

Submission to the 2020 Review - Disability Standards for Education 2005

Summary Points

- Educational inclusion should not be mandated at the expense of quality educational programs.
- If students with disability and other additional learning needs are to make optimal educational progress, their instructional needs must be met.
- Making educational adjustments requires teachers to be knowledgeable about evidence-based educational interventions for students with disability and learning difficulties. Research evidence suggests that this is often not the case when education is provided by non-specialist teachers and/or not supported by qualified special educators.
- Qualified special educators should be regarded as instructional experts. They have completed courses that not only provide them with the knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based practice but also provide them with a healthy respect for scientific research and the ability to critically read the research.
- We should move towards a requirement that a qualified special educator be included in collaboration and consultation with teachers and parents/caregivers when adjustments are planned and selected. In school settings we should move towards having a qualified special educator in every school.
- There should be some system of accountability for those students who do not sit NAPLAN tests. Genuine access to the curriculum should be demonstrated by students making progress within that curriculum.
- The knowledge and skills of qualified special educators are not acknowledged or respected. This is reflected in the advertisements for special education roles, which commonly do not list qualifications in special education as an essential criterion.
- Unless the expertise of qualified special educators is recognised, the status of special educators will remain low, teachers and other professionals will not be encouraged to complete courses in special education and the quality of university courses in special education may well be compromised. This will negatively impact both the learning and educational inclusion of students with disability.

The focus of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 appears to be the right of individuals with disability to access education on the same basis as their peers without disability, with an emphasis on the right to education in inclusive settings. We would not argue with the human rights principles guiding these standards nor would we oppose full inclusion in all education settings if this is in the best interests of the individual with disability. We agree with Farrell (2000) and others that the overriding right for students with disability is to receive an education that meets their needs, and this can happen in both inclusive and specialised settings. Our concern is with the quality of education received by individuals with disability. This is particularly important in the early years of life when neuroplasticity is at its peak (Ismail, Fatemi, & Johnston, 2017). As suggested by many supporting the importance of special education provision in educational settings, inclusion should not be used as an excuse to deny students with disability an appropriate education, specifically the provision of evidence-based instruction.

“... access to the general education curriculum provided alongside general education peers is an honored tenet and valued goal of special education; however, “access” and definition of “place” should not come at the expense of eliminating opportunities for intense, individualized, and explicit skill/strategy instruction provided by specialists” (Zigmond, 2009, p. 201).

Multi-tiered systems of support, also known as Response to Intervention which include provision for small group and individual intervention show promise for students with disability placed in regular classes (Agran et al., 2020), and these approaches include intensive instruction in specialised small groups and individually, ideally by qualified special educators.

What is truly worrying is the long-term community inclusion of an individual with disability who is accommodated in a mainstream setting, or indeed a special class or school, but who does not have the benefit of an evidence-based educational program designed to increase communication, social and independence skills and to promote optimal academic progress. Some advocates for individuals with disability argue that all teachers should be able to teach all children and that there is no research evidence to suggest the need for interventions/support provided by qualified special educators. However, although the research in this area is somewhat limited, there is definitely research illustrating the value of support programs provided by qualified special educators and evidence that teachers without these qualifications may be somewhat limited in their ability to provide the right accommodations for students with disability. Limbach-Reich (2015) reviewed evidence on inclusion and stated:

“The research cannot confirm that inclusion has a dominant and mainly positive effect for all children with disabilities, with positive effects on both academic outcomes and psycho-emotional dimensions and without negative effects on non-disabled classmates ... One of the pitfalls of inclusion may be that it works but not for all, not at all times and not in all settings” (p.370-1).

