

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

**Organisation:** Macquarie University Special Education Academics

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**Macquarie University Special Education Academics response to the inquiry  
into the provision of education to students with a disability or special  
needs in government and non-government schools in New South Wales**

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## BACKGROUND

This submission was prepared by a group of academics with particular expertise in the education of students with disability who were members of the recently closed Macquarie University Special Education Centre. All are active researchers in special education and are either currently or were previously involved in the preparation of special educators. We are grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry and further information may be requested from Dr Mark Carter (mark.carter@mq.edu.au).

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission will focus on issue (a) of the terms of reference of the enquiry, specifically the need for all students with disability and special needs, regardless of their placement or location in NSW, to receive effective, evidence-based programs and instruction; to have access to services from an appropriately qualified special educator and for all generalist teachers to have basic knowledge in effective educational practices for these students. The quality of the education provided to any student depends on the skills and knowledge of their teachers, and for students with special education needs having a teacher with relevant expertise in effective instruction is crucial. **An essential component of equitable access to resources for students with a disability or special needs in regional and metropolitan areas is access to an appropriately trained special educator, well versed in evidence-based practices.**

**\*NOTE: We have referred to teachers who have completed an additional qualification relevant to teaching students with disability and special education needs as special educators. Such teachers may hold an executive position, teach a class or provide specialist support to other teachers in either special or inclusive settings.**

## SUMMARY

We recommend that:

- All instruction and programs for students with disability and special education needs be based on evidence-based practice regardless of teaching setting. We endorse an explicit teaching approach for academic skills, strategy instruction, and social skill instruction. Many evidence-based approaches are derived from applied behaviour analysis, particularly for students with high support needs such as those with

autism and/or severe intellectual disability or significant problem behaviours.

- All teachers in special schools and units and all support teachers in inclusive settings hold an appropriate qualification in special education.
- All teachers working with students with disability and special needs included in regular classes have basic skills in effective instruction and have access to a qualified special educator.
- Universities in NSW be encouraged to re-instate specialist centres that focus on the provision of instruction to students with special education needs, particularly the preparation of special educators and research in special education in Australian schools.
- Preservice teacher education and inservice professional learning courses provide teachers with knowledge of effective, research-based instructional strategies.
- That NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) and the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), (formerly BOSTES) work with AITSL to produce standards for certification of special educators and take steps to accredit special education courses. Such standards should be based on research-based practice in special education.
- That NSW DoE 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.
- That NSW DoE put in place policies and procedures to ensure that all training programs offered by the Department reflect research relevant to the subject area and intended outcomes of the training course.

## **EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE**

Research and experience have shown that some educational interventions are more effective than others and produce better student outcomes. At the same time, we know that in NSW, many schools, and teachers implement programs that do not adequately reflect research evidence. Some current practices are known to be ineffective. We support the use of high quality, experimental research as an important means of identifying effective and ineffective practices. There are guidelines for the evaluation of the quality of research evidence that have allowed the identification of many effective practices for students with special education needs including those with learning difficulties, mild and severe disabilities. The Council for Exceptional Children in the US recently released standards for classifying the evidence base of practices in special education (Cook, Buysse, Klingner, Landrum, McWilliam, Tankersley & Test, 2015). We believe that standards such as these should be adopted in NSW as a means of evaluating interventions for students with disability and to provide guidance to educators. This may be provided on a website such as that provided by the Raising Children site for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which provides the evidence about the research base for interventions for ASD

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/parents\\_guide\\_to\\_therapies/parents\\_guide\\_to\\_therapies.html/context/1534](http://raisingchildren.net.au/parents_guide_to_therapies/parents_guide_to_therapies.html/context/1534)

There is a solid research base for effective assessment and instruction for students with disability that includes practices based on the principles of applied behaviour analysis, explicit and direct instruction, frequent formative evaluation, mnemonic and cognitive strategy instruction (Alberto & Troutman, 2011; Archer & Hughes, 2011; Courtade, Test, & Cook, 2015; Kleinheksel, 2003; Reid & Lieneman, 2006). A number of sources that describe research-based practices are now available. For example, for students with autism spectrum disorder, the recently released Findings and Conclusion: National Standards Project, Phase 2 produced by the National Autism Centre (2015) in the US describes the level of research support for interventions. There are also more general websites such as <http://www.bestevidence.org/> and <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigorousvid/index.html> and those that focus on specific areas such as transition to post-school settings <http://transitionta.org/effectivepractices> that are designed to provide information to policy makers, principals and teachers. Although there is no guarantee that a research-based intervention will work for a particular student, information about powerful intervention strategies for students with disability are available. The key question is whether or not these strategies are used regularly in NSW schools.

