



The Polished Pathway

Speech by Catherine McAlpine, CEO Inclusion Australia to the NDIS Jobs and Skills Summit - 17 August 2022

Over the past year Inclusion Australia has stood before Disability Royal Commission to talk about the inclusion of people with an intellectual disability in different parts of society.

This includes hearings on inclusive education, Disability Employment Services and Australian Disability Enterprises.

Each time we have talked about something we call the polished pathway.

I want to talk to you today about what the polished pathway is and what it means for people with an intellectual disability and their families.

For the families of people with an intellectual disability, the polished pathway is one that starts with small decisions in childhood.

Families make what feel like 'safe' parental choices during those early tricky school years when everything feels overwhelming and tiring.

Before you know it, you've gone on a different journey than what you expected and ended up in a place miles away from your dreams.

How does this happen?

Imagine being told in early childhood intervention

“Your child will never cope in mainstream school, and they will never cope with her”.

And so, you “choose” special school.

Over the next few years, the convenience of things like dedicated transport and specialised holiday programs makes it easier to stay.

When your young person becomes eligible for the Disability Support Pension the only employment information you are given is about Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). You have no idea what other choices and supports might exist.

In Year 10, the special school helpfully arranges group work experience at a local ADE – a fun time that includes organised group transport and a picnic.

During Year 12, the school holds an expo for all the local ADE and day program providers. You find out that signing up means a smooth transition from school. Ironically the ADE or ‘employment transition program’ at the day service is the best way to protect your own employment.

Such things are the polish on the pathway.

The pathway is an incremental journey. The problem is it leads to people with an intellectual disability in poorly paid, segregated, and congregated ‘work’.

It is shaped by low community expectations and supported by interlinking systems.

The connections between these systems, from early childhood intervention to Centrelink, from the NDIS to DES, and especially from school to work, are so smooth that families don’t even see they are heading towards this predetermined destination until the last minute.

The polished pathway renders people with an intellectual disability invisible to their peers when they are little more than babies.

Kids (who grow up to be potential colleagues and employers) forever lose the opportunity to gain experience about the strengths and similarities of their peers with an intellectual disability - and vice versa.

The United Nations understands this. Their most recent uncomfortable advice about employment in the 2019 report on Australia's Review of the CRPD states concerns about the:

“Ongoing practice of segregated employment through Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) with sub-minimum wage payment”

It recommends that Australia:

“Undertake a comprehensive review of ADEs to adhere to Article 27 of the Convention and provide services to transition of persons with disabilities from sheltered employment into open inclusive and accessible forms of employment, ensuring equal remuneration for work for equal value”.

Our Voice is the official committee made up of people with an intellectual disability that advises the Inclusion Australia Board. Our Voice has provided guidance to the Inclusion Australia Board for close to 20 years.

At the start of the Disability Royal Commission, Our Voice members wrote position statements on the changes they would like to see from the Royal Commission.

The Our Voice Statement on Respect says:

“People with disabilities have the right to be respected like anyone else in society. We know when we are respected, and we are not respected – we feel it.”

The committee has told us what they want:

- systems that support people to earn a decent wage
- a job of their choosing working with a diverse range of people
- systems to work together to support the best possible outcomes for people with an intellectual disability.

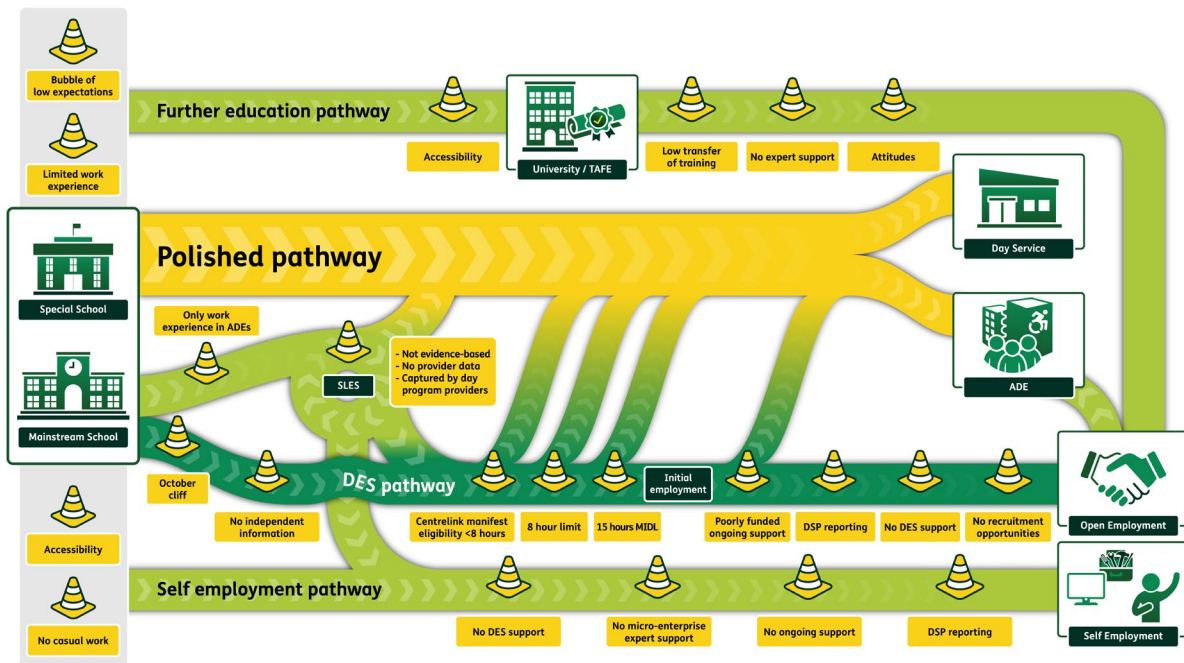
The Our Voice Statement on Employment says:

“People with disabilities have the right to work in the open job market like anyone else and get the training and support they need; this means no more sheltered employment.”

It’s time to listen to what people with an intellectual disability are telling us.

And to act on it.

To do that we must acknowledge that the polished pathway is real. It is time to take it apart, brick by brick and build a new road to a place where people with an intellectual disability are respected, included, and valued.



The Polished Pathway - Inclusion Australia, August 2022



Inclusion Australia