

**Submission  
No 17**

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL  
SETTINGS**

**Organisation:** The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd)

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## **Submission to the NSW Upper House Inquiry into Children and Young People with Disability in New South Wales Educational Settings**

The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to **to improve the quality of education for individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties in Australia** across all settings and to support families and all professionals and carers providing services to individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties by offering up-to-date, evidence-based, information on approaches and specific intervention strategies.

The board of InSpEd is advised by a panel of experts with qualifications and experience in the education of people with disabilities and includes leading Australian researchers in the field.

More information on the activities of InSpEd are at <https://www.insped.org.au/>

In our submission we will focus on **the importance of appropriately qualified special educators as an essential human resource to support students with disability and their teachers** and to **reduce barriers** due to inappropriate instruction, curriculum and behaviour management. The key driver of student outcomes is teacher quality. For students with disability, teacher quality encompasses teachers who have the range of skills outlined below in the InSpEd standards. InSpEd believes that the provision of at least one qualified special educator in every school would provide a valuable resource and support for regular educators and school leaders. We also believe that every student in a specialist setting should have a fully qualified specialist teacher. We acknowledge that NSW Department of Education is moving towards this goal, but progress is far too slow.

The need for teachers with specialist training is especially important since many effective strategies, including explicit and teacher-directed instruction and positive behaviour intervention and support, particularly for students with learning difficulties, intellectual disability and behaviour/emotional difficulties are based on the principles of applied behaviour analysis (ABA). These strategies are typically not included in initial teacher education programs. Most teacher education courses take a constructivist stance, advocating enquiry and problem-based approaches which have been shown to be ineffective for students with disability. The 2022 review of initial teacher education (Next steps: Report of the quality initial teacher review) recognised the lack of evidence-based practices such as explicit teaching and lack of preparation for teaching students with disability in initial teacher education programs. These deficiencies may be amended in the future, but the current teaching workforce is unlikely to be well equipped in these areas.

### **What are special educators and what can they do?**

A qualified special educator holds a special education qualification, generally accepted to be a minimum one-year full-time 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) or postgraduate (postgraduate diploma, master's) level. Special education courses in NSW that prepare special educators that meet the InSpEd standards are

offered at Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt University, Newcastle University, Sydney University, University of NSW and Wollongong University.

Special educators may be employed in any position devoted to supporting individuals with autism, intellectual and multiple disabilities, sensory and physical disabilities, behaviour/emotional difficulties, and learning disabilities. In 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 teacher assisting regular class teachers in a regular school, or as a special educator in a tutorial centre.

In identifying the requirements of effective education for student with disability, InSpEd has developed standards for special educators and for the courses that prepare them. The standards provide insight into the skills needed to provide research-based curriculum and instruction to students with disabilities in consultation with families/caregivers, students and relevant others.

The standards cover these key areas:

- Individual planning (including appropriate adjustments) in consultation with families/caregivers, students and other professionals
- Knowledge of effective, research-based instructional strategies including those based on applied behaviour analysis, explicit and direct instruction (especially in literacy and numeracy), and the use of assistive technology
- Knowledge of appropriate assessment and progress monitoring strategies, including curriculum-based assessment, and the ability to make educational decisions based on assessment and monitoring information
- Knowledge of programming, instruction and monitoring for students with high support needs, including those with complex communication needs.
- Expertise in positive behaviour support including functional behavioural assessment, the design and monitoring of behaviour support and intervention strategies and instruction of pro-social skills
- Knowledge of the Disability Standards for Education and other relevant laws and policies
- Skills in communication and collaboration with other teachers, families/caregivers, teacher assistants and other professionals, including an appreciation of cultural factors and the ability to provide advice regarding effective and ineffective practices
- Skills in providing professional learning, including coaching and feedback to other teachers and teaching assistants
- Knowledge of disability and its impact on learners
- Knowledge and skills in research methods, and in evaluating and using research to make evidence-based decisions on educational practices

These key areas provide an overview of the skills and knowledge that are required in a school to effectively support students with disability. See <https://www.insped.org.au/special-education-certification/#standards-for-eligibility>

## **How could special educators support students and assist in overcoming barriers and providing adequate support?**

There are many barriers to a quality education for students with disability in both segregated and inclusive settings. We will use some recent Australian studies involving students in NSW to illustrate some of the barriers and problems in current practice. These findings are similar to those reported in earlier studies and in the international literature and are likely similar for students with a range of disabilities. Research (Stephenson et al., 2021) that involved interviews with teachers, parents and principals of 60 students in mainstream schools, found that in regard to students on the autism spectrum, there were barriers identified at the student, teacher and school level. At the student level, participants identified many of the characteristics of autism (poor social skills, difficulties with change, sensory sensitivities) as barriers to inclusion. At the teacher level, they identified that poor and inappropriate teaching practices, lack of understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the time demands of catering for students were barriers. At the school level, they identified that a general lack of understanding of ASD, lack of support from teaching assistants (School Learning Support Officers in NSW), lack of support from specialist teachers, inappropriate behaviour management, difficulties with peers, lack of individualised planning (including planning to support social interaction and transitions), and poor communication with parents were barriers.