The evidence supporting special education is drawn from scientific research into applied behaviour analysis and systematic and explicit teaching using a range of prompt systems. Special educators use this research base to develop programs and teaching strategies for individuals with disability and learning difficulties. 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, 2012; 2013; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2002). Qualified special educators are more likely to use effective practices (Nougaret, Scrugs, & Mastropieri, 2005; Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004) and teachers with additional training in transition are more likely to provide transition services (Morningstar & Beitz, 2013). Students with autism spectrum disorders placed in special schools demonstrate more improvement in behaviour and socialisation (Reed, Osborne, & Waddington, 2012) and the authors suggest that one reason for their finding was that the students in special schools all had a teacher with a qualification in special education and there was a lack of appropriate teacher training in mainstream settings.

Special education teachers have more knowledge and experience than regular educators in the effective instruction of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The more training and experience that a teacher has, the greater the probability that evidence-based practice will be implemented (Segall & Campbell, 2012). Special educators are better able to identify evidence-based practices and non-evidence-based behavioural interventions and are more confident in their ability to select interventions (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011). Special educators in the United States and Australia have been found to have more positive attitudes to students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Hsien et al., 2009; Klehm, 2014).

Why are teachers without special education qualifications less likely to provide evidence-based instruction to students with disabilities in mainstream and special education classrooms? Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that teacher education programs preparing trainee teachers to teach in Australian schools may not always include educational practices that have a strong research base. Australian research investigating teacher education programs has indicated that evidence-based practice in the areas of literacy instruction and behaviour management is missing from many teacher education programs (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Meeks & Stephenson, 2020; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011, 2014). This is of concern for the education of all students but of particular concern for those with disability. Further, surveys of teachers suggest that, despite completing a mandatory unit in special/inclusive education in preservice teacher education courses and despite the availability of professional learning courses, teachers do not feel confident or competent to teach many of the children with additional needs included in their classrooms (NSW Department of Education, 2019). This may reflect the fact that not all mandatory courses are taught by academics with the relevant practical and research backgrounds (Stephenson et al., 2012) and the lack of access to specialist support from qualified professionals when needed.

These findings suggest that there needs to be a clearer definition of what comprises reasonable adjustment within the standards, particularly in relation to teaching strategies and curriculum content. We think there should be a requirement that adjustments are evidence-based, and that education departments take steps to identify and provide professional learning to support the use of evidence-based adjustments. At present parents/caregivers and the student (if possible) are to be consulted about adjustments. We believe it would be appropriate to move towards a requirement for a qualified special educator to also be involved in this consultation so effective strategies are selected and strategies with little evidence, and those with potential damaging effects are avoided.

We recognize that a major barrier is the shortage of qualified special educators. The NSW Disability Strategy (NSW Department of Education, 2019), which was released in response to the 2017 NSW Parliamentary inquiry into the teaching of students with disability, provided data indicating that teachers in NSW did not feel confident to teach students with disability despite the availability of professional learning courses in the area of special/inclusive education and is recommending the need for more specialist teachers. 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%). 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?

Research by Thomas (2009), through which the qualifications of educators teaching in special schools were investigated, found that 64.7% had a recognised qualification in special education. Data presented by Thomas would suggest that the percentage of qualified special

educators in special schools is unlikely to have increased since the 2007 data collection because only 18.3% of the staff not qualified in special education were undertaking courses in special education. A large proportion of the principals and teachers were over 50. These data are supported by the NSW Disability Strategy Document (NSW Department of Education, 2019). The percentage of qualified special educators in special and mainstream classes in regular schools is likely to be much lower.

The lack of expertise in special education among many of those holding special education positions in schools (support classes or learning support), 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 fear is that the lack of recognition of the value of special education in recent years has or will influence a decline in the quality of special education courses at the tertiary level.

It is also of concern that there is no accountability within educational systems for students who do not sit the NAPLAN tests. Access to a curriculum is not just being present in a classroom when content is presented, it is acquiring new skills and knowledge. If students with disability are genuinely having access to the Australian curriculum, there should be a means to show they are learning new skills and knowledge from that curriculum. At present there is no structure to ensure that access to the curriculum has happened. Again, qualified special educators have expertise in appropriate monitoring strategies to ensure individual students are making progress, and this data-based approach to education ensures that pedagogy is changed when students fail to make progress.

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