

THE AUSTRALIAN

Segregating the disabled is unacceptable



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

ANNE KAVANAGH THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 23, 2017

Many Australians were rightly upset when senator Pauline Hanson stood up in parliament this week to call for children with disabilities to be withdrawn from mainstream classrooms and educated separately.

My family was deeply hurt. After all, her comments were directed at children such as my son, who has autism and an intellectual disability. In fact, she singled out children with autism, who are among 164,000 Australians living with it, as particularly problematic.

My son is 14 and attends a school for children with autism — exactly where the Hansons of the world would want him. But it was not our first choice. We tried integration in mainstream schools. That lasted two years but the school made it clear it couldn't do it any longer because it didn't have the skills or resources to support him. We even tried enrolling him in a special school but he was turned away because he was "too autistic".

Every day he rides a special school bus 90 minutes each way to and from school. On the bus he has to sit still, he can't eat and there is no toilet. He can find the other children disruptive. In the mornings he doesn't want to get on the bus. Sometimes he has been crying when he gets off at the end of the day.

My son gets picked up much earlier than all the other children on our street. He gets home too late to play sport, do a music lesson, go for a swim or all the other things kids his age are doing. Three hours of his day are taken away from him travelling to a school that the Hansons of the world want him to attend.

This is a burden no child should have to endure.

This is not to say that the school is not committed to providing him with the best education possible. He has an individualised learning plan. They are thinking creatively about employment. It is possible that, in the long run, the school he is at is the best school for him, particularly given the poor range of alternatives. But let's not pretend that we don't already have a deeply segregated education system.

So let's take a step back. Given our experiences with schooling, and the experiences of countless others I know, Hanson's take on segregated education for children with disability is by no means marginal. I reckon she is simply articulating, poorly, the views of society more generally — a society that is not yet able to embrace the diversity of children and adults with disability.

Her remarks could have applied equally to employment. Australia has the lowest level of labour force participation of people with disabilities in the OECD. The Australian Human Rights Commission found that people with disabilities experienced discrimination and were confronted by negative stereotypes in recruitment, in the workplace including bullying and harassment, and lacked opportunities for career advancement.

Our research shows that, when employed, people with disabilities receive lower levels of pay for the same work, have little control over the work that they do and have less job security.

The situation is dire for people with intellectual disabilities. If they are in the workforce it is usually in a disability enterprise — what we used to call sheltered workshops. More likely they are in a day program with other people who are "like them" — away from the rest of society.

University of Sydney academic Gerard Goggin published a book, *Disability in Australia: Exposing a Social Apartheid*, in 2005 in which he argued that Australians with disabilities were routinely excluded, segregated from, the rest of society in special schools, workplaces, playgrounds, everywhere. Hanson's comments remind us that this problem is still alive and strong.

As well as closing off opportunities for social and economic participation, "social apartheid" undermines the health of children and adults with disabilities.

There is a large body of evidence that discrimination causes poor mental and physical health. Children with disabilities are likelier to be bullied in schools, affecting their emotional wellbeing. Adults who experience - discrimination are likelier to be depressed and anxious and experience a range of physical health problems such as high blood pressure.

Ableism shuts off educational and employment opportunities. This social and economic disadvantage puts them at risk of many health problems.

Next week we launch a Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council. We will concentrate on how experiences of discrimination, education, employment, housing, social inclusion and other social and economic factors affect the health of Australians with disabilities. We want to work out what society and governments can do to improve the health of Australians with disabilities.

Hanson's comments about "ridding" our schools of disabled children to advance the prospects of "ordinary" children are abhorrent but they reveal a deep-seated belief that Australian children and adults with disabilities are not full citizens, that exclusion and segregation is acceptable. It is not. It undermines the rights of people with disability to live a full life and society is much poorer for it.

Anne Kavanagh is director of the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health, which will be launched next Tuesday.

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