Research with special education teachers in Australia to determine the level of use of evidence-based instructional strategies found that some evidence-based practices were used regularly, but many practices that have been shown to be ineffective were also used weekly or more by about half the teachers we surveyed. We also found a substantial minority of teachers reported that they never or rarely used some effective strategies (Carter, Stephenson & Strnadova,

2011). Other research we have carried out shows that schools may often use practices that have no research support and that such practices may be supported or passively condoned by education authorities (Carter & Stephenson, 2012; Stephenson, 2009; Stephenson, Carter, & Wheldall, 2007). As long as some schools and teachers continue to waste time and resources on interventions that are known to be ineffective, in preference to those likely to be effective, the education of students with disability will be compromised.

There appears to be limited Australian research on the practices of regular teachers working with included students. Shaddock (2007, p. 191) reported that teachers tend to make adjustments that “require little planning and that can be made efficiently and economically of time, effort and resources. Furthermore, these mainstream teachers favour approaches that do not disrupt the organisation of their class and that do not involve elaborate or time-consuming individualisation for one student.” Shaddock noted that given the time constraints for regular teachers “their uptake of the full range of recommended strategies is unlikely” (p. 192). It would appear then, that even teachers who are more positive about inclusion are unlikely to making extensive use of research-based practices.

We strongly endorse the work of the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) and we particularly note and endorse their findings reported in “Great Teaching, Inspired Learning: What does the evidence tell us about effective teaching?”, “How schools can improve literacy and numeracy performance and why it (still) matters” and “Reading Recovery: A sector-wide analysis” These reports note the importance of teachers being well-informed and well prepared in evidence-based practices, explicit instruction and ongoing monitoring of student learning. The report on Reading Recovery also well illustrates the way systems and sectors can continue to promote and implement less effective interventions for students with literacy difficulties if they do not keep abreast of research developments. Some form of accountability is needed to ensure that the NSW DoE does not continue to develop, endorse and promote professional learning that contradicts research and ignores recommendations contained in CESE reports (see, for example, the multi-million dollar roll out of L3 (Language, Learning and Literacy) program that ignores research into effective beginning reading instruction.)

## **QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATORS**

All students are entitled to access an education that provides effective programs and instruction. For most students with disability, this will be achieved through personalised or individualised planning and the provision of suitable adjustments to allow access to the national curriculum. In addition, where appropriate, students with disability may require instruction related to self-determination, social and communication skills, preparation for meaningful employment, and independent living. Specialist teachers need to possess not only the relevant skills to provide these programs and instruction, but also to

mentor and support regular classroom teachers and school learning support officers in implementing evidence-based practices.

There is a shortage of research that links teacher education and qualifications directly to student outcomes, but there is emerging research to show that students with disability who are taught by a teacher with a special education qualification do better in both reading and math than students with a teacher without special education qualifications. Teachers with higher level qualifications are more effective in boosting math achievement (Feng & Sass, 2013). There is more research to show that trained special educators are more likely to use effective practices in their classroom, but this research has not gone on to measure student outcomes (for example, Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005; Sindelar, Daunic & Rennells, 2004). In the specific area of transition from school, crucial for supporting students with disability to move into employment, it was found that special educators who had more training (through both initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning) in the area of transition were much more likely to provide transition services (Morningstar & Beitz, 2013).

It is disturbing then that surveys of teachers working in special education settings in Australia show that around 30 to 40% are not qualified in special education (Principal's Association for Specialist Schools, 2010; Thomas, 2009). Recent data from a survey carried out by one of our doctoral students provided evidence that in NSW, 37% of teachers working in support classes that included students with ASD did not have a special education qualification (Ho, Stephenson & Carter, in press). By way of comparison, researchers in the US bemoan the shortage of qualified special educators there, with around 12% of teachers in special education positions unqualified (McLesky & Billingsley, 2008). As far as we are aware, there are no publicly available figures regarding the qualifications of teachers in support positions in regular schools, although in NSW a survey of itinerant behavior support teachers (who are now placed in school support positions) indicated that 53% had post-graduate special education qualifications (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2010).

