

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd)
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Parliamentary Inquiry into Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Infants and Young people in NSW

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the above inquiry. This is an area of concern for the Institute of Special Educators as we have clear evidence of:

- A decline in the quality of support for infants and young children with developmental disabilities and delays and their families over the last decade or so
- An increase in the number of students with a range of disabilities, including significant intellectual disability, being included in mainstream classrooms without the necessary support from qualified special educators
- Clinical approaches to support at both the preschool and school levels rather than using an inclusive, functional approach to both assessment of need and the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions in collaboration with teachers and family members and other relevant professionals.
- Special/inclusive education scholarships offered by the NSW Department of Education for universities that do not cover the evidence-based content necessary for the provision of quality interventions and supports.

The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd) aims *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.

Standards for Specialist Teachers

Following its establishment, researchers and practitioners across Australia who have considerable expertise across a range of areas relating to disability and learning difficulty were invited to be part of a panel <https://www.insped.org.au/expert-panel-members/> to advise the InSpEd Board on standards for certified membership and for preservice training and ongoing professional development in special/inclusive education.

Resources for Teachers and Others

In addition to its role in developing and monitoring standards in specialist instruction based on research evidence, a major objective of InSpEd is to support special/inclusive educators in their work with individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties by providing free online resources <https://www.insped.org.au/resources-2/> and a free quarterly newsletter that includes summaries of research and information relevant to those working in the field.

Consultancies

InSpEd has provided consultancy to government departments, including the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), which is part of the NSW Department of Education and the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO), and not-for profit organisations supporting individuals with disabilities and delays.

InSpEd Research

InSpEd also has teams of researchers investigating interventions and support for individuals with disabilities and their families prior to school, during school and post school. These include the following projects that are related to pre- and in-school support:

1. the quality of university courses preparing instructional specialists to teach students with disabilities in specialist schools or classes and/or to support teachers who are including students with a disability in regular classrooms. Findings from this research have resulted in two conference presentations and the following four published papers:
 - Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., Sarandrea, A. M., & Salisbury, C. (2025). Preparation of special educators in Australia: University staff characteristics. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2025.5>
 - Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., Sarandrea, A. M., & Salisbury, C. (2025). Provision of practicum in Australian postgraduate courses preparing special/inclusive educators. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2025.1>
 - Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., & Salisbury, C. (2023). How sustainable are claims about evidence-based content in Australian courses for preparing special educators? *Education Sciences*, 13(2), 105. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/2/105>
 - Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., & Salisbury, C. (2022) Preparing Australian special educators: Courses and content. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(10). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2022v47n10.4>
2. The quality of Early Childhood Intervention. To date findings from this research have resulted in two Australian conference presentations, two international conferences and the following two published papers.
 - Carlon, S., Zanutinni, J., Kemp, C., & Gavidia-Payne, S. (2025). Australian early Childhood intervention roles: Are they reflective of best practice and are the skills, knowledge, and experience sought by employers suitable? , *Infants and Young Children*, 38(2), 87-106. DOI: 10.1097/IYC.0000000000000288
 - Gavidia-Payne, S., Zanutinni, J., Carlon, S. & Kemp, C. (2024). Early childhood intervention under the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme: Characteristics and recruitment practices of service providers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01759-w>

Decline in quality support for infants and young children with disabilities and delays

Until the establishment of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) more than a decade ago, most NSW community-based comprehensive early childhood intervention (ECI) programs supporting children with developmental disabilities and delays and their families were funded by the NSW Government through block grants. This enabled services to provide family-centred support including evidence-based information provided by practitioners skilled and experienced in the field, with time built in to collaborate with early childhood education and care (ECEC) providers. Other support that mainstream ECEC providers received was through the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program (ISP), support that focussed more on accommodation than inclusion as the ISP facilitators were not qualified ECI Practitioners. Also from 2012, Commonwealth person-centred support was provided for young children on the autism spectrum and young children with cerebral palsy and genetic diagnoses such as Down

Syndrome but not for children with developmental delay of unknown aetiology (Kemp, 2013).

The advent of the NDIS has resulted in the establishment of a market-driven approach to service delivery with some services struggling to generate the income needed to cover costs (Marchbank, 2017). At the same time: (a) generic disability and early childhood organisations began to offer early childhood intervention services; (b) targeted early childhood intervention services began to offer supports to individuals with disabilities of all ages; and (c) private providers, generally allied health professionals, began offering NDIS funded ECI services. As a result, the quality of staff recruited to ECI roles has diminished in recent years with adherence to best practice guidelines significantly reduced (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2024). Gavidia-Payne et al. found that recruitment of ECI practitioners did not focus on the skills and experience required to provide quality support. The result of this person-centred approach to funding has been that families have not received the evidence-based information that they would normally have received. Carlon et al. (2025) found that the skills and experience required for ECI roles did not reflect those needed for the implementation of Australian best practice guidelines (ECIA, 2016). Zanuttini et al. (under review) found that the qualifications required for ECI roles were generally those of allied health (specifically speech pathologists and occupational therapists) and educators (generally early childhood educators) who often recommend unsupported practices (Paynter & Keen, 2015).

