

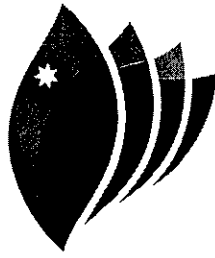
Submission
No 95

INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

Organisation: Macquarie University Special Education Centre

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**MACQUARIE
UNIVERSITY**



**SUBMISSION FROM MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY SPECIAL
EDUCATION CENTRE (MUSEC) TO THE ENQUIRY INTO
THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A
DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS.**

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- That all teachers in special schools and units and all teachers providing additional support to students with special education needs in mainstream settings hold an appropriate qualification in special education.
- That the content of training courses and other professional development courses provided to trainee and practicing teachers be soundly based on research. We endorse an explicit teaching approach for basic academic skill and strategy instruction, approaches derived from applied behaviour analysis for students with high support needs such as those with autism and/or severe intellectual disability or significant problem behaviours.
- That the NSW Institute of Teachers take steps to accredit special education courses and to register special educators. It should act to promote research-based practice in special education.
- That NSW DET put into place policies and procedures to support teachers in implementing effective and evidence-based practices and to discourage the misuse of resources in implementing unproven and disproven interventions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) was established in 1975 as one of the very first research centres at Macquarie University. For over 30 years MUSEC has been at the forefront in researching and developing data-based instructional and behaviour management procedures for students with disabilities and special needs.

MUSEC primarily offers postgraduate programs of study including four postgraduate certificates in Special Education, a postgraduate diploma and a Master of Special Education by coursework study, in addition to higher research degrees at Masters and Doctoral level. Special Educators holding a postgraduate qualification from MUSEC are highly regarded as pre-eminent practitioners by the educational and broader disability industry. MUSEC staff have particular expertise in reading instruction for students with special education needs, in the education of students with high support needs and the education of students with problem behaviour.

Postgraduate students studying at MUSEC are greatly advantaged by access to the onsite MUSEC School, an independent special school that caters for children who have special learning needs. The MUSEC School represents a successful community outreach for children with special learning needs and allows for the demonstration of exemplary and research-based programs and pedagogy.

THE PROVISION OF ADEQUATE TEACHER TRAINING

As one of the prime concerns of MUSEC is to provide courses in special education, we would like to focus our submission on the importance of adequate teacher training. An appropriately qualified teacher with skills in program design, assessment, behaviour management and a range of effective instructional strategies is essential if students with special education needs are to be adequately supported in either mainstream or special education settings. Such teachers need to work in adequately resourced settings, with an appropriate inclusive curriculum and in collaboration with other professionals such as therapists and counsellors, but we believe a highly skilled teacher is the lynchpin of quality education for students with special education needs regardless of their educational placement. Such a teacher may be directly responsible for teaching students with disabilities in segregated classes or schools, or may provide support to teachers with students with special needs included in regular classrooms.

SHORTAGE OF ADEQUATELY TRAINED SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

We know that at present the number of appropriately qualified teachers working in special schools is totally inadequate. Students in these schools have significant disabilities and/or behaviour problems and clearly require skilled teaching. A recent survey (Thomas, 2009) which included 95 special schools in NSW (72% of all special schools in NSW) found that only 60% of 671 school staff in those schools (this included teachers and school principals) held qualifications in

special education. We believe that this situation is unacceptable, and note that it has remained unchanged since the 90s.

There is less information available about itinerant support teachers who provide support to students and teachers in mainstream settings. A MUSEC student (O'Neill, 2009) recently surveyed teachers who provide additional support for students with problem behaviour in regular classes. The survey covered three of the education regions in the Sydney area (93.5% of behaviour support teachers responded) and found that only 53% of those teachers had relevant post-graduate qualifications in special education. If this figure is representative of support teachers generally, it also represents an unacceptable situation.

We think this situation precludes effective delivery of educational programs to many students with special education needs. Unless those in special education placements are taught by a suitably qualified teacher, they are unlikely to be receiving special education. Similarly, if teachers in regular classrooms do not have access to expert support and advice, they are severely disadvantaged in attempting to provide suitable instruction for students with special education needs. MUSEC believes there should be a concerted effort to ensure that all students with special education needs receive an appropriate level of support from a qualified special educator.

