed by adding a phonics patch over it, neither can mainstream be fixed by papering over the cracks. It will require careful planning to create an inclusive system and this cannot be achieved overnight, but do it we must. The in-school and post-school outcomes for people with disability are testimony to the urgency of systemic change. These include the low rates of school completion, further study, and open employment (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, n.d. a & b). They also include the high rates of gatekeeping, restrictive practices and inequitable access to reasonable adjustments (Poed et al. 2022). We cannot justify doing nothing and maintaining the status quo. You will read more about a proposed plan and roadmap for systemic change in this issue from the piece written by Sue Tape and Mary Sayers from Children and Young People with Disability Australia.

The obligation for systemic change in education

The second is the *obligation* for systemic change in education. Australia, like 185 other countries, has a longstanding set of commitments to meet their human rights obligations. These obligations have their roots in the aftermath of World War 2, when the United Nations (UN) came into being. At this time the UN created a charter which outlined a goal and vision for societies in which the atrocities of the war could never occur again. Essentially, this vision described the creation of a society characterised by peacefulness and justice, in which all humans belonged and were equally valued, and was hoped to prevent violence against, or ill-treatment of, particular vulnerable or minority groups, including people with disability (Mostert, 2002). The resultant UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR; UN 1948) named the rights that should be realised for all human beings and thus formed a “roadmap” for its vision of peace. Since this declaration was made, many UN treaties and conventions have been developed as instruments for achieving the vision for peace and equality, and have placed obligations upon the nation states that signed and

ratified them. Australia is signatory to the seven core international treaties created to realise this vision (Australian Government, n.d.). These are as follows:

- the 1966 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR)
- the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR)
- the 1966 *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (CERD)
- the 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW)
- the 1984 *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CAT)
- the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC)
- the 2007 *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD).

The last of these treaties places signatories under a binding obligation to realise systemic transformation for inclusive education. As can be seen above, the educational rights of students with disability to an education has taken half a century to be clearly articulated and defined within the CRPD through Article 24: Inclusive Education. It is not uncommon to hear that “inclusive education” is hard to define but this is not accurate. Indeed, a decade after the CRPD came into force, the UN released General Comment 4 (GC4; UN 2016),

a guidance document which provided further clarity for signatories. Within GC4, inclusion is defined and also distinguished against what it is not, as encapsulated in the infographic below (Hehir, 2016).

The evidence for systemic change in education

The third is that the balance of *evidence from the past five decades* of research shows that a high-quality inclusive education, as defined in Hehir’s (2016) infographic, produces better outcomes for students with and without disability. Cohort studies, meta-analyses and matched sample studies all show that when appropriate support and intervention is provided for students with disability within general education settings, the benefits for all students re superior. To be clear, this does not mean placing kids with disability into mainstream without support. Nor does it mean that all students are required to access all supports within the general education classroom. There is a place for interventions to be run outside the general education classroom within inclusive settings. The graphic above makes clear that an “inclusive” system is not a “mainstream” system. Attempting to fit kids with disability into mainstream essentially asks them to work with that system that was never designed for them and many of those add-ons may create new barriers for students, families and teachers to navigate. Yet considerable fear and anxiety continues

to be expressed by many, including some expressed within this Bulletin, that this is what is being proposed.

It is not.

Inclusion involves systemic reform, designing a system in which effective and appropriate supports are brought to students, rather than requiring students to attend separate settings to access those supports. It is about ensuring adjustments are designed consultatively with students and their families, and requires the upskilling of the workforce.

In my job as researcher and in my university teaching of experienced teachers undertaking a Master’s Degree in Inclusive Education, I often hear anxieties expressed about inclusion and I welcome the opportunity to discuss these. I tend to hear anxieties about the quality of support for student with complex learning profiles as well as about the future role of teachers and leaders from special schools. These are perfectly reasonable concerns to hold and are important to address. In my teaching I have found that once systemic redesign and transformation is understood, these anxieties are considerably reduced. There is a place for every student and for every teacher in a transformed inclusive system. The skillset of all teachers will continue to be valued. There are no supports currently offered in a segregated setting that cannot be offered in an inclusive one.

