

CAROL KEMPER.

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SUEAN HILL

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Qualifications Required for Australian Special Education Roles

If anyone had any doubt about the decline in availability of specialist instructional support in our schools, one only has to check the qualifications needed to take up a role related to disability and learning and behavioural difficulties in departments of education across Australia. This applies not just to the special education roles in specialist and mainstream schools but also to senior roles in departmental offices. The following information with regard to essential/desirable qualifications for those working in special education support roles has been taken from State and Territory departments of education websites.

New South Wales Department of Education: Four types of teachers are listed on the NSW Department of Education website. These include 1. Early childhood teachers, 2. Primary teachers, 3. Secondary teachers and 4. Specialist teachers. The specialist teachers listed include teachers with "expertise in a particular field, such as career advising, teacher librarianship and teaching English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D)". Qualifications are listed for: career advisors "Careers advisors are secondary trained teachers who have undertaken an approved course of study in career education"; teacher librarians "Teacher librarians are trained teachers who have also undertaken an approved course of study in teacher librarianship"; and EAL/D teachers "EAL/D teachers are qualified primary or secondary teachers who have completed approved TESOL ... studies". **No specific qualifications could be found for special/inclusive education teachers.** [New South Wales Department of Education-Specialist Teachers](#)

Department of Education Victoria: There is information about specialist schools, specialist teachers, learning specialists, visiting teacher programs, and programs for students with disabilities (including the Abilities-Based Learning and Assessment Tool, ABLES) on the website. Regarding qualifications in special settings, it was stated that in addition to the registration requirements for teacher positions, "principal and teacher class employees in special settings and visiting teachers are required to have completed an approved year of study in an appropriate special education discipline for ongoing employment in special settings or as a visiting teacher". However, it is clear from additional information on the same webpage that teachers without these qualifications can still be employed in specialist positions. For education support class positions, it is stated that they "do not have mandatory qualification requirements but may require knowledge in specific functional areas depending on the nature of the role and responsibilities of the position". [Department of Education Victoria-Education Support Class](#)

The department has a strategy for increasing inclusion support for students with disabilities. This includes supporting courses relating to various types of disability. In order to become a course facilitator you need to have completed the course that you are facilitating and an additional three hours of facilitator training. There is no mention of qualifications needed for a course facilitator. [Department of Education Victoria - Become a course facilitator](#)

The Victorian Department of Education does offer scholarships for teachers wishing to complete a Master of Inclusive Education at selected universities. An investigation of course content in postgraduate special/inclusive education courses across Australia, which included seven of the eight courses listed on the Victorian Department of Education website, found that only one of the seven included the content needed to work with students with disabilities and other special education needs (Stephenson et al., 2022, 2023).

Queensland Department of Education: On the Queensland Department of Education website, under the heading *Specialist Teachers*, is a list of specialisations. Special education is one of 22 that are listed. Becoming a special education teacher is encouraged in various documents on the website. In [Life as a Special Education Teacher](#), for

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example, the following statement is made: "Special education teachers are currently in demand, and will continue to be in the coming years. If you're beginning your teaching career in our state schools, or you're looking to shift gears from industry to teaching, we encourage you to consider moving into this rewarding field". From there you can access information on "Qualifications to become a teacher" but **there is no information about the qualifications needed to become a special education teacher.** [Queensland Department of Education – Types of teachers](#)

A lengthy report, [Review of education for students with disability in Queensland state schools provided for the Queensland Department of Education](#) by Deloitte Access Economics, provides some interesting data relating to pre-service training in the skills needed to support inclusive education "Teachers, principals and academics consulted throughout this review have pointed to the current state of pre-service training as inadequate for the task of achieving more inclusive schooling. Initial teacher education programs are not delivering the curriculum required for school staff to develop these skills" (p. 21); "Of school staff including teachers, guidance officers and other support staff who participated in the survey, 33% indicated that they had received pre-service training in education for students with disability. Unsurprisingly, this was higher among Heads of Special Education Services (45%) than teachers (35%). This still indicates a relatively low adoption in skills for teaching this cohort of students – particularly given the prevalence of students with disability and learning difficulty across Queensland state schools" (p. 113).

