

Response to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report

The **Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd)** was established in 2017 in response to a concern by researchers and practitioners that educators working in the disability field were not formally recognised by way of certification for this specific skill area, as are other professions working in this field. It was clear from discussions with professional organisations in the allied health field that registration for certified professionals was important not only for the status of the profession but also to ensure that the skills and knowledge of registered professionals met the standards of the organisation and ensured the ongoing quality of preservice training.

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 disability 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.

InSpEd and Research

InSpEd also has teams of researchers, one of which has been investigating the quality of university courses preparing instructional specialists to support teachers who are including students with a disability. Findings from this research, included in a paper under review for publication, and earlier research by our members, contribute to the response from the InSpEd Board to the Productivity Commission's *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report*.

We note that the three reform directions are: *1. Supporting Students, Student Learning and Student Achievement; 2. Supporting Teaching, School Leadership and School Improvement; and 3. Enhancing the National Evidence*. We contend that these three areas are interdependent in that student learning and achievement is dependent on quality teaching, which is dependent on an acceptance and promotion of evidence-based practice. The latter will depend heavily on the quality of initial teacher education courses and the quality of on-going professional development. We strongly urge governments to closely examine the Australian research into barriers to effective teaching of foundation literacy and numeracy skills, in particular for low performing students.

Lifting Outcomes for all Students

We agree that the shortage of teachers, in particular qualified teachers supporting students with disabilities and learning difficulties, is problematic in Australia and that this will impact the quality of education provided to all students. We note information request 3.1 regarding intensive, targeted instruction for students who are falling behind. We believe that qualified special educators would be the teachers best placed to assess, program for, teach and monitor the progress of these students. Policies could be directed towards providing at least one full-time qualified special educator in every school to deliver and/or oversee such targeted instruction.

Members of InSpEd have been engaged in research investigating international achievement in literacy and numeracy of Australian students (Meeks, et al., 2014), the quality of initial teacher education programs preparing teachers to work in the field (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Meeks et al., 2016; Meeks & Stephenson, 2020; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011, 2014), and the quality of teacher preparation programs preparing specialist teachers (Stephenson, et al., 2012; Stephenson, et al., under review).

Factors Contributing to Student Outcomes

When we examined the contribution of various factors to the achievement of students in countries with high-ranking results in international testing regimes, we concluded that the quality of teachers was the overriding factor (Meeks, et al., 2014). Although there was acceptance that a minimum investment was needed, the annual expenditure on education and percentage of a country's GDP spent on schooling did not appear to be a major contributor to success. For example, Australia and the United States spent more on education than higher ranking countries such as South Korea and Finland. Further, when comparing teacher salaries across both high-ranking and lower-ranking countries, student achievement did not seem to be related to teacher pay. The data provided in the interim report would support this finding in that teacher pay was by no means the most common reason that teachers gave for considering leaving the profession (p. 143). Teacher status, linked to the selection and education of trainee teachers, appeared to be more relevant. At the time the research was conducted, in countries such as Finland and South Korea entry to teacher training was restricted to the top performing students, comparable to entrants to high status courses such as medicine, law and engineering.

The Value of Quality Initial Teacher Training

Research into the preparation of Australian teachers to employ evidence-based literacy instruction and behaviour management has demonstrated that Australian teacher education courses are failing teachers (e.g., Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Meeks, & Stephenson, 2020; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; O'Neill, & Stephenson, 2011, 2014). Further, Stephenson, et al. (2012) found that most courses preparing primary school teachers to teach students with additional needs included a core unit in special education, yet only 30% of instructors identified as teaching these units had a named qualification in special education and the majority of instructors had no publications in the field. In addition, many of the units did not cover the content required for individualising instruction for the population of students with special education needs. Although the data for the Stephenson et al. (2012) research was collected more than ten years ago, government reports indicate that regular primary school teachers do not feel confident in their ability to cater for the full range of students included in their classrooms (e.g., NSW Government, 2016, 2019; Victorian Government, 2016).

