

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

**Organisation:** Australian Association of Special Education, NSW Chapter  
**Date received:** 22 February 2017

---



## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The NSW Chapter of the ***Australian Association of Special Education (Inc.)*** appreciates the opportunity make a submission 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*.

We have chosen to focus our submission on four key issues:

- the improvement of transition planning for students with disabilities (a)
- the necessity for qualified specialist teachers in support positions and special education positions (b)
- effective preparation for pre-service teachers (c)
- the provision of evidence-based professional learning for in-service teachers (c)

These issues are most closely aligned with the aims of our association and we feel we have the expertise and research-based knowledge to provide quality advice to the inquiry. In addition, we believe that “equitable access” means ALL students with a disability should have access to an appropriately qualified special educator and an effective educational program (as outlined in our position paper, submitted as supplementary documentation to the inquiry).

We also comment on the response of NSW Department of Education to the 2010 inquiry, particularly Recommendations 13, 14, 18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31.

## **THE AIMS of AASE**

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc. is the national peak body of professionals, other paraprofessionals and community members with expertise and/or interest in the education of children and young people with special education needs.

The key aims of AASE are to:

- a) Provide educational leadership to the professional and wider community
- b) Advocate for quality education for all
- c) Commission, participate in and disseminate quality research to inform educational practice
- d) Arrange, promote and facilitate high quality professional learning events and conferences
- e) Coach, mentor and model best practice in teaching and leadership
- f) Build partnerships with universities, service providers and the community
- g) Actively influence policy and decision making

## **TRANSITION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY**

AASE advocates for quality outcomes for all students, with a need to use a lifespan perspective on learning and support. There are many critical transition points for people, and these highlight the need for effective systems of support and effective instructional methodologies. Typically students will transition into school from home or a before-school setting (childcare or pre-school), from primary to high school and finally from high school to work, further education or other post-school option.

Although transition planning is not federally mandated in Australia, as it is in other countries, timely and careful planning of schooling transitions for students with disabilities is still considered to be best practice (NSW Parliament, 2012). One of the major recommendations of the Standing Committee on Social Issues (NSW Parliament, 2012) was “that legislation be introduced to mandate transition planning for students with additional or complex needs” (2011, p. xi). This Committee also raised issues such as problematic access to and transfer of information, funding related to educational transitions of students with disabilities, fragmented responsibility for these transitions across various specialised services that do not always communicate effectively with each other. Yet, many of these concerns remain not addressed five years later.

Transition from primary to secondary education can be challenging for students with disabilities (Strnadová & Cumming, 2016), yet this transition seems to be neglected in NSW schools. According to a recent survey study (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), school visits and orientation programs in term 4 prior to transition to a secondary school, which are considered best practice (Carter Brock, & Trainor, 2014), are common in NSW schools. There is however an inconsistency in regards to the execution of this practice. The reported visits varied in length from one to four half-days, and only a couple of schools

described more intensive transition programs. The respondents in this study called for better collaboration between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, not only prior to but also post-transition.

There are similar concerns about transition to post-school life. Strnadová and Cumming's (2014) research into transition practices in NSW schools revealed that while some evidence-based practices are in place when it comes to transition planning for post-school life (e.g., supporting students with disabilities in visiting work expositions, and arranging for them work experience in years 10 to 12), other important evidence-based practices were missing (e.g., supporting students' self-determination and independence, and developing individual transition plans).

Therefore, AASE suggests a number of recommendations, which are consistent with the Standing Committee on Social Issues' recommendations (NSW Parliament, 2012):

- There is a need for specific funding for transition. Low funding levels for students with disabilities was also acknowledged by the Standing Committee (NSW Parliament, 2012). Funding should include: (a) workload allocations for teachers to conduct transition-related activities; (b) budgets to fund appropriately qualified transition specialists to liaise with schools, parents, students, and outside agencies/employers; and (c) support personnel to accompany students on site visits and work placements if necessary.
- There is a need for better collaboration between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, not only prior to, but also post-transition. There is a need for clarification of roles of primary and secondary schools when it comes to transition planning, as currently this tends to be seen as "the other party's responsibility". The length and amount of students' visits in their future secondary schools should be extended, as per students' individual needs, and should start early in the school year.
- There is a need for: (a) more work placements to be available for students with disabilities, and (b) more plentiful and well structured work experiences. This would provide students with more opportunities to become familiar with the work environment.
- Transition assessment and planning should be student-centered and holistic. Students with disability, including those with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, need to actively participate in the transition planning process, which is currently not a common practice (Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016). The meaningful involvement of students with disabilities in transition planning also dictates the need to prepare them for this (Beamish, Davies & Meadows, 2012).
- Transition to post-school option planning for students with disabilities, including individual transition plan (ITP) development, should be mandatory. Without a requirement that mandates best practice, in regard to transition processes, many schools in NSW may not feel compelled to create ITPs, teach academic and vocational skills related to transition, involve the student and family in transition planning and goal setting, and provide paid/unpaid work experience for students with disability

