

to modify curriculums, teachers with patience and imagination and principals committed to the noble ideal of inclusion.

The percentage of students with disabilities in primary schools doubled between 1995 and 2006 as anti-discrimination policies funnelled kids into a mainstream setting. The Productivity Commission calculated that 183,610 children with disabilities received funding in 2012, yet that same year figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported 295,000 children aged from five to 17 with disabilities were attending schools. Trials of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability returned even higher estimates of 598,824 in 2014. When the autism cohort is extracted from ABS disability surveys the data reveals a 79 per cent increase since 2009 in the number of Australians with this

condition, which tags roughly four boys for every girl with the highest prevalence among younger age groups. The reason for this increase is not clear, but would seem to be a combination of more cases and more diagnoses for a condition characterised by problems with social interactions, communication and behaviour.

Disability has ballooned beyond physical or intellectual impairment into an array of psychological conditions. One mother who qualified as a teacher in 2001 says she took a single semester course on children with special needs that focused mainly on visual and hearing impairments. "I can honestly say I was ill-prepared to teach children with special needs," she admits.

Teacher's aides were introduced in 1992 initially to provide clerical support. Their role has changed but training and qualifications remain poor. An Australian Education Union survey of staff in 2013 found the vast majority in primary and secondary felt they were lacking the wherewithal to teach students with disabilities. A Queensland principal, who wishes to remain anonymous, says he is desperate to employ staff with special education qualifications. If he can't find candidates he trains them himself because he believes in catering for this

demanding cohort. "Children with autism can't cope with changes in routines; they can't filter noise or other sensory triggers that cause them to melt down. They need higher adult ratios, structured regimens and small, safe environments which are sometimes incompatible with mainstream classrooms." His primary school has seven autistic children who will start secondary level this year without the funding that supported them through childhood. "None of them can function on their own in the mainstream."

Yet for every complaint of burnout, stress and breakdown among teaching staff there are points of light, places of compassion. Debbie Nelsson, a Victorian principal with almost four decades of teaching experience, is another strong leader committed to ensuring the neediest of her brood at Mooroolbark East Primary are supported, even though only 36 of the 80 students with an autism diagnosis qualify for government help. "It is a ticking time bomb," she says. "When I started there were not as many kids with difficult issues in the system. Quite a lot of the special schools have closed because mainstream is seen as the best option but the most vulnerable families are not getting the support."

Like other principals and parents, Nelsson is flummoxed by the number of kids who lose their funding at the end of Year 6 on the cusp of the challenging switch to secondary school. "These kids hate change of that magnitude. We've got kids who have improved out of sight during their primary years but they'll get nothing this year as they start secondary school."

Nelsson argues that funding in primary settings should continue through the first year of high school and then be reviewed. Listening to her describe carefully thought through strategies for managing meltdowns would be music to the ears of any parent parched of hope. The school has a "sensory" room for children to recover from explosions in the company of an adult. No locks, no blacked-out windows, just a beanbag and quiet music to calm them. "We have a special card that says 'I'm going to lose it' which they can show to a teacher," she explains.

She found funding for two adults to take a child with autism away on school camp. This seems such a meagre gesture until I hear from the parents of a boy who was refused permission for a school trip to Canberra on the grounds of insufficient support staff. His terrible disappointment "led to a meltdown and subsequent suspension" which took his parents to the Human Rights Commission in a case that was



Feisty Katrina
Baudich with son
Jack in Ballarat

until the school reduced his attendance hours a day. Just getting him out of us fraught. One morning, after tears and resistance, she finally shoe-horned him into school where the deputy principal told her he was too upset for class. "I unlocked my car, got in and went home." She withdrew to start again somewhere else. But it's the frustrations that encourage parents to skew diagnoses to procure funding for their aide, because without additional help their offspring wither. They sell homes, sell furniture, anything to pay for services not funded by the public purse. Some parents abandon work to remain on their own when schools summon them because of their child's behaviour. Success is a lottery that depends on a mix of early diagnosis, robust support and therapies, a tailored learning plan