Later research in NSW on how schools make decisions about adjustments for students with disability, what these adjustments are and how they are monitored in regular classes in government schools (Carter et al., 2022a; 2022b; Stephenson et al., 2022) found that schools did try to make decisions that met perceived student needs but a limited palette of adjustments was provided, with heavy reliance on employing teaching assistants (often on a 1:1 basis) without specifying how they would support the student. In about one third of the participating schools, there was a focus on care, participation and safety as opposed to a broader educational focus to teach academic, social and other skills. This suggested that some schools may have been employing the same limited number of options across students, and that these options may not always meet student needs. Indeed, at least one participant in over half the schools believed that student needs were not being met. The adjustments that were provided tended to be “light touch” that did not require major changes to teaching practices or curriculum. Adjustments were often limited in areas such as communication and social skills, which may be crucial areas for students with disability.

In relation to individual planning there were some schools where student goals were clear, specific and measurable but in other schools, goals tended to be very broad or unclear and some participants stated they were unaware of any specific goals. Very few participants described regular monitoring of the effects of adjustments or of student learning. Best practice for students with disability includes regular and systematic monitoring of student learning through the collection of data, and it is of concern that so few schools reported this practice.

Other researchers have reported less than ideal provision for students with disability in NSW. For example, Cumming et al. (2020) reported a lack of quality individual transition planning for students with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability and suggested teachers needed more preparation in this area.

If a comparison is drawn between the deficiencies in current practice in many mainstream schools and the contribution that could be made by a qualified special educator employed as a support teacher, the benefits of a specialist teacher can be seen:

- Special educators are familiar with a wide range of possible research-based assessment and intervention strategies that could be used as appropriate adjustments for students with disabilities, thus broadening the range of effective strategies employed in schools
- Special educators can facilitate planning of adjustments with families and others as they have expertise in collaboration and consultation
- Special educators can support the effective use of teaching assistants as they can train them in effective intervention strategies to meet student goals and increase student independence by planning withdrawal of teaching assistant support
- Special educators can support regular classroom teachers by providing:
  - Consultation and collaboration on individual planning and effective practices with teachers, school leaders, families and other professionals
  - In class support for classroom teachers through assessment of student needs, co-teaching or providing coaching and feedback in the implementation of adjustments and through regular monitoring of student learning and the effect of adjustments
  - Small group or individual instruction for students who need more intensive support
  - Information about the impacts of disability on student learning
  - Assessment, planning interventions and monitoring interventions to deal with behaviours of concern using the principles of positive behaviour intervention and support
  - Support for teachers and schools to meet the requirements of disability legislation and policies
  - Information to keep teachers and school leaders abreast of current developments in research that informed the education of students with disability
  - Advice against the use of unproven, disproven, and potentially dangerous practices

For the minority of students with disability who are educated in special classes within mainstream schools or in special schools, the advantages of appropriately qualified class teachers and school leaders are similar. We take it for granted that appropriately qualified teachers are essential in high schools where specialist content knowledge is required for academic subjects, and the shortage of qualified maths and science teachers is cause for community concern. We would argue that the specialist knowledge required to educate students with more severe disabilities (especially those with cognitive impairment) is

similarly required and that all teachers of specialist classes and leaders in specialist settings should be qualified special educators.

## **What is the current position regarding special educators in NSW at present?**

### **Mainstream schools**

At the school level, NSW DoE has recommendations in place for Learning and Support Teams in schools to plan, deliver and evaluate educational programs for students with disability. The composition of teams is recommended to include school executives, class teachers, school counsellors and LASTs. All schools have a Learning and Support teacher (LAST) and the creation of these positions is to be commended. The role of LASTs is to provide support to teachers to implement effective, evidence-based practices and to assist in decision-making processes in planning adjustments. The difficulty is that **many of these positions are filled by teachers who do not hold special education qualifications**, In the research described above (Stephenson et al., 2022) only five of the 16 of the LASTs involved were qualified, with two currently studying for a qualification.

There are also Assistant Principals Learning and Support who work across several schools support LASTs and learning support teams in meeting student needs. We have no current information on the qualifications held by teachers in these positions.

### **Specialist settings**

We do not have statistics on the number of teachers in specialist classes and schools who are qualified, but the figures may be similar to those in Victoria. A recent survey of Victorian specialist schools found that just over one third of teachers had a qualification in special education (Pevevett & Stephenson, 2023). This represents a significant decline since 2007, when two thirds of teachers in specialist schools in Victoria were reported to have a special education qualification (Thomas, 2009). We would expect that schools in rural and remote areas would have more difficulty employing qualified LASTs and special educators than those in urban areas.