CONCERN ABOUT DET EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE TEACHER SHORTAGE

The ongoing trial of the School Learning Support Program initiated by NSW DET would appear to signal that NSW DET recognises the lack of expertise in teachers

dealing with students with special education needs in regular classes. This initiative includes online training courses, sourced from the UK, for teachers who are school learning support co-ordinators. We strongly support the idea of an appropriately qualified special educator available to every school, but we have strong reservations about the content of these training courses.

MUSEC has had an opportunity to examine some of these online courses in detail and although they contain useful and relevant information, we have serious concerns about some of the content and resources provided. Strategies are recommended that are without any research support at all, and in some cases practices long known to be ineffective are presented. For example, perceptual-motor programs such as those recommended in the DET online courses have long been known to be ineffective in changing both academic and perceptual motor skills. The claim made by the course providers that they are based on current research is untenable. In addition, at present none of these courses includes general strategies for assessing student learning and designing individualised programs within key learning areas. We regard this training package as inadequate to produce teachers with the skills needed to support students with special education needs. Not only is it inadequate, it could even be harmful as teachers may begin to use intervention strategies that have been shown to be ineffective.

SKILLS NEEDED BY EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Research shows quite clearly that students with special education needs who are learning academic and cognitive skills benefit most from explicit, teacher-

directed instruction using carefully analysed curricula so learning can proceed in small steps. Instruction should be individually planned, with planning decisions made on the basis of regular and ongoing assessment of student learning. During instruction teachers provide many opportunities for students to actively respond, to practise their skills and teachers provide frequent informative feedback to students on their learning. Teachers thus need to have skills in assessing learning and in adjusting teaching and learning programs to meet individual needs. This approach can be applied to both basic academic skills (direct instruction) and to strategy instruction. A “teacher-centred” approach to education contrasts with widely used approaches described as “student centred” and aligned with constructivist theories of teaching. Regular classroom teachers also need a thorough grounding in explicit teaching approaches if they are to work effectively in collaboration with special educators (See Rowe, 2006 for a discussion of these issues in Australian schools). The online courses provided by DET do not, at this time, include a coherent presentation of explicit instruction.

Similarly, research shows that students with higher support needs such as those with severe disabilities or autism benefit from approaches to instruction derived from applied behaviour analysis which also emphasise systematic instruction and regular monitoring of progress in order to adjust teaching to student needs. These approaches, in the form of positive behaviour intervention and support have also been shown to be effective for students with significant problem behaviour. NSW DET is to be commended for its efforts to introduce the positive behaviour support model to schools in NSW.

EFFECTS OF INADEQUATE TRAINING - PREVALENCE OF UNPROVEN AND DISPROVEN PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

Unfortunately, not only are evidence-based practices not used in many special education settings in NSW but human and physical resources are used to implement unproven and disproven practices. In particular we note the use of perceptual motor programs purported to improve academic skills, the use of multisensory environments for students with severe disabilities and sensory integrative approaches used for students with autism and other severe disabilities. There is no credible research to support the efficacy of these practices in achieving educational outcomes for students with special education needs (see Hyatt, Stephenson & Carter, 2009).

ACCREDITATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

At present the NSW Institute of Teachers provides processes to register both teacher education courses and teachers themselves. This provides one measure to ensure some quality control. Currently, these procedures only apply to regular educators and there are no agreed standards for the content of courses training special educators, not for the competencies expected of special educators in NSW. MUSEC believes that the Institute could play a valuable role in accrediting special education teachers and courses, using a model similar to that operating for regular education.

ACCREDITATION OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSES

Having said that, we noted with dismay that the NSW Institute of Teachers accredited the NSW DET online training courses as approved professional development courses for teachers in NSW schools. It is clear that accreditation procedures for professional development to not include a careful examination of course content by a panel of appropriately qualified people to ensure it is evidence-based (as panels of experts do for teacher training courses from universities). We believe that the accreditation procedure for post-training professional development courses should be rigorous and those who put forward courses should be able to show that the content is up to date and is evidence-based.

RESPONSIBILITY OF NSW DET TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Although the NSW Institute of Teachers may bear responsibility for the content of teacher education courses and professional development courses, we believe NSW DET also has an obligation to ensure teachers are supported in their use of evidence-based, effective practice and are strongly discouraged from using unproven and disproven interventions with students with special education needs.

SUMMARY

We believe universities delivering training courses in special education, the Institute of Teachers and NSW DET should share a common commitment to the dissemination and support of evidence-based practices in special education. We

believe that appropriately trained special educators are essential to delivering quality programs to students with special education needs.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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