

**INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR  
SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS**

**Organisation:** Dr Coral Kemp

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## **Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales**

I am responding to the invitation to make a submission to the above inquiry. I have included information with regard to my qualifications and experience in the field of education, and special education in particular. I thank the committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours faithfully

**Coral Kemp PhD**

### ***Qualifications***

B.A. Dip Ed

M.A. (Special Education)

PhD (Special Education)

### ***Experience in Education and Special Education***

My background is as follows:

- Regular education teacher of primary age children in two Australian states including head teacher of a two-teacher school in a remote area of WA
- Special education teacher in a special school and executive teacher in special education units in two regular primary schools in NSW
- Special education consultant in both the state and independent sectors in NSW
- Academic:
  - 1. Coordinating and teaching special education courses/units at undergraduate and postgraduate level
  - 2. Supervising research students
  - 3. Conducting and publishing research in special education (50+ publications in peer reviewed journals)
  - 4. Deputy principal and acting principal at Macquarie University Special Education Centre Special School
- Director of a not-for-profit provider of literacy and numeracy programs for children with disabilities and severe learning difficulties
- Independent special education consultant
- Expert witness in legal cases involving the education of children with disabilities.

### ***Key Issues***

#### ***1. Lack of Staff Qualifications for those Working in Special Education Positions in Schools***

There is no doubt that one of the greatest impediments to appropriate provision of educational programs to students with disabilities and other special education needs is the lack of qualified and competent special education teachers employed in special education and support positions. There is general agreement that while a special education qualification cannot guarantee that teachers will provide effective instruction, most would agree that it is unlikely that they will be able to do so without the qualification.

Thomas (2009) conducted an Australian wide survey of state government special schools in 2007. He found that, on average, only 64% of the teachers in special schools had a special education qualification and, of those unqualified in special education, only 18.3% were working towards a qualification. In NSW, the percentages were 60% and 6.3% respectively meaning that only about 62% of teachers in special schools in this state were either qualified or undertaking a qualification in special education. Although, one could argue that things have improved in the past 10 years, this seems highly unlikely given that 40.5% of the NSW special education teachers in special schools at that time were aged 50 and over and that more recent research by Stephenson and Carter (2014) has indicated that special education qualifications were rarely specified as essential in advertised special education positions. Their research included advertised positions in all states and territories, with the majority of positions advertised for NSW. Only 5.5% of the advertisements included a special education qualification as an essential criterion and 4.2% as a desirable criterion.

- What is a special education position?
  - It is any position devoted to the teaching of students with autism, intellectual and multiple disabilities, sensory and physical disabilities, behaviour/emotional difficulties, and learning disabilities. As related to the school sector, it may be a full or part time position in a state, catholic or independent school and may involve working as a special education teacher, in a class in a special unit or special school, as a support in a regular school, as a consultant assisting regular class teachers or as a special educator in a tutorial centre.
- What is a special education qualification?
  - A special education qualification is generally accepted to be a one-year university course or equivalent either in combination with or following a relevant university degree. This can be at undergraduate (e.g., major in special education/ graduate diploma in special education) or postgraduate (postgraduate diploma in special education/masters degree in special education) level. Some universities offer postgraduate certificates in special education. These focus on a special area such as learning difficulties, behaviour support or high support needs. These are useful for teachers wanting specialist knowledge or those wanting to “try” special education. I would argue that in order to hold a special education position, a one-year full time course should be a minimum requirement.
  - Other credentials offered include courses run by the Department of Education. The latter are not one-year full-time equivalent courses and do not necessarily promote evidence-based practice. I would contend that in order to hold a special education position a teacher would need to have a one-year full-time equivalent qualification with a focus on reading and analysing scientific research along with extensive practicum in a range of special education settings.

2. *Lack of Registration for Special Education Teachers/Special Educators*  
Unfortunately, there is no professional body that registers special education teachers/special educators separately from general education teachers. Therapists and counsellors/psychologists, all of whom work in the area of disability and other special needs belong to professional organisations that require them to have a recognised qualification. The NSW Department of Education does not employ school counsellors without the required qualification and all therapists need to be registered with their relevant organisations in order to be employed in the health area. The lack of registration requirements for special education teachers/special educators makes it easy for the NSW Department of Education to employ non-qualified special education staff in special education positions.

