Australia's progress toward SDG4 targets for school-age students with disability

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Australia's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) for students with disability reveals both challenges and opportunities. Despite existing disability discrimination legislation, systemic barriers persist within government and non-government schooling sectors. A lack of a coordinated national strategy, combined with fragmented policies, has constrained efforts to promote inclusive education, leaving students with disability underserved, particularly in regional, rural, and remote areas. Underinvestment in mainstream schools has also created disparities in educational access and quality. Moreover, inadequate training of classroom teachers in these schools has continued to restrict the implementation of inclusive and individualized approaches, limiting educational outcomes for this student group. These students therefore continue to experience lower success and completion rates than their peers. This paper emphasizes the urgent need for systemic reforms, including targeted investments and a national policy framework aligned with SDG4, to address these issues. We argue that to achieve equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all students, collaborative effort across all levels of government and education sectors is required for Australia to realize sustainable progress toward its international commitments.

KEYWORDS

access, disability, inclusive education, student equity, Sustainable Development Goal 4

Introduction

The Icheon Declaration and Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) have intensified the call for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015]. While universal education has long been a UN aspiration [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2000, 2007], SDG4 seeks to "transform lives through education" by promoting lifelong learning opportunities for everyone from early childhood programs to higher education [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015, p. 7]. Central to SDG4 are two key priorities: (a) access to education and (b) inclusion and equity. As a signatory to the 2015 Incheon Declaration, Australia committed itself to the SDG4 agenda and targets. Webb et al. (2019) called for studies to explore critically how current policies and practices are understood in relation to lifelong learning and report findings internationally. This paper takes up that challenge focusing on the issues of access, inclusion, and equity for school-age students with disability, drawing on an analysis of relevant reports, policy documents, and academic

literature. The central question guiding this analysis is: *How do Australian education policies and practices address issues of access, inclusion, and equity for school-age students with disabilities in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) priorities?*

When exploring these issues, it is crucial to account for the broader political and socio-demographic context. Politically, education in Australia is characterized by a complex interplay between federal and state authorities. While states and territories hold constitutional responsibility for school education, early childhood education, and Vocational Education and Training (VET), the federal government oversees higher education, disability services, and the maintenance of teaching quality. The federal government, therefore, establishes policies and allocates funding to support students with disabilities, the responsibility for educational provisions ultimately falls on individual states and territories. Additionally, the federal government influences education more broadly through funding initiatives and strategic intergovernmental forums (Spandagou, 2021). Demographically, Australia's multicultural population of over 27 million is predominantly urbanized, with the majority residing near state capitals along the eastern seaboard. This concentration affects the delivery of services to regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas.

Within the Australian context, the term *disability* is defined differently by governments and organizations. Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 defines people with disability as "those who have long-term physical, mental, cognitive, intellectual or sensory impairments" (Australian Government, 2021, p. 5). Equity in schooling is framed by the federal government as ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or individual needs, acquire the skills essential for an active and fulfilling life. Inclusive education is understood as an approach whereby students with disability and other special needs are educated alongside their typically developing peers in mainstream classrooms, promoting learning within a shared environment.

The Australian education system comprises three main sectors: government, Catholic, and independent schools, with a broadly consistent structure across the country. Education is compulsory until at least age 16, encompassing both mainstream and special schools from primary education (beginning with Kindergarten or Preparatory through to Year 6) to secondary education (Years 7–12). Despite this overarching similarity, learning environments vary significantly between metropolitan, regional, and remote areas. Large city schools may enroll over 3,000 students, whereas small schools in RRR locations may serve as few as 15. For students in remote locations, distance education and programs like the School of the Air play a critical role. Nationally, more than 4 million students across all sectors participate in formal schooling [Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2024]. According to 2018 data, the latest available, 7.7% of students under the age of 15 were identified as having a disability, with 69% of those aged 5–14 receiving their education in inclusive mainstream classrooms in primary and secondary schools [Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2019]. However, the quality and accessibility of inclusive education for students with disabilities is shaped by varying state policies, funding mechanisms, historical service delivery models, and the geographic distribution of educational resources.

Initial steps in SDG4 implementation

The Australian government's response to SDG4 was coordinated through a national Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) established in 2018, with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment overseeing the coordination of SDG4 implementation across states and territories. A significant policy development during this period was the revision of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The updated policy is known as the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Services Australia, 2019). While this declaration reaffirmed Australia's dedication to educational excellence and equity, it did not explicitly align its goals with the specific SDG4 targets. This represented a missed opportunity to integrate national education policies more closely with international objectives.