An analysis of a sample of advertisement for teachers to fill special education and support positions carried out at MUSEC (Stephenson & Carter, 2014) made the concerning finding that most advertisements did not require applicants to hold a special education qualification, but that the Catholic and independent sectors were more likely than government schools to require special education qualifications. This reluctance to ask for special education qualifications may be linked to a shortage of appropriately qualified teachers as noted by the 2012 Review of the Disability Standards for Education. Since there is no requirement to be appropriately qualified for a special education position, and those teachers who do gain an additional qualification are not rewarded financially there is little incentive for teachers to undertake additional study to gain a qualification. We commend the efforts by NSW DoE to increase the number of qualified staff by providing cadetships and the like, but we also think an appropriate qualification in special education should be a requirement of special education and support positions.

We support the current NSW DoE practice of appointing a support teacher to every school as part of the “Every Student, Every School” initiative. We note however, that “Every Student, Every School” has not resulted in an increase in the number of specialist teachers employed to support students with disability: rather it has resulted in a reallocation of existing teachers. We strongly believe, that such teachers should be appropriately qualified. Recommendations 14, 29 and 30 from the 2010 Inquiry support our position that support teachers in regular schools should hold an appropriate additional qualification in special education as well as a regular teaching qualification. We also believe it is crucial that teachers in segregated settings (units and schools) hold special education qualifications.

It is also of concern that most of these positions are fractional with many schools having only a 1 day per week allocation. It is well recognized that students performing ‘at minimum standard’ on NAPLAN assessments are at some risk of not making adequate progress. Unless the allocation of Learning and Support Teachers reflects the percentage of students performing at or below the NAPLAN minimum standard, schools will continue to be under-resourced to support all students in need of specialist help.

Data from 2016 reveal that at a Year 9 level, 23.5% of students who participated in the Reading assessment and 20% of students who participated in the Numeracy assessment performed at or below minimum standard. At a Year 3 level the percentages were 12.5% in Reading and 14.6% in Numeracy. Students who are below the national minimum standard have not achieved the learning outcomes expected for their year level. They are at risk of being unable to progress satisfactorily at school without targeted intervention. “It should be noted that students who are performing at the national minimum standard may also require additional assistance to enable them to achieve their potential” (NAP edu.au). With an increased number of students with significant disability being enrolled in mainstream classes, the allocation of resources to support students with ‘low level’ disabilities such as dyslexia and/or learning difficulty (i.e. students typically performing at or below the minimum standard) has actually declined.

## **REGULAR TEACHERS**

For students with mild disabilities, literacy and numeracy are crucial skills in early education that allow students to progress not only within the education system, but to gain employment and live independent lives after schooling. Classroom teachers are responsible for initial instruction and monitoring of student progress. Where initial difficulties have been identified, regular teachers may collaborate with special educators to plan and evaluate more intense intervention. For students who do not progress with this level of intervention, it is appropriate for special educators to provide intensive and explicit instruction that has been individually designed on the basis of careful assessment of student skills (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010).



Regular teachers, with the support of special educators when appropriate, need to be able to differentiate instruction, monitor student progress and identify students who need more intensive supports. Thus initial teacher preparation must include not only relevant content but also practical experience with coaching and feedback for skills related to the education of students with disability. The education of students with disabilities must be an integral part of all initial teacher education programs and regular teachers need to be familiar with frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning which allow proactive curriculum planning and the individualising of instruction and assessment (Brownell et al., 2010). The current AITSL standards appropriately require all teachers to have skills and knowledge in the area of teaching students with disability, but there is no mechanism for monitoring actual course content and teacher's actual knowledge and practice.

## **PRESERVICE TEACHERS**

Teacher preparation has a crucial role to play in improving access and outcomes for students with disability, but research that links the content of university teacher education programs to teacher practices in classrooms and on to actual student outcomes is sparse. This applies both to the preparation of general classroom teachers and to specialist educators. In a report on better preparing educators to meet the needs of diverse learners, the Council of Chief State School Officers (2015) in the US strongly recommended that general education teachers must be prepared to provide "core instruction that is accessible and differentiated" and that "Special education teachers, ELL specialists, and other school personnel must be ready to provide the increasingly intense academic and behavioral instruction" required by students with special education needs.