transitioning from high school to post-school life (O'Neill, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016, p.54). To avoid poor outcomes for students with disability, AASE recommends that NSW policy oblige schools to provide students with student-focused, evidence-based transition planning and instruction. It is also important to note that this planning should begin as early as possible, and certainly no later than the student's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## **NEED FOR QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATORS**

AASE NSW (Inc.) strongly supports the NSW Department of Education initiative of placing a Learning and Support teacher in every school under the "Every Student, Every School" initiative. This is the first step in providing support to the many students with disabilities and special needs enrolled in inclusive settings, and their teachers. We also strongly support the recommendation from the 2010 report that school learning support teams include at least one member with formal special education qualifications (Recommendation 14). At present, there is no requirement that Learning and Support teachers hold an appropriate qualification. A specialist teacher, like a specialist doctor, cannot claim to be a specialist unless they actually have specialised skills and knowledge.

We strongly advocate that support teachers, transition specialists, and teachers in special education units and schools, **MUST** have a qualification in special education or inclusive education that incorporates the following components:

- curriculum-based assessment and monitoring of student learning
- effective programming,
- effective explicit teaching strategies in basic literacy and numeracy skills, cognitive skills, social and communication skills, and in
- teaching, mentoring and modeling effective practices for other teachers and School Learning Support Officers.

The report from the 2010 inquiry made several recommendations in support of increasing the number of qualified special educators in schools (recommendations 14, 29, 30) and AASE NSW commends the ongoing schemes run by NSW Department of Education to support teachers who wish to gain special education qualifications. Current evidence suggests that many teachers in support and special education positions are not qualified. Although the data collected by Thomas (2009) that showed 40% of staff in special schools lacked special education qualifications, are outdated, there is little to suggest qualification rates in NSW have improved. For example, a recent survey (Ho, Stephenson & Carter, in press) found that 37% of teachers across systems in NSW, on autism-specific classes, or on special education classes, including students with autism spectrum disorders, did not have a special education qualification.

Research on advertisements for teachers to fill special education positions has shown a reluctance on the part of employing bodies in government, catholic and independent sectors to require special education qualifications for teachers in support positions (Stephenson & Carter, 2014). In this 2014 study, 115

advertisements across sectors in NSW across preschool, primary and secondary settings were examined. Only 28.8% included a special education qualification as a criterion. As long as qualifications are not a requirement for special education or support positions, these positions will continue to be filled by unqualified staff.

We could make similar points about the lack of a requirement for appropriate qualifications for people who take on consultancy and leadership positions related to children with special education needs, including those who experience difficulty with literacy and numeracy.

Related to the need for more qualified special education teachers, AASE notes with concern, the lack of special education centres in NSW universities. Two long-standing centres (within the University of Newcastle and Macquarie University), that specialised in research on teaching students with disability and special needs and in providing teacher education for special educators, closed this year. There are now no university centres dedicated to teaching students with disability and special education needs. The amalgamation of special education with general education is likely to lead to the employment of fewer academics with special education qualifications and experience. This increases the likelihood of less qualified staff teaching in the area and less Australian research into issues affecting students with disability and special needs. It also means that there is unlikely to be input from qualified academics into the mandatory special education unit and into embedding of practical teaching strategies for students with disability into other units in preservice teacher education (as per Recommendations 27 and 28 of the 2010 report).

To progress the acceptance of the importance of qualified special educators, AASE NSW recommends that NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), in conjunction with the Australian Institute for teaching and School Development, develop standards for special educators and for the university courses that prepare them. We would hope to see a time when only qualified and certified special educators were employed in special education and support positions.

