

## Opinion

### We can learn from special schools

Brian Caldwell

JULIA Gillard has called for a "raging debate" about how our education system compares to the best in the world, how to ensure that every school is a great school, and how to ensure every child gets an excellent education.

Accepting Ms Gillard's challenge leads to ground-breaking conclusions in some fields. I believe that the education revolution will not succeed until all schools adopt some of the practices in the best special schools. Special schools serve students with moderate to severe disabilities. I'd like to highlight two practices: personalising learning and a focus on the arts.

Personalising learning has become a mantra in efforts around the world to secure success for all students. A common feature is that there is a learning plan for every student, progress is monitored frequently, support is available to get the student back on track should he or she fall behind, and at least one teacher knows the student well and serves as a mentor.

Millions of frequent-flyer points are being accumulated as educators fly to Finland to learn the secrets of its success. One factor stands out: each student is monitored so well that the moment he or she falls behind, special support is provided, either one-to-one or in small groups.

Why do we need to fly to Finland to fathom this out, when our best special schools are models of world-best practice? They have a personal learning plan for every student. They monitor progress on a daily basis. Staff work in teams to ensure that needs are diagnosed and action is taken.

At Port Phillip Specialist School, for example, the integrated services committee of school leaders, therapists, specialists and teachers meets weekly in a cycle that ensures the progress of each of its 150 students is discussed regularly and a course of action is planned. Parents may attend in some instances.

It's the same at the Western Autistic School, which serves 240 students with autism and Asperger Syndrome. These and similar schools also act as links to external agencies and service providers in their determination to ensure services are tailored to student need.

I see no difficulty scaling up to a school of 1500 students these approaches that are working so well in special schools of 150 students. It will mean remarkably different approaches to the delivery of services, with teachers and other professionals working in clinical teams in an educational counterpart to the best medical practice.

New skills are required, and this was recognised in Finland, where every teacher must now have a master's degree and those who provide individual and small-group assistance to students receive additional training and higher salaries.

In some instances, schools will set up their own training centres, as occurred at Western Autistic School, which established the Autism Teaching Institute, offering university-accredited programs that bring participants to the forefront of knowledge.

These strategies call for innovation in school management and creativity in building professional capacity. Meeting the additional costs will be a test of our resolve to secure success for all students in all settings. These commitments lie at the heart of the education revolution.

At a recent symposium on "Re-imagining Special Education", hosted by Port Phillip Specialist School, particular attention was given to the place of arts education and arts therapy in special education.

In *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, Oliver Sacks, Professor of Clinical Neurology at Columbia University, provides a powerful affirmation of the approach. He refers to those "who may be unable to perform fairly simple sequences involving perhaps four or five movements or procedures - but who can often do these tasks perfectly well if they set them to music. Music has the power to embed sequences and to do this when other forms of organisation (including verbal forms) fail". The power of music is demonstrated daily in the music therapy program at Port Phillip. Its work in art, drama and dance is equally inspirational.

What is central to success in special education should also be central to education in general. In *Creators*, Paul Johnson declares that "creativity is inherent in us all" and that "the art of creation comes closer than any other activity to serving as a sovereign remedy for the ills of existence".

It is therefore startling that there is no place for the arts in the current brief of the National Curriculum Board, which operates under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Its task in the first instance is to develop a national K-12 curriculum in English, mathematics, the sciences and history. After that, it will work on geography and languages other than English. There is no reference to the arts.

Harvard University's Howard Gardner is one of the most influential people in shaping curriculum. In *Five Minds for the Future*, he argued that "it is essential" for all to think in ways that characterise the major disciplines. At the school level, he declares that "my own short list includes science, mathematics, history and at least one art form".

Including the arts in a national curriculum was proposed at the Australia 2020 Summit in the "Toward a Creative Australia" stream co-chaired by Cate Blanchett, Peter Garrett and Julianne Schultz.

The education revolution is stunted by the omission of the arts in the work of the National Curriculum Board. COAG should ensure that this is rectified.

Ms Gillard and Kevin Rudd have called for the engagement in education of business and philanthropy. This is a field in which some special schools excel. The Port Phillip Specialist School arts in education program is supported by 36 organisations and

institutions, including some of Australia's largest companies and leading foundations and trusts.

In her recent John Button lecture, Ms Gillard referred to John Maynard Keynes, who said that "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?"

I suggest that the facts have changed about special education. It is in the national interest to draw lessons for all schools in personalising learning, transforming approaches to learning through the arts and arts therapy, creating a place for the arts in the national curriculum, and drawing on the resources of the whole community.

*Brian Caldwell is managing director of Educational Transformations and a former dean of education at Melbourne University. This article draws from his address to the "Re-imagining special education" symposium – and appeared in "The Age" on 11 August 2008*