A recent nationwide study of 4<sup>th</sup> year teacher education students (Carter, Stephenson, & Hopper, 2015) suggested that late-stage preservice teachers failed to consistently distinguish between practices with a strong evidence base and those that do not have strong research support, complicating attempts to foster the adoption of research-based practice.

## **UNIVERSITY COURSES AND UNITS**

This year two specialist centres in special education were closed, one at Newcastle University and one at Macquarie University. These centres both had a focus on the education of special educators and on research on the education of students with disability. We are concerned that the amalgamation of these centres with general education departments will lead to:

- a loss of special education expertise
- courses and units being taught by academics without experience, expertise and research backgrounds in special/inclusive education

- lack of input by special education academics into all general teacher preparation courses and
- a reduction in special education research in NSW.

There is substantial evidence that regular class teachers often struggle to provide adequate accommodations to students with special learning needs, particularly in the absence of adequate support (Shaddock, 2007). Qualified and skilled special education support educators are key to providing high quality support and ensuring optimum outcomes in inclusive classrooms. The loss of specialist centres in NSW universities represents a concerning trend.

## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

Teacher professional learning is an important element in maintaining and increasing the skills of teachers to work with diverse students using evidence-based practices, but the professional learning must be effective in changing what teachers do. Often professional learning in literacy and numeracy includes information that contradicts what is known about effective instruction for students with disability, as the actual content of professional learning endorsed by bodies such as the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) is not vetted against any objective standards and approval is given based on the promoters claims about which AITSL standards are addressed. The suite of online courses sourced from the UK that are used in NSW and which have been widely adopted by education departments in other states may raise teacher awareness but is unlikely to provide sufficient training in evidence-based practices. It is likely to be unrealistic to expect teachers to read, evaluate and apply the research literature published in journals. “One-shot” workshops and presentations are also ineffective in changing practice, but they may introduce teachers to new concepts and practices (Alexander, Ayres, & Smith, 2015). The relatively new area of implementation science (Kelly & Perkins, 2014) provides a framework for these efforts, which must be co-ordinated by education systems and sectors. A team-based approach, where collaboration supports the use of new practices and demonstration, coaching and consultation are provided to the team, is recommended. New technologies using video capture for coaching could be used here.

A team-based approach as described above has been adopted by the DoE in implementing its Early Action for Success strategy but unfortunately the content of the professional learning does not reflect the research in literacy and numeracy instruction for ‘at risk’ learners. (Neilson & Howell, 2015)

## **AITSL STANDARDS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND THEIR PREPARATION**

It is clear that the employment of qualified special educators in settings that educate students with disability only, and in inclusive settings, would increase the likelihood of students gaining access to effective interventions. We thus recommend that NSW DoE, NESA (formerly BOSTES) and other NSW systems

and sectors work with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to develop additional standards for accreditation of special educators and for the teacher education courses that prepare them. This could be informed by the work undertaken at the University of Newcastle by Ian Dempsey and Kerry Dally and by existing standards for special educators developed in other countries.-We believe there should be some financial reward for higher qualifications. Special education qualifications should be obtained after general teacher training because teachers need a deep knowledge of the content to be taught as well as knowledge and skills in meeting the needs of students with disability.

The development of standards for special educators and special education teacher preparation would need to take into consideration not only the preparation of teachers to teach in stand alone special education classes, but also the preparation of those supporting regular educators in inclusive settings. Both positions need sound knowledge and skills in research-based assessment, monitoring, teaching, programing and evaluation and skills in collaborating with families and with other professionals. Idol (2006) noted that support teachers in inclusive schools may be used in a variety of ways – for consultation with class teachers and teaching assistants, co-operative and team teaching, as members of learning support teams as well as providing services directly to students with disability and supporting teachers to make appropriate adjustments. Cummings, Atkins, Allison and Cole (2008) suggested more specifically that special educators could assist in the administration of formative assessments with fidelity, assist in educational diagnosis, suggest scientifically-based instructional strategies, and provide modelling, support and feedback to other professionals to help them implement and evaluate interventions. Potentially, specialist teachers can also support classroom teachers to develop knowledge and skills in the use of new technologies such as digitised text and speech-to-print software to enable all learners to access more complex material and to generate text (Brownell et al., 2010). Clearly if the educational outcomes for students with disabilities are to be improved, a highly skilled special educator is a must in every special education classroom and in every mainstream school. The support that such educators can provide to both students and teachers requires that the role be awarded to well-trained teachers who are appointed for more than a few hours each week.

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