## **PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION**

AASE NSW was one of the advocates for the introduction of a mandatory unit in special education in preservice teacher education and strongly believes such a unit should be maintained, along with the embedding of relevant content in other units throughout teacher education courses. AASE NSW believes it is crucial the units on special and inclusive education are taught by academics with both qualifications and experience in special education, and where possible by those who are actively researching in the area. As noted above, with the demise of dedicated special education centres, this is less likely to occur.

Preservice teachers being taught by an academic with a research interest in special or inclusive education matters. Problems in classroom behavior management are one of the top reasons teachers leave the profession. With the increase in enrolments of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms,

including those who display challenging behaviours, there is a pressing need for pre-service teacher instruction in positive and proactive strategies in behavior management (O'Neill, 2015; Stephenson, O'Neill, & Carter, 2015).

The examination of pre-service teacher preparation into classroom behaviour management by O'Neill and Stephenson (2012) showed the importance of having academics that conduct research in the areas they teach. Those with a research background in classroom management or special education included more strategies that were evidence or research-based compared to those who did not have a research background in the area. The review of inclusive education courses in pre-service teacher programs by Stephenson, O'Neill, and Carter (2015) also showed low numbers of courses being taught by academics with a research background in special or inclusive education. With dedicated special education centres disappearing, the likelihood of preservice teachers receiving their inclusive education or classroom management coursework instruction from an academic with a research background in either area is becoming slimmer.

A recent Australia-wide survey of final year preservice teachers (Carter, Stephenson & Hopper, 2014, <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol40/iss6/5/>) showed that the judgements of beginning teachers about the effectiveness of instructional strategies did not reflect the scientific evidence available. Given that there is a large knowledge base of effective practices for students with disability and special education needs it is of considerable concern that teacher education courses do not appear to produce graduates with a sound knowledge of effective strategies.

We would advocate that the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) consider including a representative with expertise in special education to provide advice during the processes of approving teacher education courses in NSW, to ensure that courses contain information about evidence-based practices for students with special education needs. This would be beneficial in maintaining the critical balance of theory and practice for preservice teachers as they develop their capacity, confidence and knowledge of ways to enhance authentic and valuable engagement experiences for ALL students (Grima-Farrell, 2015; 2017)

## **INSERVICE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

AASE strongly supports the provision of opportunities for ongoing professional learning. One of its main activities is to provide information to members and others on evidence-based education practices for students with disability through professional learning sessions, conferences and the production of high quality journals.

The Quality Teaching Council (QTC) provides advice to the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) on a range of important matters relating to the skills of teachers of student's with special needs. The QTC's advice covers

- teacher accreditation policy
- teaching standards
- ongoing professional learning for teachers
- initiatives to support quality teaching.
- recommendations for initial teacher education programs for accreditation
- endorsement of providers of continuing professional development for teachers

We support the efforts of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) to endorse organisations and courses that provide professional learning to teachers. It is important that the principles that underpin the advice of the QTC are consistent with the evidence concerning the education of students with special needs. This applies particularly to the endorsement of providers of professional development of in-service teachers, across all the sectors. In addition, it is essential that there be independent evaluation of the content of professional learning to ensure teachers are not given misleading or incorrect information.

In AASE's 2012 position paper on evidence based practices, we recommended;

- That state and federal education authorities take responsibility for promoting evidence- based practices and advising against disproven approaches. Currently, education authorities do not consistently provide this advice.
- That state and federal education authorities, in consultation with special education researchers and knowledgeable professionals, develop a set of criteria, relevant to Australian schools, for judging the standard of evidence available about educational practices.
- That schools and teachers accept some responsibility for establishing the level of research evidence for existing and proposed practices. Education systems and sectors should provide advice and support for this endeavour.
- That state and federal education authorities provide clear guidelines for teachers and schools who wish to trial new and unresearched or unsupported practices. These guidelines should include a requirement for a quality evaluation of the practice, using student outcome measures.

The creation of the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), in association with the NSW Department of Education in 2012, was a positive development. Its documented goal is to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and accountability of education in New South Wales, for all students. Within its operations, CESE has promoted a professional learning clearinghouse, evidence hierarchy and toolkits on effective practices in teaching and learning. It is important that evidence standards, such as CESE's, are consistently applied to NESA endorsed teacher education programs and professional learning courses. AASE is particularly focused on ensuring that teacher education programs are evaluated with reference to clear and measurable student outcomes.