This is not to minimise the challenge that lies ahead. Change is hard and systems contain a lot of inertia that means efforts to innovate and redesign them face their own barriers – attitudinal, financial and structural. However, there are systems overseas who have gone before us and from whom we can learn. The United States closed their special schools in the 1970s, as did Italy. More recently Portugal has also closed their special schools, as has the province of New Brunswick in Canada.

None are “perfect” examples of inclusion. Yet as indicated above, we have a current system that is not providing the outcomes we would want in terms of school completion, rates of exclusion and segregation, denial of support and adjustments and so forth. We cannot wait for perfection and we do not have it now. It is therefore instructive for us to learn from what was accomplished elsewhere and apply those lessons here as part of a carefully planned systemic transformation.

One such lesson is from the United States about how system innovation

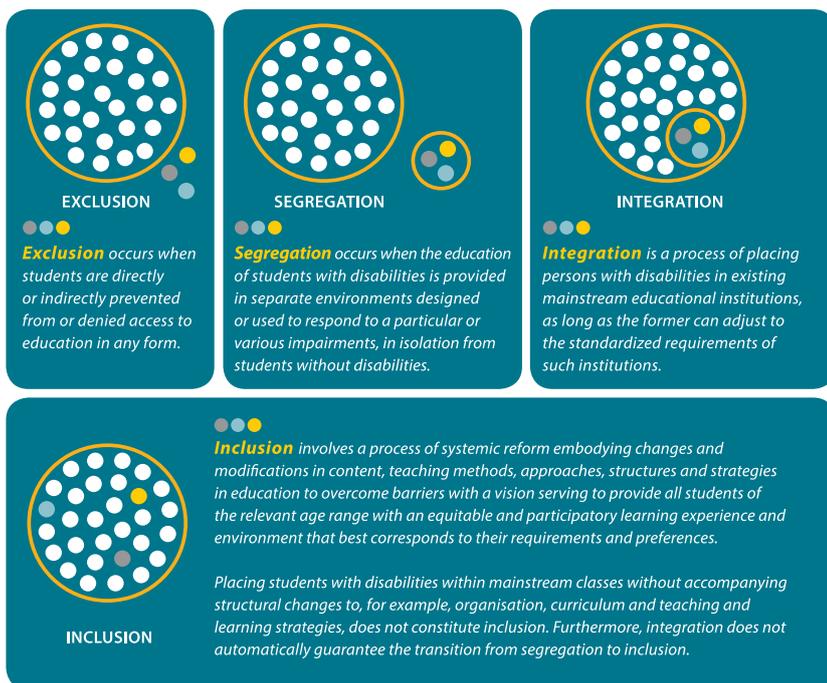


Image taken from Hehir et al., (2016)

might look. Following their school desegregation, there was considerable such innovation during the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the development of multi-tiered systems of support models such as Response to Intervention (RTI). This equipped systems to improve the quality of teaching provided to all students in general education classrooms as well as to provide targeted or intensive supports to students without requiring them to be placed into special education settings to access these. The introduction of RTI resulted in a substantial drop in the numbers of students referred to special education while student academic and behavioural outcomes also improved significantly (Burns et al. 2002; 2005).

There are also lessons from elsewhere showing that systems continue to perform well by international standards. For example, the work of AuCoin (2020) notes that student achievement, as measured by New Brunswick students' PISA data from the 2015 cohort, were relatively high, and on par with the results from countries with much stronger economies and resourcing for education (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Australia). By this argument, one could consider that New Brunswick is "punching above its weight" in PISA and getting these results with a more inclusive system and lower resources than countries with "like" results. Like New Brunswick, Portugal also continues to refine their systemic transformation following recent legislation reform for inclusion (Alves et al., 2020). There are clear lessons to be learnt about monitoring student progress as well as investing in the upskilling of teachers.

It takes collective courage and commitment for change to occur, as well as careful planning. It is with great excitement and pride that I have been involved in the development of this LDA Bulletin in which eminent and emerging scholars, parents and teachers share their work and thoughts on the realisation of the right to an inclusive education and how this might be achieved. You will read about the role of the NCCD, school leaders, and collaboration with allied health professionals in making this a reality. You will also hear from those who note their concerns. But most importantly you will hear from those at the heart of this issue – the students themselves. I hope you find this important issue both informative and inspirational.

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