The IDC compiled Australia's initial Voluntary National Review (VNR; Australian Government, 2018) on SDG implementation for the UN. The review did not follow UN reporting guidelines for content or structure, limiting cross-national comparability. Moreover, it failed to establish monitoring tools for evaluating SDG progress. Several researchers have commented broadly on Australia's approach to the SDGs, highlighting the need for a coordinated national approach (Allen et al., 2019; Asadikia et al., 2023; Pawar et al., 2021). More specifically, the Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED) noted that data sources were provided for only 5 of the 11 global SDG4 indicators and characterized the VNR "as a collection of case studies" [Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED), 2019, p. 27] as opposed to a detailed analysis of progress toward SDG4 targets. The lack of comprehensive data on school education, particularly concerning access, inclusion, and equity for marginalized groups such as students with disabilities, highlights the limitations of the VNR. Further, the decentralized structure of Australia's education system may have contributed to gaps in data collection and reporting, requiring greater national coordination.

Trends in school education

Despite Australia's early endorsement of the Salamanca Statement [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994], policy and research on inclusive education remain primarily focused on disability, rather than the broader spectrum of special educational needs. Key legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005) have strengthened this focus on disability. Most states and territories, moreover, have maintained a rights-based, disability-focused approach to inclusive education, with only Queensland and the Northern Territory enacting broader inclusion policies (Beamish et al., 2022).

Australia, in common with many other countries in the Asia-Pacific, has a dual education system that caters for students with disability (Beamish et al., 2024). Approximately 89% of this student group attend mainstream schools, with 18% being educated in segregated, special education units on a full- or part-time basis (Children and Young People with Disability

Australia, 2019). Moreover, research has shown that students with disabilities represent an invisible sub-group often excluded from participating in Australia's national testing program (Teather and Hillman, 2017). Furthermore, a national survey of predominantly parents and educators indicated that this student group was frequently subjected to restrictive practices to manage behavior, suspension for minor incidences, and regular exclusion from mainstream schooling (Poed et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, enrolments in special schools are increasing (Lassig et al., 2022), with Poed et al. (2017) providing evidence that many families are encouraged to enroll their child with disability in these segregated settings.

These complex circumstances have led to an under-resourcing of mainstream schools, with reports highlighting the need for governments to address the persistent challenges posed by varying state-based funding models (Australian Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2016; Gonski et al., 2011; Lassig et al., 2022). Although the Australian government introduced needs-based funding in 2013, the manner in which states redistribute these allocations does not guarantee that all eligible students with disabilities receive the intended support. For example, in Victoria, 25% of eligible students did not receive this targeted funding (De Bruin, 2022).

Another longstanding issue concerning the education of this student group is the inadequate teacher education and training of mainstream classroom teachers (e.g., Chambers and Forlin, 2021; Forlin et al., 2013; Hopkins et al., 2018; Vaz et al., 2015). All initial education programs at Australian universities are required by Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to provide classroom teachers with two courses focused on inclusive education as well as to ensure that all beginning teachers meet the AITSL professional standards at the graduate level. Yet, teachers in Australian primary and secondary schools continue to report that they have not been equipped with the essential knowledge and competencies to teach in inclusive schools (Duncan et al., 2020; Mofield et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, with Dickinson et al. (2020) highlighting a reduction in educational support for students with disability during lockdowns, particularly in the area of curriculum modifications (down by 18%). Remote learning also placed additional burdens on families, with parents often overseeing learning activities.

Australia, in common with the United States, Canada, and China experience a major service gap between schools located in metropolitan and RRR locations (Eacott and Freeborn, 2020). The vast distances contrasted with small, diverse student populations distributed over these RRR locations in this country substantially impacts access to resources and supports for all students, including those with disability (Barley and Beesley, 2007). Moreover, insufficient teacher preparation for working in these locations, together with varying academic and social expectations, create complex environments for both teachers and students (Kuhl et al., 2015). Collectively, these challenges affect equitable access to the curriculum and accordingly, student learning and achievement.

In broader perspective, inequalities in educational outcomes for students with disability remain apparent. As at 2018, only 34% of individuals aged 20 and over with a disability had finished Year 12, compared to 66% of those without a disability, while 21% of people with a disability aged 15–64 who acquired their disability before age 15 left school before turning 16, in contrast to just 8.9% of their non-disabled peers [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2024]. These statistics highlight the urgent need to address these persistent educational inequities that have long been recognized as a characteristic of the Australian schooling system compared to other OECD countries (Lampert and Wilson, 2024).

Discussion

Australia's progress toward SDG4 targets for students with disability have been substantially influenced by the federal government's ineffective approach to SDG4 implementation and entrenched schooling issues that have hindered the broader goal of inclusive education for this student group. A critical examination of the material presented in the previous sections identifies five systemic and policy-related considerations: lack of coordinated national strategy and policy alignment; underinvestment in mainstream schools; inadequate teacher education and training; access and equity challenges, particularly for students in RRR locations; and disparities in educational outcomes.