Quality ECI can make an enormous difference to the lives of infants and young children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families and has been known to improve the quality of educational experience once these children enter school (see, e.g., Kemp & Carter, 2005; 2006a; 2006b)

Increasing number of children in mainstream early education and school classrooms without the necessary support from qualified special educators

With the move to inclusion in recent years, more children with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are being educated in Australian mainstream classrooms. Being educated alongside their typically developing peers is seen as a human right. Although we would not dispute this position, we would strongly argue that quality of instruction is even more important than the place of instruction, a position that is also taken by researchers who have examined the research comparing outcomes for students in mainstream and special education classrooms (Fuchs et al., 2025). If inclusion is to make a difference to the long term quality of life for individuals with disabilities and their families, schools need to have access to the instructional expertise required to give these students the skills needed for ongoing learning and development. As departments of education in Australian states, including the NSW Department of Education, do not require practitioners to have qualifications and experience in special education (<https://www.insped.org.au/resources-2/articles-from-insped-insights-2>), special education roles are not appropriately remunerated or recognised. The view taken is that any teacher can teach any child; therefore, there is no imperative for those working in the field to become qualified. This means that mainstream teachers will be required to deal with behaviours that they do not have the skills to manage given the lack of content related to classroom management in pre-service teacher education courses in Australia (O'Neil, &

Stephenson, 2011) and are required to provide accommodations with little insight as to what is needed.

Clinical approaches to support at both the preschool and school levels rather than using an inclusive, functional approach to both assessment and intervention and support

With the advent of the NDIS there appears to be a growing view of disability, including intellectual disability and ASD, as a medical problem rather than one that can be ameliorated using evidence-based instructional approaches. Preschools and schools are eager to get a diagnosis in order to get support via an NDIS plan. That generally means referral to a paediatrician and later allied health professionals, such as a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist. As already noted, these professionals do not always suggest approaches that have a strong evidence base but more importantly their approach is generally a clinical one rather than a functional or inclusive one.

I have a personal experience of this approach, one that has cemented my view. The childcare centre attended by my great nephew contacted my niece because they were concerned about his behaviour. As a result, my niece took him for a paediatric assessment. The paediatrician suggested that he might have ASD but was more likely to have a global developmental delay. She suggested a developmental assessment in her rooms and follow up with a speech pathologist and an occupational therapist. My advice was not to have the assessment as he was unlikely to perform in an unfamiliar clinical environment, nor to get a diagnosis, as the potential supports were not in his best interest. Instead, he was assessed by two special educators in his own home, where he felt comfortable, using an alternative developmental screening assessment and an assessment of receptive language, commonly used as a rough measure of intelligence. The only area of concern identified through the assessment was personal/social, with clear indicators of ASD behaviours. He scored in the average range, probably an underestimate, on the test of receptive language. Clearly there was no developmental delay and any support for concerning behaviours needed to be addressed in the home and childcare centre.

Fortunately, my niece was able to access special education support in the childcare centre through the Special Teaching and Research (STaR) program, a program funded by the Commonwealth Government, externally evaluated and deemed to be a promising practice by the Institute of Family Studies in 2008. This is a capacity building program where ECEC educators are supported by qualified special educators to implement functional assessments in situ and to implement evidence-based strategies for supporting learning and development. The outcome for my great nephew has been very positive. He successfully completed a full year of kindergarten last year following a transition to school program supported by STaR special educators, educators who not only have skills and experience in delivering evidence-based practice but also, as educators, understand the difficulties faced by teachers in mainstream classrooms, teachers who are required to cater for the full range of learning needs in their classrooms.

NSW Department of Education Special/inclusive education scholarships offered for universities that do not meet the InSpEd standards

Unfortunately in recent years there has been a decline in the quality of university courses preparing teachers for special education roles. Using the InSpEd standards <https://www.insped.org.au/university-courses-how-courses-are-endorsed/> to assess the content of courses available on university websites, the research team investigating the quality of postgraduate special education university courses found that, of the 28 courses of one to two years duration across 21 Australian universities, important specialist content was missing from more than half (Stephenson et al., 2022; 2023). Further research has identified that a minimum amount of supervised practical experience is built into postgraduate special education courses (Stephenson et al., 2025a) and that the staff delivering these courses do not always have the requisite qualifications and practical and research experience (Stephenson et al., 2025b) The NSW Department of Education offers scholarships to universities that by InSpEd standards are not fit for purpose.

Need for evidence-based foundation supports provided by the state government

The NSW government needs to ensure that evidence-based foundation supports are provided to pre-school and school age children with disabilities and delays, including children with ASD and intellectual disabilities. These supports should be provided through the relevant government departments, including the NSW Department of Education. At the pre-school and school levels, these supports should be provided by qualified and experienced special educators who have completed a course in special/inclusive education that includes the evidence-based content identified in the research and embedded into the InSpEd standards. Unfortunately, our long-term experience in submitting to multiple parliamentary inquiries suggests that change is unlikely to happen. The decline in the number of senior Department of Education officers with the requisite skills and qualifications in special education, officers who influence policy, may in part account for this. The sad fact is that if these supports are not provided not only will many young children and students not meet their full potential but there will be additional pressures on families and ECEC and school systems.

We would be happy to provide additional information should this required.

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Chair, Institute of Special Educators.

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