3. *Failure to Acknowledge the Value of Qualified Special Education Staff by Systems and School Executive*  
This is, in part, due to the two issues discussed above. If there is not an imperative to employ qualified special education teachers in special education positions, the systems are implying that such qualifications are not important. Indeed, it has been quite common for first-year-out teachers to be employed in special education positions, in particular in positions that are hard to fill. Further, in the past, school counsellors have had more say with regard to decisions made for children with disability and other special needs than have qualified special education teachers, including special education executive teachers in regular schools. This is despite the fact that counsellors do not have the same training as special educators in the use of evidence-based instructional practices that support student learning.

In some independent schools, a learning support teacher is sometimes employed to cater for atypical students. Skills in both learning difficulties and giftedness are sometimes required for these positions. Although there are some commonalities for students at the extreme ends of the normal distribution (e.g., the risk of disaffection because the curriculum or instructional approach does not meet their needs) in this country we do not have a qualification that addresses the needs of both populations of students. It may well be that qualifications in one or the other are accepted. The pressure for independent schools to cater for their more able students is likely to take precedence in such cases leading to fewer qualified special educators in learning support positions.

Under Virginia Chadwick's education ministry in the early 1990s, special education did gain some status, with this minister seeking advice from a range of experts in the field. This resulted in the appointment of a senior special education position in each education district in NSW. Highly qualified and experienced special educators were employed in these positions. Unfortunately, the positions as they were then, no longer exist and the programs for children with a disability and other special needs in our schools may not be supervised by someone with this level of skill or, indeed, by someone with a qualification in special education.

It may be that systems/schools do not require their special education staff to

have special education qualifications because there are not enough qualified personnel to fill the positions. If this were the case, surely job advertisements in the area would at least list a special education qualification as a desirable criterion. Data from the Stephenson and Carter research (2014) indicate that this is not the case, given that only 4.2% of the job advertisements for special education positions, most of which were advertised in NSW, listed a special education qualification as a desirable criterion.

#### 4. *Shortage of Teachers Qualified in Special Education*

It is difficult to know whether there is a shortage of special education qualified teachers, as such qualifications are not needed to gain employment in this area (Stephenson & Carter, 2014). Over the years, the Department of Education has offered cadetships to teachers willing to study in special education. Unfortunately, these cadetships have not always been awarded to suitable candidates. At one time, university academics interviewed prospective candidates for cadetships in collaboration with officers of the Department of Education. This practice ceased many years ago with unfortunate consequences. Prospective candidates must be sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities and other special needs but also need to have a high level of academic skill as courses do require students to perform at a high level when reading and analysing scientific research. Cadets have been known to take on other roles while paid to complete full time study and students who fail to complete the courses are generally still employed in special education roles. It is not surprising that the university in which I taught eventually took the decision not to apply for Departmental cadets.

The lack of teachers with special education qualifications employed in special education positions, in particular in support teacher positions in regular schools, is a problem across all education sectors and one that has serious implications for students with additional needs. The problem with unqualified staff is, of course, more serious in rural and remote areas.

#### 5. *Poor teacher Training for Pre-service Teachers*

*Response to Intervention*, which is acknowledged to be a highly effective way of catering for the full range of educational needs, employs a three-tier system of instruction (e.g., Cuticelli et al., 2015). Tier 1, whole class instruction, will cater for 80% of the class population. Tier 2, which employs small group instruction, caters for another 15% of the population, with only 5% requiring a more intensive individual program at Tier 3 level. The success of the approach is predicated on an evidence-based approach implemented at Tier 1 level. Most children will progress well if they have a good classroom program. Unfortunately, teachers in this country are not taught to read and analyse scientific research as part of their pre-service courses. They are, therefore, at the mercy of their professional learning courses, which do not always reflect evidence-based practice. This is most particularly evident in the case of initial instruction in literacy. Inquiries into the teaching of reading that have been held in the USA (National Reading Panel, 2002: <https://education.ucf.edu/mirc/Research/IRA%20-%20NRP%20Summary.pdf>), the UK (Rose, 2006: <http://www.ttrb3.org.uk/the-rose-report-independent-review-of-the-teaching-of-early-reading/>) and Australia (Rowe, 2005:

[http://research.acer.edu.au/tll\\_misc/5/](http://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/5/)) have reported similar findings, that is, instruction in phonemic awareness and explicit and systematic instruction in phonics is essential if most children are to make satisfactory progress in reading. These reports were based on thousands of scientific studies into the teaching of reading. Some schools in NSW have ignored those findings (e.g., at the school where my niece teaches in regional NSW, the principal instructed the teachers of the junior students to remove the phonics resources from their classrooms), while others simply do not understand the meaning of 'systematic' or 'explicit'. I am including a paragraph on the teaching of phonics that was included in a school newsletter aimed at the parents of kindergarten children, many of whom had been critical of the approach to initial reading instruction used at the school (full newsletter attached).