## **What about the use of School Learning Support Officers?**

There is potential for SLSOs to provide individual and/or small group support for students with disabilities and learning and behavioural challenges. Teaching assistants, when trained and supported, can be used effectively when their deployment is purposeful and they implement evidence-based practices and there is research evidence to support their use in implementing peer support, reading interventions and supporting socialisation. Unfortunately, in mainstream classrooms, SLSOs are often seen as **the** support or adjustment, which can be counterproductive and in many cases exclusionary when such support means that the student is not engaged with the rest of the class or with the classroom teacher. The SLSO is often not trained to implement an appropriate intervention nor supervised by the classroom teacher or a specialist teacher and is left to manage without the necessary input. The use of paraprofessionals has also been identified as counterproductive when the least qualified person is responsible for the education of the most vulnerable students with the most complex learning needs (Giangreco et al., 2010). Where classroom teachers lack the skills and knowledge to design and implement evidence-based adjustments, SLSOs could be effectively trained, coached and monitored by special educators.

### **Is there progress in the provision of special educators?**

The education of our most vulnerable students is currently being compromised by a lack of suitably qualified and competent staff supporting them. Where qualified special educators are not present, we believe the risk of inappropriate instruction, curriculum and behaviour management is increased.

Concerns about the lack of qualified special educators has been raised in several enquiries relating to the education of student with disability, including the 2016 NSW Auditor-General's Report on Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools and the 2016 Victorian Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities as well as the 2017 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry (2017) into the Education of students with a disability or special needs. In this report specific recommendation (35) was that the NSW DoE work towards all LASTs having appropriate special education qualifications. As can be seen from the data presented, NSW is still a very long way from this goal. The 2017 report did not suggest the need for teachers in specialist settings to be qualified, but surely if LASTs require qualifications, those teachers should also hold a qualification. It would appear from the Victorian data that the number of qualified teachers in specialist settings may be decreasing. We would also note that qualified special educators in every school would have a role to play in ensuring that other recommendations of the report were implemented including providing appropriate education in inclusive settings and ensuring additional support classes ( Recommendation 10) were appropriately staffed, providing training for learning support teams (Recommendation 14), developing individualised learning plans (Recommendation 15), improving behaviour management in schools (Recommendation 17), training staff on the Disability Standards (Recommendations 29, 30), and providing professional development (Recommendation 31).

Unfortunately, the expertise of those qualified to work in Special Education is still seriously undervalued. This is exemplified in the failure of most employers advertising for special education roles in the school, preschool and post school sectors to require a Special Education qualification (Stephenson & Carter, 2014). Of the advertisements for special education positions identified in research by Stephenson and Carter, special education qualifications were only specified in 12.8% of the advertisements (essential: 5.5%; desirable: 4.1%; unspecified: 3.2%). Senior positions in the Department of Education responsible for policies in relation to the education of students with additional needs are not filled by qualified special educators. Current advertisements continue to lack the requirement for a recognized qualification. We would strongly suggest that special education positions require either a formal qualification in special education or a commitment to enrol in such a course.

No wonder we are witnessing a demise in the number of qualified special Educators. Why put the time, effort and financial commitment towards getting a qualification that is not valued?

### **What needs to be done?**

NSW DoE must move to increase the number of qualified special educators. We acknowledge that the DoE provides scholarships for qualified teachers to gain additional training as special educators, but from the statistics it is clear this is not meeting needs. At

present there is no incentive, other than personal interest for teachers to seek additional training.

If qualified specialist educators are to be employed and retained, they should have the pay and status that befits the additional qualification attained. All specialist educators with a postgraduate qualification from a recognised special education program and employed in LAST positions should be employed at least at a lead teacher level and paid accordingly. For those filling special education positions and enrolled in postgraduate special education programs, the Department of Education should pay for the course and provide adequate study leave to encourage teachers to complete their courses. They would not attract the higher status and pay until they had qualified.

There are also no Australian Institute of School Leaders (AITSL) standards outlining the desired competencies of specialist teachers as there are for regular classroom teachers and executives. It is thus important for the NSW DoE to carefully assess the courses for which scholarships are provided to ensure that graduates will possess the required skills and knowledge to be competent special educators. InSpEd had developed standards for these courses and has carefully evaluated the content of post-graduate special/inclusive education programs in NSW (Stephenson et al., 2022; 2023). Several universities for which scholarships are offered do not meet InSpEd standards (Deakin, Flinders, Griffith, Latrobe, Macquarie, UNE, Western Sydney). See <https://www.insped.org.au/university-courses-how-courses-are-endorsed/>

## Conclusion

InSpEd believes that the provision of at **least one qualified special educator in every school** would provide a valuable resource and support for regular educators and school leaders in meeting the needs of students with disability and also those with academic or behavioural difficulties. We also believe that all students with disability in special classes or schools should have a qualified special educator as a class teacher.

NSW DoE is **far from the goal of having qualified special educators in all relevant positions**. In the absence of appropriately qualified teachers, students with disabilities are at risk of receiving inadequate adjustments to curriculum and instruction. The roles of special educators need to be formally recognised through recognition of their specialist skills through remuneration and formal status.

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