

The Board of the Institute of Special Educators would like to congratulate the NSW Department of Education on the approach taken in the *New Student Behaviour Strategy*. Best practice is evident through the focus on prevention and early intervention, a positive approach to managing behaviour, a whole school approach, the adoption of evidence-based practice, capacity building through professional learning, and mental health and well-being. While these are laudable targets, given the current level of expertise in behaviour management within NSW Department of Education, it is hard to see how these strategies can be successfully implemented. The Disability Strategy released in 2019 refers to “an increasing shortage of staff with specialist training” (p.1). This is true of behaviour specialists as well as other special education roles

Impediments to Successful Implementation of the New Behaviour Strategy

1. Lack of focus on classroom management in pre-service teacher education courses

Evidence-based practice in the area of behaviour management is not well covered in teacher training courses. Studies by O’Neill and Stephenson have investigated the content of classroom management units in university teacher education courses across Australia and found that the content does not always focus on evidence-based interventions in this area (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2014). They also found that, on the whole, preservice teachers were only somewhat confident in dealing with a range of problem behaviours (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2012) and this did not change markedly following a year of teaching practice (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2013).

2. Poorly qualified behaviour specialists

Behaviour specialists, if qualified for this role, will have completed a university course in special education. Quality special education courses will include training in evidence-based practice. We know, for example, that interventions based on functional behaviour assessment (FBA) have strong support in the research literature. A 2012 meta-analysis by Gage, Lewis, and Stitche found that such interventions reduced problem behaviour by an average of 70.5% and that FBA was more effective than descriptive assessment procedures, which can be very subjective. Unfortunately, as identified by O’Neill and Stephenson (2010), only 45.5% of the Sydney based behaviour specialists employed by the NSW Department of Education had ever written a FBA based behaviour intervention plan. Only 52% of those surveyed at that time had completed a postgraduate qualification in special education.

3. Limited Commitment to Evidence-based Models

Multi-tiered approaches to intervention, based on student and school data, especially for students with problem behaviour have a strong evidence base. This approach is taken by the Positive Intervention and Behaviour Support (PBIS) model (<https://www.pbis.org/about/about>), adopted in NSW under the Positive Behaviour for Learning strategy. We believe the NSW Department of Education should retain this evidence-based approach across the system, and work to increase its uptake and implementation. The PBIS website provides access to many resources for schools, and a system for training staff to collect baseline and evaluative data. There is also a considerable research data base on introducing, implementing and maintaining PBIS systems in a range of school types. To do this, it would be necessary to ensure support teachers and behaviour specialists have the skills to ensure schools can assess and provide and monitor interventions for students who need Tier 2 and Tier 3 support. Under this approach, qualified special educators can support regular class teachers in implementing pro-active approaches such as teaching positive rules and routines, and

responding positively to appropriate behaviour. They can also provide needed professional learning and support to schools in monitoring problem behaviour at the classroom and school level, in selecting appropriate interventions, evaluating intervention outcomes and ensuring interventions are implemented with fidelity.

4. Non-qualified special education teachers in special education support roles

The link between problem behaviour and ineffective and/or inappropriate instruction needs also to be acknowledged. The provision of work that is too difficult is one the many predictors of problem behaviour, and making adjustments to curriculum and teaching strategies to meet the needs of individual students, including students with disabilities is an important pro-active strategy (Kern & Clements, 2007). Mention was made in the strategy document of the behaviour problems linked to students with disability but not to those with learning difficulties, the high incidence population of students with special education needs. Within the PBIS model, Tier 2 and 3 intervention often includes academic intervention as well as interventions to teach pro-social behaviour and reduce problem behaviour.

Our view is that every school, primary and secondary, should have a member of staff with the qualifications to implement evidence-based interventions for a range of learning needs, including behaviour. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The expertise of those qualified to work in special education and behaviour specialist roles is seriously undervalued. This is exemplified in the failure of most employers advertising for special education roles to require a special education qualification. Indeed, research by Stephenson and Carter (2014) found that special education qualifications were included as a criterion for employment in only 12.8% of of advertisements for special education positions (5.5%; desirable: 4.1%; unspecified: 3.2%). No wonder we are witnessing a demise in qualified special educators. Why put the time and effort and financial commitment towards getting a qualification that is not valued?

The lack of expertise in special education among many of those holding special education positions in schools, and also those supervising such positions, has potentially devastating consequences for students with additional needs in special settings, and more particularly in inclusive settings. For these students, evidence-based interventions are in danger of being the exception rather than the rule. The lack of recognition of the value of special education in recent years may well have influenced a decline in the quality of special education courses at the tertiary level.

The Way Forward

We believe that the NSW Department of Education would be better advised to build local expertise in schools through the employment of more appropriately trained special educators in support and advisory positions and through provision of professional learning. We believe this a preferable approach to outsourcing from private providers who are not familiar with local issues and who cannot provide ongoing consistent in-class support. There is also the danger that schools will be approached by providers promoting the latest fad rather than evidence-based practices.

Special education qualifications make a difference to the performance of teachers in special education roles and subsequently to the outcomes of students with disability and other special needs (Feng & Sass, 2013; Hanushek, et al., 2002). Qualified special educators are better able to identify evidence-based practice (Stormont et al. 2011) and have more positive attitudes to students with

disabilities in inclusive settings (Hsien et al., 2009; Klehm, 2014). The NSW Department of Education is currently investing in scholarships for teachers to gain a university qualification in special education. Our concern is that not all university courses in special education will provide teachers with the knowledge and skills required to support students with behaviour challenges and other special learning needs, and to also support and their classroom teachers. The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd) has engaged a Panel of Experts from across Australia (see our website) with members contributing to the development of standards for assessing the qualifications of special educators and the quality of tertiary courses and professional learning in special education. **InSpEd is interested in working with the NSW Department of Education to identify quality tertiary courses and professional learning in special education.**

Yours faithfully,



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On behalf of the InSpEd Board

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