### **"WHAT ABOUT PHONICS?**

**A preference for teaching reading through a structured, systematic and whole class phonics program that teaches students sounds in a coordinated approach is sometimes discussed. Through this approach, students begin to join single sounds into blends and chunk sounds to make full words. It is true that many schools teach students to read using this approach. This is despite the fact that new Kindergarten students enter school on their first day with an enormous range of reading abilities. A systematic phonics approach brings all students to parity. Students who can already read prior to school end up learning very little for 6 months while those who find the approach too difficult require remediation almost immediately when the program prescribes movement to a different sound."**

The ignorance expressed in this paragraph is disturbing to say the least. It is definitely a reflection of the very poor education that teachers receive in this area and the commitment of officers in senior positions in the NSW Department of Education to approaches that do not have a strong evidence base.

### ***Examples of Difficulties Caused by the Above***

#### ***1. Educational and Social/Emotional Disadvantage***

In my role as a researcher collecting data in schools across sectors and as an independent consultant acting on behalf of parents, I have seen many examples of teachers in special education positions not meeting the needs of their students with disabilities and other special education needs. In most of these cases, the teacher in the special education role either teaching the child or supporting the teacher who was teaching the child was not a qualified special education teacher. Often these unqualified special education teachers are defensive, especially if they are questioned about the practices that they are using.

The Department of Education puts a lot of faith in their learning support teams but, if there is no expertise in these teams, they are not going to meet the needs of the students or families whom they purport to support. I was present as an advocate for one family with a child with special needs at one learning support team meeting. When the parent complained that no one ever said anything positive about her child, the head teacher special education (not qualified) walked out of the meeting saying that she was not prepared to listen to the mother's criticisms. At another state secondary school, a behaviour support consultant (not qualified in special education) presented anecdotal information to the learning support team on the behaviour of the



student whose family I was supporting and was using this information to make a placement recommendation for the student. A qualified special educator would have systematically collected observational data to support his or her recommendations. Families have a right to expect that the people advising them on the placement and ongoing educational programs for their children with disabilities have the relevant skills and qualifications.

It is always extremely disturbing when a student reaches secondary school unable to read because of severe learning difficulties that have not been adequately addressed by the school. Two extreme cases come to mind. One was in the 1990s and involved a young man attending a single sex state high school. Because of his learning difficulties, this boy was severely educationally disadvantaged. He was being seriously bullied to the extent that he would hide in the toilets during school breaks in order to avoid social contact. David attended the Special Education Centre at Macquarie University for one day a week in Year 11 for a work experience placement. This was at the instigation of the support teacher at the school who had just enrolled in a special education course at the Centre. The principal of his school then decided that David would need to have a full-time work experience placement or leave school before the commencement of Year 12 work in Term 4. David commenced working in the special school at the Special Education Centre while also being provided with daily individual and expert instruction in reading. In a seven-week period (David left early to attend a school camp), David's reading accuracy as measured by a standardised reading assessment had improved by 1 year, 7 months (from 7 years 11 months to 9 years, 6 months) and his reading comprehension had improved by 2 years, 1 month (from 9 years 3 months to 11 years 4 months). Despite the humiliation that David felt as a result of comments by both teachers and fellow students, which had a profound effect on his self-esteem, he managed to take advantage of the support offered to him. He had plans to sit the HSC at a future time. The gains that David made were extraordinary but "What is even more extraordinary is that he has survived, reasonably intact, a system that could well have damaged a less robust and determined personality" (Kemp & Wheldall, 1995, p. 60). I am attaching a copy of this case study published in *Special Education Perspectives*. Unfortunately there are still students reaching secondary school with similar literacy levels to that of David.