AASE NSW has met with representatives of DoE to express our concern about aspects of current DoE practice. We have been particularly concerned about the literacy component of the Early Action for Success (EAfS) strategy that advocates practices for early literacy instruction that are not research-based. Research on reading acquisition clearly shows that children learning to read, especially those who experience difficulties, need systematic and explicit instruction in letter/sound relationships. Such instruction is not part of the L3 literacy program, and thus effective strategies for providing this systematic and explicit instruction are not part of the professional learning provided to teachers who implement L3 (Neilson & Howell, 2015). The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation has reported that the available evidence shows that Reading Recovery, which is based on similar principles to L3 is a less than ideal approach.

As decision-making about educational practices is devolved to schools and principals, it is crucial that there are policies and procedures in place to support school communities in adopting effective, evidence-based practices and to provide reliable and trustworthy advice.

## REFERENCES

- Beamish, W., Meadows, D., & Davies, M. (2012). Benchmarking teacher practice in Queensland transition programs for youth with intellectual disability and autism. *The Journal of Special Education*, 45, 227–241. doi:10.1177/0022466910366602.
- Carter, E., Brock, M., Trainor, A. (2014). Transition assessment and planning for youth with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, 47, 245-255.
- Carter, M., Stephenson, J., & Hopper, T. (2015). Factors in instructional decision-making, ratings of evidence and intended instructional practices of Australian final year teacher education students. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(6), 85-106. Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol40/iss6/5>
- Grima-Farrell, C. (2017). *What matters in a research to practice cycle? Teachers as researchers*. (1st ed.). Singapore: Springer. Retrieved from <http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9789811020858>
- Grima-Farrell, C. (2015). Mentoring pathways to enhancing the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 4, 255-268. doi:[10.1108/IJMCE-07-2015-0020](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-07-2015-0020)
- Ho, B. P. V., Stephenson, J., & Carter, M. (in press). Cognitive-behavioural approaches for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. A teacher survey. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*.
- Neilson, R., & Howell, S. (2015). A critique of the L3 early years literacy program. *Bulletin Learning Difficulties of Australia*, 47(3), 7-12. Retrieved from <https://www.ldaustralia.org/client/documents/Bulletin Winter 2015.pdf>
- NSW Parliament. Standing Committee on Social Issues. (2012). *Transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families (Report 45)*. Sydney, N.S.W.: Legislative Council.
- O'Neill, S. C. (2015). Preparing preservice teachers for inclusive classrooms: Does completing coursework on managing challenging behaviours increase their classroom management sense of efficacy? *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 40 (2) 117-140. doi:[10.1017/jse.2015.10](https://doi.org/10.1017/jse.2015.10)
- O'Neill, S., & Stephenson, J. (2012). Does classroom management coursework influence pre-service teachers' perceived preparedness or confidence? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28, 1131-1143. doi:[10.1016/j.tate.2012.06.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.06.008)
- O'Neill, S. C., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. (2016). Evidence-based transition planning practices for secondary students with disabilities: What has Australia signed up for? *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 40, 39-58. doi:10.1017/jse.2015.15.

Stephenson, J., & Carter, M. (2014). What do employers ask for in advertisements for special education positions? *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 38, 51-62. doi: 10.1017/jse.2014.3

Stephenson, J., O'Neill, S., & Carter, M. (2012). Teaching students with disabilities: A web-based examination of preparation of preservice primary school teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(5). doi:10.14221/ajte.2012v37n5.5  
Retreived from  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1757&context=ajte>

Strnadová, I. & Cumming, T.M. (2014). Importance of quality transition process for students with disabilities across settings: Learning from the current situation in New South Wales. *Australian Journal of Education*, 58, 318-336.

Strnadová, I. & Cumming, T. M. (2016). *Lifespan transitions and disability: A holistic perspective*. London, UK: Routledge.

Strnadová, I., Cumming, T.M., & Danker, J. (2016). Transitions for students with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorders: Carer and teacher perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 40, 141-156. doi: 10.1017/jse.2016.2

Thomas, T. (2009). The age and qualifications of special education staff in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 33, 109–116. doi:10.1375/ajse.33.2.109