Department of Education, South Australia: In addition to having a relevant degree, a working with children check, and eligibility for South Australian teacher registration, there are requirements for various subject areas and levels of education (e.g., early childhood, primary and secondary). There is also an additional requirement for teaching English as a second language. Unfortunately, there is no mention of additional qualifications for those working in special education roles. South Australia has recently announced that there will be a support person for students with autism in every school and there are plans for providing professional development for these support personnel. There is no mention of the qualification required of teachers working in these roles or the qualifications of the personnel offering professional development. In the information pack on eligibility to apply for teaching positions [Applying for Advertised Teaching Positions](#) it is stated that, for those applying for preschool teacher positions, a qualification in special education or other relevant qualification or experience in teaching children with autism was desirable. However, there is no such statement in relation to applications for school based special education positions.

Western Australian Department of Education: Among the types of teachers listed as teachers in specialist areas are English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and special education needs. For teaching EAL/D "you must be a qualified teacher and have completed an additional qualification or units in EAL/D". In order to teach students with special education needs "you need to be a qualified teacher and have completed education support units". For teaching English as a second language, an additional qualification is mentioned but to teach students with special education needs, including those with the most complex educational needs, there is no mention of a qualification nor is the nature of the education support units specified. [Western Australian Department of Education – School teacher roles](#)

In the selection criteria for a senior role *Director Disability and Inclusion*, advertised on the WA website dated December, 2023, management skills, personal skills and communication skills were included. Neither the selection criteria nor the eligibility criteria included knowledge and skills in the area of disability or a relevant qualification.

Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP): Two types of specialist teachers supporting children with additional needs are listed on the website. These are [Inclusion and Access coordinators and Support Teachers](#).

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Inclusion and Access Coordinators (IAC) are reported to be experienced teachers supporting school teams to assist students with disability to optimise their learning potential. Their role is to facilitate professional learning for teachers, teacher assistants and specialists in areas related to students with physical and medical support needs.

Support Teachers are reported to work with classroom teachers to develop learning plans in partnership with families and other professionals to improve outcomes for students with disability.

The only information with regard to qualifications is registration with the Teachers Registration Board of Tasmania, registration to work with vulnerable people and eligibility to work in Australia. There is no mention of additional qualifications for those in support roles.

Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate: The ACT Education Directorate offers: an inclusion support program in mainstream classrooms; hearing and vision support; a disability education program (a smaller class size and opportunities to learn with regular peers); and specialist schools. It is stated that every school has a Disability Education Coordination Officer.

A teacher in the ACT is required to have an Australian bachelor degree (or equivalent) and at least one year of tertiary professional teacher education or an integrated four year qualification. Additionally, those applying to work as classroom teachers need to have or be eligible for teacher registration and have a current working with vulnerable people registration. There is no mention of additional qualifications for Disability Education Coordination Officers or other specialist teachers. An inclusion strategy can be downloaded from the website, but again the skills required of those supporting inclusion are not reported.

Northern Territory Department of Education: The Teacher Registration Board must be satisfied that applicants for teaching positions hold appropriate qualifications to teach children in the Northern Territory. This means that they must have:

- A degree awarded by a higher education institution on completion of a 4-year full-time (or the equivalent part-time duration) initial (pre-service) teacher education course that includes a minimum of 45 days of supervised practice teaching in a school; or
- Completed at least four years of full-time study (or the equivalent part-time duration) at a higher education institution with the award of a degree/s including an alternative qualification awarded on completion of a teacher education course of at least one-year full time duration (or the equivalent part-time duration) that includes a minimum of 45 days supervised practice teaching in a school.

There is no mention of the need for an additional qualification to work in a specialist teacher role.

Summary

It appears that no Australian state or territory department of education mandates, or even lists as desirable, a formal qualification in special/inclusive education for all special education classroom teachers or specialist teachers supporting students with disabilities in state schools. What is puzzling is that other specialist teachers, such as librarians, career advisors, and teachers of English as a second language are far more likely to be required to have an additional qualification than teachers supporting our most vulnerable students, those with significant intellectual disability, multiple disabilities and autism.

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Many departments of education now employ support staff from the allied health professions to advise on the inclusion of students with additional needs. What is not clear is how the pre-service training for the range of allied health professions employed for these roles includes the skills required to advise teaching staff on individual program plans and evidence-based instructional strategies within the classroom environment for students with intellectual disability and autism.

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