Student Well-being

We agree that some students face social/emotional difficulties created by factors outside the school environment. Successful learning experiences at school will contribute to a student's sense of self-worth and will go some way towards mitigating the negative effects of difficult home and community experiences. ***All students can be successful learners, given the right instruction.***

Supporting Teachers

In order to feel confident in their teaching roles, teachers must have relevant content knowledge and knowledge of evidence-based pedagogy. As indicated earlier, research indicates that primary school teachers may not have the relevant content knowledge in relation to the teaching of literacy and

numeracy (e.g., what components of literacy and numeracy need to be taught if students are to be successful in later years). There is ample evidence for the foundation skills needed for students to make progress in these areas; however, this content and the pedagogy required to teach it, appears to be missing from many initial teacher education courses.

The Supporting Role of the Special Educator

As an increasing number of children are included in mainstream classrooms (Dempsey, 2011), it is important that teachers are supported to provide appropriate instruction to these students. There is evidence to support the use of multi-tiered levels of instructional support. However, these systems of support are only as good as the individual strategies included within them (Kemp, 2020). For example, Tier 1 should include evidence-based content and instruction that will support the learning of all students. In addition to quality Tier 1 support, students with learning difficulties and disabilities will need a more individual approach within a small group or one-to-one instructional arrangement and this instruction would be very similar to the targeted instruction suggested in *Chapter 3 of the Interim Report* for students who have fallen behind. Implementation through collaborative relationships between teachers and special educators can improve the efficacy of this approach (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Qualified special educators should have knowledge of the instructional strategies required to motivate and teach children with additional learning needs. They are in the best position to assist teachers who are struggling to accommodate the full range of learning needs in their classrooms.

As stated in *Chapter 5 of the Interim Report*, there has been an increase in teaching assistants and specialist support staff. Providing classroom assistants to support teachers may alleviate teacher stress but will do little to enhance the learning of educationally disadvantaged students unless the assistants are trained to implement programs developed by teachers with support from instructional specialists (Ledford et al., 2018). As noted in *Chapter 5 of the Interim Report*, the use of teacher aides to support teachers is an area that needs further investigation. In fact, reports from research internationally have suggested that students with disability may well be disadvantaged by an overreliance on teacher assistants (e.g., Giangreco, et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2011). For this reason, the work of assistants must be closely monitored by classroom teachers supported by qualified special educators. If the increase in support staff also includes teachers in specialist teacher support roles, the value of this kind of support will be of limited value if these teachers are not qualified special educators.

Lack of Suitably Qualified Specialists

Unfortunately, there appears to be a decline in the number of qualified instructional specialists supporting classroom teachers. An investigation into the qualifications of teachers in Australian special schools found that only 64% were qualified special educators (Thomas, 2009). Given the ageing teaching workforce and the fact that there is no imperative for a teacher in a special education role to have a special education qualification, this percentage is not likely to have increased. Further, although we have no Australian data to support this, we expect the number of qualified special educators in mainstream schools to be considerably lower. This would indicate that the estimate in the *Interim Report* (p. 10) that approximately one third of special education teachers are not qualified for the role is likely to be an overestimate of qualified special educators in Australian schools. Indeed, anecdotal reports from the field would indicate that it is becoming much harder to find qualified special education staff. Given that there is evidence to suggest that students with disability taught by a teacher with a qualification in special education do better in both reading and maths than students

taught by a teacher without these qualifications (Feng & Sass, 2013; Hanushek, et al., 2002) this situation is indeed concerning.

We suggest that there should be separate registration for qualified special education teachers, in recognition of their specialist instructional expertise. Teachers who have specialist instructional expertise are able to work alongside teachers with subject expertise to support instructional programs for those students who find learning to be difficult. In *Chapter 5 of the Interim Report*, there is a suggestion that classroom-based teachers who have specialist expertise should attract a higher level of teacher recognition, that is at the level of *Highly Accomplished* and *Lead Teachers*. Special educators who teach in special schools or classes or work alongside classroom teachers in regular schools to support the instruction of students with disability or learning difficulties should attract this level of recognition. However, the level should be attached to the qualification and not the position. This would contribute to a rise in the status of qualified special educators which in turn would encourage teachers to gain a relevant qualification.

