

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

**Organisation:** UNSW Sydney Special and Inclusive Education Group

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## School of Education

### INTRODUCTION

The Special and Inclusive Education Research Group at UNSW Sydney would like to 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*. As active researchers and teacher educators in the areas of inclusive education, transitions for individuals with disabilities, and managing challenging behaviours, we will focus our submission on these areas with regards to:

- ensuring that special education positions are staffed by teachers who have a qualification in special or inclusive education,
- that pre- and in-service education for teachers should be firmly derived from evidence-based practices, and
- improving quality of transition planning and instruction for students with disabilities.

### **Special and Inclusive Education Research Group @ UNSW Sydney**

The Special and Inclusive Education Research Group (SIERG) aims to support the use of evidence-based practices in special and inclusive education, through our high quality, accredited MEd Special Education program, our evidence-based core courses in the undergraduate and post-graduate pre-service teaching programs, and via Professional Learning activities. The Special Education and Inclusive Education Research group has a strong commitment to conducting research that aims to enrich the lives of children, adolescents and adults with disabilities by providing evidence-based supports to help them succeed in inclusive environments at school, at home, and in the community. Our high quality research and that of other academics invested in evidence-based practices informs our teaching.

The members of the SIERG are also members of the: Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; US organisation), the International Association of Special Education (IASE), Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Australia, and the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE). Our research into inclusive education, research to practice, challenging behaviours, and lifespan transitions is disseminated at highly esteemed, national and international special education conferences, and via peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and books. The team members also serve on numerous boards of high quality research journals in special education and teacher education. Given the above, we feel we possess the expertise to provide advice to the inquiry on these matters.

We have provided comment on the response of NSW Department of Education to the 2010 enquiry, particularly to Recommendations 13, 14, 15, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 29.

### **Recommendations 13, 14, & 15:**

#### **The Need for Qualified Special Education (Learning Support) Teachers in Every School, and on the Learning Support Team and guidelines**

The UNSW SIERG strongly supports the NSW Department of Education's "Every Student, Every School" initiative to provide a suitably qualified learning support teacher in every school that would serve on the school's learning support team. We believe this is an important move towards improving the inclusion and support of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. This educator *must* have a special education qualification. They *must* have knowledge, skills, and understanding in evidence-based instructional and behavioural strategies, and transition planning.

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. This is imperative to ensure that these teachers have the specialised skills and knowledge necessary to provide appropriate instruction to students with special education needs. These skills include: data based decision making informed by curriculum-based and behavioural assessment, explicit evidence-based teaching strategies, and the ability to be a mentor and model.

We strongly support the development and publishing of guidelines for Learning Support Teams, and that transition planning must be a key responsibility of the team.

### **Recommendations 24 & 25:**

#### **The need for guidelines on the development of Individual Education Plans and time to plan**

Although the NSW Department of Education has adopted personalised learning plans to meet the needs of students with additional learning needs, it is our experience as teacher educators, that in-service teachers have little understanding of what an IEP should contain, or how to develop annual goals and short term objectives based on assessment. The creation of an assessment-based IEP takes time, and involves discussions with multiple stakeholders including the young person and their family. In fact, the young person needs to be actively involved in any planning of their future in order to own the planning. This is consistent with the requirement of person-centeredness. Yet, the focus on person-centred planning is poorly understood and addressed in NSW government schools (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014).

In our recent examination of personalised learning plans for young people in custodial environments, it was clear that teachers understood assessment informed planning, however, the alignment of assessment to educational goals and post-secondary transition goals was poor (O'Neill, Cumming, & Strnadová, in press), this

is despite teachers' understanding of the importance of and desires to engage these at-risk students in an education (Strnadová, O'Neill, & Cumming, in press).

We recommend that learning support teachers receive explicit instruction in IEP formation, and in person-centred planning that reflect the evidence-base. We also suggest that clear guidelines and supporting materials are made available to increase the quality of IEPs, and that sufficient time is allocated to learning support teachers to lead IEP teams, and gather the data from all stakeholders to create *and* evaluate IEPs. Classroom teachers have an important role in IEPs and must be released from their classroom teaching responsibilities to work collaboratively with special educators to create IEPs. Young people will also need to be explicitly taught how to self-advocate.

### **Transition Planning of Students with Disabilities and Their Families**

Our research suggests that there is insufficient teacher knowledge in: inclusive education practices (Carter, Stephenson, & Strnadová, 2011), proactive classroom behavior management practices (O'Neill, 2015; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012), and transition planning and support (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016). This is worrying given Australia's commitment to United Nation protocols for such as the Convention for Persons with Disabilities. Despite no federal mandate for the provision of individual education programs or transition plans, the signing of international and national conventions does make us morally bound to provide both (see O'Neill, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016), along with the use of evidence based practices in instruction and behaviour management.