The absence of a coordinated national strategy for implementing and monitoring SDG4, as evidenced by the limited alignment of national educational goals with global targets, points to missed opportunities for establishing systematic accountability. Also, it is evident that the Interdepartmental Committee's initial VNR lacked the necessary analytical depth to gauge national efforts toward SDG4 targets. Without robust data and consistent reporting, it is difficult to compare Australia's progress with other nations or accurately assess whether educational initiatives are realizing the intended benefits for students with disability. Asadikia et al. (2023) rightly emphasize the urgent need for Australia to establish a data-driven, evidence-based approach to advance SDG progress. Additionally, the federal and state governments need to jointly formulate a detailed, sequenced roadmap for achieving SDG4 targets and provide funding support for its coordinated implementation across educational jurisdictions in all states and territories. Further, each jurisdiction should be required to report against a standardized set of indicators as a basis for annually mapping progress toward SDG4 targets, including metrics specific to students with disability.

Australia's progress toward SDG4 targets is further complicated by persistent underfunding, decentralized funding models, and inconsistent resource allocation. Despite the introduction of needs-based funding, some students with disabilities fail to receive the support to which they are entitled (Lassig et al., 2022). According to the 2018 national survey of principals conducted by the Australian Education Union, 81% of government school principals indicated that they "did not have sufficient resources to cater for students with disability" [Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED), 2019, p. 41]. This under-resourcing of mainstream schools not only constrains the ability of these settings to respond to diverse learning needs; it also perpetuates inequality, particularly for those students with disability. Despite strong disability discrimination legislation, this entrenched pattern undermines the foundational principle of educational equity which underpins both domestic and international policy frameworks.

Therefore, state governments need to work in partnership with the federal government to increase and equitably allocate funding to mainstream schools.

The insufficient preparation of teachers for using inclusive and high-leverage strategies also demands attention. Although teacher education programs in Australia are required to incorporate courses on inclusion, the persistent reports of inadequate pre-service training suggest that meeting ATSIL's professional standards does not necessarily translate into effective classroom practice. To effectively include and educate students with disability, teachers need to be equipped with a complex array of strategies associated with adjusting curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Swancutt et al., 2020) and providing social, emotional, and behavioral supports (Rivera and McKeithan, 2021). For teacher preparation to be strengthened, governments and educational authorities need to critically review the curricula provided by all Australian universities and make individualized recommendations. Further, the impact of these initiatives on the confidence and concern levels of beginning teachers following at least 18 months of working in mainstream schools needs to be monitored.

Profound access and equity challenges are faced by Australian students with disability, particularly for those living in RRR areas. The geographic isolation of these areas influences teacher retention, program implementation, and student support, further hindering student achievement (Halsey, 2018). Collectively, these factors highlight the urgent need for targeted strategies to address access and equity issues for students with disability in underserved school communities. The mix of "distance, diversity and demographics" (Halsey, 2018, p. 26) is a "wicked" problem which requires governments at all levels and education systems to work in concert to create situated solutions for improving learning outcomes for students with disability.

Significant disparities in educational outcomes between students with disability and their non-disabled peers highlight the systemic failures to address the multitude of barriers within Australia's educational landscape. Despite ongoing educational reforms, marked gaps remain for students with disability in completing Year 12 or equivalent in schooling and obtaining vocational and university qualifications [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2023]. These reduced educational outcomes are not isolated incidents: They are the cumulative result of failures to effectively tackle the interconnected barriers perpetuating educational inequities and hindering the academic and socio-economic potential of students with disability. Persistent discrepancies in educational outcomes further entrench socio-economic disadvantage for students with disability, limiting their future opportunities and reinforcing a cycle of marginalization that extends into employment, economic independence, and participation in community life.

Concluding statement

This critical analysis of policy and practice highlights the systemic issues within Australia's educational landscape that impede progress toward achieving SDG4 targets for students with disability. We began this paper stating that the central question guiding our analysis was: *How do Australian education policies and practices address issues of access, inclusion, and equity for school-age students with disabilities in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) priorities?* We conclude with the proposition that urgent collaborative and coordinated efforts by governments and education authorities are required to realign educational policies, funding, and teacher training to achieve more accessible, equitable, and inclusive schooling for students with disability by 2030. To achieve these outcomes with Australia's current fragmented systems of educational delivery, we recommend that a national advisory panel comprising policy makers, educational administrators, disability advocates and researchers be formed to formulate, guide, and oversee an action plan and its implementation.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. WB: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Publisher's note

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