The Quality of Postgraduate Courses in Special/Inclusive Education

The courses offering qualifications for teachers wanting to become special educators should include the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to equip graduates for the role. We suggest that the postgraduate courses preparing teachers to work as instructional specialists should cover the standards that have been endorsed internationally (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015, Mclesky et al., 2019) and form the basis of the standards adopted by InSpEd (<https://www.insped.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Standards-for-the-Certification-of-Special-Educators-May-2019-1.pdf>).

These standards incorporate practice that has strong research support as well as practice endorsed by experts in the field. A recent online investigation of postgraduate courses in special/inclusive education has found that course content does not cover all of these important standards, with evidence-based strategies such as explicit teaching and strategies that are incorporated in the principles of applied behaviour analysis missing from many courses (Stephenson, et al., under review). Further, our research has indicated that, even at postgraduate level, courses are not always taught by specialists and/or researchers in the field. Of concern, also, is the lack of practicum experience attached to some courses. Where practicum is offered, it is often a limited number of days and is not supervised by academic staff. We strongly suggest that universities offering postgraduate courses in special/inclusive education should be required to include content that will prepare graduates with the skills needed to be competent specialists and that courses should be taught by academics with the requisite background knowledge, skills and experience. Scholarship programs supporting teachers to obtain a qualification in special/inclusive education should be limited to those universities whose courses meet the requisite standards.

Summary

Student learning, supporting teachers and building a national evidence base are interdependent.

Teachers are supported when they feel competent and confident in their teaching roles.

1. Improved teacher competence and confidence will result in an increase in job satisfaction. This can be achieved by:

- Selecting top performing students for admission to teacher education courses

- Addressing the falling standards in initial teacher education courses through increased funding to university schools of education to:
 - i. enable them to employ academic staff with the relevant skills and experience
 - ii. cover the cost of quality practicum and practicum supervision
 - Providing support by qualified specialists as needed
2. Teacher status will be enhanced if teaching is viewed as a highly skilled and desirable profession. This can be achieved by:
- Selecting the best candidates for entry into initial teacher training courses
 - Increasing the quality of preservice courses by only endorsing courses that:
 - i. have evidence-based content with regard to the teaching of initial literacy and numeracy skills, behaviour management, and evidence-based pedagogy for the teaching of subject content
 - ii. are taught by academics with a relevant practical and research background
 - iii. have adequate practicum with coaching and supervision provided by highly skilled staff
 - iv. include content that prepares teachers to work collaboratively with families and other professionals
 - Employing administrative staff to carry out tasks that do not require a teacher qualification
 - Committing time for teachers to be involved in research activities in collaboration with approved researchers

Outcomes for all students, specifically those with a disability, are enhanced by a highly professional and skilled teacher workforce supported by specialist staff who are qualified special/inclusive educators. There is a shortage of qualified specialist teachers. This means that, initially, not all special education roles will be filled by qualified special education professionals.

1. The long-term goal should be for all schools to have at least one qualified specialist educator supporting teachers who are including students with a disability or learning difficulty. Increasing the number of specialist educators in schools can be achieved if:
 - Teachers working in specialist support roles are required to have or be working towards an endorsed qualification in special/inclusive education
 - Qualified special educators are required to meet professional standards and teachers meeting these standards are recognised as highly proficient/accomplished teachers thereby enabling them to receive appropriate professional recognition, including higher remuneration
2. If teachers working in specialist roles are to make a difference, all teachers working in these support roles in regular schools should be supervised by a qualified special educator. This may mean that the supervision is provided by a member of staff from another school. As special schools are more likely to have qualified special education staff, this may well be a suitable source of supervisory staff.

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