In 2010, the NSW Parliamentary Committee recommended that additional resources and time be allocated to learning support teachers to develop individual education plans (IEPs). Transition plans and planning are an integral part of IEPs (O'Neill, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016). We are concerned at teachers' lack of preparation or knowledge in the area of transition planning in NSW (O'Neill, Cumming, & Strnadová, in press; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016). Without adequate preparation, learning support teachers or transition specialists in high schools will struggle to address transitions adequately, leading to undue stress for students, their families, and teachers, as well as poor educational and life outcomes (Sitlington, Neubert, & Clark, 2010).

There is, however, a depth of knowledge on evidence-based transition practices (see National Technical Assistant Center for Transitions, n.d). This knowledge is seldom offered to teachers as professional learning or courses in NSW. This is likely due to transition planning not being mandatory in Australia. The post-graduate course offered at UNSW (EDST5129 *Transitions in Lives of Students with Disabilities*) is, to our knowledge, the only post-graduate course dedicated to transition planning for individuals with disabilities in NSW. Likewise, the professional learning we offer includes a strong focus on transition planning for students with disabilities across the life-span.

We recommend that all special education programs include a course with a depth of evidence-based transition practices or increase their content in transition planning as part of instruction associated with the IEP. The NSW Department of Education,

Catholic Education Office, and the Association for Independent Schools should all look for ways to offer increased professional learning in this underserved area.

## **Recommendations 27, 28, and 29**

### **The need for pre-service teacher preparation in inclusive education effective practices**

Inclusive education is a whole-school responsibility and all educators share the obligation of ensuring that all students achieve educational outcomes appropriate to their individual learning needs. Quality teaching is fundamental to inclusion and student learning. Thus, quality teacher education is critical to the development of committed and capable teaching professionals who can implement validated evidence-based practices to enhance effective student engagement and growth (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; ARACY, 2013, Grima-Farrell, 2015).

The UNSW SIERG members are highly skilled (and award winning) pre-service teacher educators in the area of special and inclusive education and classroom management. We strongly believe that *all* teachers must have foundation knowledge, skills, and understanding in evidence-based instructional and behaviour management strategies. Our research, and that of other Australian academics indicates that although pre-service teachers are completing a mandatory course in inclusive education, as newly graduating and experienced teachers, most report knowledge of only a narrow range of evidence-based instructional and behaviour management practices (Carter, Stephenson & Hopper, 2014; Grima-Farrell, 2015; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012; Stephenson, O'Neill, & Carter, 2012).

In 2010, the Committee recommended incorporating and embedding additional strategies and practical skills in teaching students with special needs (Recommendation 27), and that such training be included in the national agenda (Recommendation 28). The AITSL standards now include standards associated with educating students with special needs in mainstream classrooms, and these must be explicitly addressed in pre-service teacher education programs. The 2014 BOSTES report into initial teacher education in the area of inclusive education was mostly positive of NSW providers. The main challenge that exists for pre-service teacher educators remains the research to practice gap: imparting strategies does not guarantee the transfer of use into the classroom (Grima-Farrell, 2015; 2017).

We recommend that pre-service teacher programs require that foundation, evidence-based, inclusive education strategies be demonstrated during professional experience placements. This will require academics with research interests and experience in inclusive education to design and teach the curriculum of the mandatory courses, and provide clear guidance to supervising teachers in what competencies must be demonstrated. The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) should continue to conduct cyclical reviews of initial teacher education programs in this important area and ensure that academics in special and inclusive education serve as panel members.

## OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Special and Inclusive Education Research Group at UNSW Sydney provides the following recommendations:

- The development and publishing of guidelines for Learning Support Teams.
- A requirement that learning support teachers receive explicit instruction in IEPs that reflect evidence-based practices.
- The development of clear guidelines and supporting materials for teachers to increase the quality of IEPs.
- Sufficient time allocated to learning support teachers to lead IEP teams and gather the data from all stakeholders to create and evaluate IEPs.
- The inclusion of a course with a depth of evidence-based transition practices and planning as part of instruction associated with the IEP.
- A requirement that pre-service teacher programs require that foundation, evidence-based, inclusive education strategies be demonstrated during professional experience placements.
- A requirement that academics with research interests and qualifications in special and inclusive education design and teach the curriculum of the mandatory courses, and provide clear guidance to supervising teachers in what competencies must be demonstrated.
- Cyclical reviews of initial teacher education programs in special and inclusive education continue to be conducted by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), with academics in special and inclusive education serving as panel members.

The UNSW Sydney Special and Inclusive Education Group submission was prepared by:

*Dr Sue O'Neill,  
Associate Professor Therese Cumming,  
Associate Professor Iva Strnadová, and  
Dr Christine Grima-Farrell*

Address: c/- School of Education, UNSW Sydney, NSW 2052

Phone: (02) 9385 3736

Website: <https://education.arts.unsw.edu.au/disciplines/special-education/research/>

This submission has been authorised by Professor Chris Davison, Head of School, School of Education, UNSW Sydney.

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