Not all young people with significant learning disabilities will be as fortunate as David. Jack (not his real name) came to our attention in 2013 when I was contacted by an officer from his state high school about our advertisement for a tutoring program for children with learning difficulties 6-12 years who were being raised by their grandparents. Jack had very poor literacy skills (reading accuracy level of 6 years 5 months at the age of 15) and was refusing to attend school. Our program involved training student volunteers to tutor children for one hour, three days a week after school, over a 10 week period. Jack was not eligible for the program because he was being raised by his single mother with the help of her parents and was outside the age range. The school was desperate for a program for Jack and we agreed to include him in the program. Unfortunately, he did not make any gains on norm-referenced tests despite the fact that he did engage with the program. For Jack, this was just another failure. Surprisingly the school did not see Jack's plight as a failure of their system but blamed the parent who had tried a variety of reading programs, many of which had no efficacy data to support them. Teachers at neither the primary nor the secondary school had the knowledge to direct the parent to programs that had research

evidence to support them, nor did they have the expertise within the school to address his difficulties. Working with a student of 15 years who has the reading age of a child in Kindergarten/Year 1 is extremely difficult as the content of the text that the student is asked to read is so very far beneath him. Although the work of the volunteers was monitored by academics associated with the Macquarie University Special Education Centre, they were not qualified special education teachers. We were able to secure Jack a free place in an evidence-based reading program. Unfortunately neither Jack nor his family was prepared to take this up. At that point it was hard to be critical of their decision.

## *2. Physical Harm to Students and Staff*

In my role of expert witness in legal cases, in which either students or staff have been injured, I have been very disturbed by the fact that, in each case, the staff involved did not have qualifications in special education. In two of these cases the incidents took place in schools for students with emotional/behaviour problems. In my opinion, these are the most difficult students to teach and, therefore, require high-level skills in both behaviour management and curriculum instruction, specifically literacy and numeracy instruction. To have staff members who are not qualified in special education is a recipe for disaster. Although I could not guarantee that such injury would not occur with a qualified special educator in charge, I strongly believe that, in the cases with which I have been involved, the risk would have been significantly diminished.

## *Recommendations*

There will be no 'quick fix' for the problems outlined above. However, in order to ensure that learning opportunities are enhanced for future populations of students with special education needs, I recommend the following:

1. The establishment of a board to oversee the qualification and registration requirements for special education teachers, separate from regular education teachers. This board should consist of members with considerable expertise in the field and have sufficient power to:
  - Influence the curriculum content and practicum of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in special education offered through universities;
  - Accept only qualifications from universities offering courses supporting evidence-based instructional approaches and appropriate practicum experiences;
  - Contribute to the decision as to which applicants are accepted for any cadetship program offered by the NSW Department of Education and monitor candidates' progress throughout the courses;
  - Require schools and school systems to advertise for suitably qualified staff to fill special education positions;
  - Ensure that sufficient special education qualified teachers are available to meet the requirements of all schools;
  - Control ongoing professional learning courses in special education.
2. There should be an overhaul of university teacher education courses, particularly those related to the initial training of teachers who will teach literacy and numeracy to children in their first years of school. The content of these courses must reflect scientific research in the field and the academics coordinating and teaching the relevant units should have a relevant qualification



and research experience in the area. A PhD student, under my supervision, who is currently investigating units in teacher education courses across Australia has found that content that has been established to be important to the teaching of early literacy is frequently absent from such units and that the units are regularly coordinated by staff without the relevant qualifications and experience.

### **Summary**

The education of our most vulnerable students is currently being compromised by the lack of suitably qualified and competent special education teachers in special education positions. Currently there is no imperative for schools or systems to employ qualified special educators with the result that many teachers in special education positions are providing a poor education to their students with disabilities and other special education needs. The employment of unqualified staff in learning difficulties support positions can result in inappropriate advice given to classroom teachers and parents with the result that students with severe learning difficulties will suffer a life time of emotional distress associated with poor self-esteem and failure to successfully negotiate the literate world. The employment of unqualified staff and staff without the necessary specialised skills for difficult-to-teach special education classes can also pose a threat to the safety of both students and staff. To address these issues, a board that is able to influence training courses for special education teachers, their employment and registration and ongoing professional development is necessary. This Board should comprise members with expertise in special education.

A close partnership should exist between the special education teacher supporting students with learning difficulties in regular schools and classroom teachers. The need for special education input for students will be reduced if teachers use evidence-based practices in the initial teaching of literacy and numeracy to young children. Unfortunately pre-service teacher education courses do not always include evidence-based strategies for initial literacy and numeracy instruction, nor are they always staffed by academics with expertise and research experience in these areas. An overhaul of teacher education courses is recommended to address this situation.

### **References**

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