

The Institute of Special Educators 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.

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.

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. This includes educators working with (a) infants and young children and their families; (b) school age children and young adults; and (c) adults in postschool programs. We offer a free quarterly newsletter that includes summaries of research and information relevant to those working in the field. We also provide downloadable brief research reports on specific interventions, and short presentations overviewing recommended practices <https://www.insped.org.au/resources-2/>

All resources are checked by members of the Expert Panel before publication on the website. InSpEd also hosts research teams investigating interventions and practices in special/inclusive education.

The Board of InSpEd would like to address the following questions posed by AITSL in relation to the 2020 review of the Disability Education Standards.

1. What are the key opportunities presented by this project and development of outlined resources?

The project offers the opportunity to identify specific knowledge, skills and practices that will support effective adjustments for students with disability and to communicate these to teachers/ leaders, teacher education providers, families/care-givers, students and others.

In identifying the requirements of effective education for student with disability, InSpEd has developed standards for special educators that provide insight into the skills needed to provide research-based curriculum and instruction to students with disabilities in consultation with families/care-givers, students and relevant others. The full set of standards can be viewed at <https://www.insped.org.au/special-education-certification/>

The standards cover these key areas:

- Individual planning (including appropriate adjustments) in consultation with families/care-givers, 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 DSE and other relevant laws and policies
- Skills in communication and collaboration with other teachers, families/care-givers, 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 teacher 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, and thus a guide to the content of the required resources. We would also note that simple presentation of content is not sufficient for a practice to be adopted in a classroom. If teachers are to learn new skills, they need demonstration and coaching with feedback from a qualified special educator.

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 would support the development by AITSL of additional standards for specialist qualifications.

2. What are key challenges, risks and issues AITSL should consider at the outset of this project?

A major risk is that presentation of information, through text and video, is not sufficient for teachers to learn new skills in curriculum adaptation, assessment, instruction, monitoring and evaluation, and in collaboration. Presentation of information and models are helpful, but teachers also need coaching with feedback to develop the necessary skills (Ayvaxo, Inbar-Furst, Meadan, 2021; Israel et al., 2012,). Coaching requires an expert mentor, who is directly linked to a teacher's classroom, students, and teaching practices (Israel et al., 2012, Meadan et al., 2017). This kind of professional learning can only be provided by qualified special

educators who themselves have the required skills and the ability to support other teachers. Providing fragmented professional learning opportunities will not create teachers who are qualified special educators.

The key driver of student outcomes is teacher quality. For students with disability, quality teacher are those who have the range of skills included in the InSpEd standards outlined above. As long as AITSL does not have standards for teachers with additional qualifications and expertise, there is no consistent framework available to inform schools, teachers and families/care-givers and this is a major risk factor for failure to deliver quality education to students with disability.

To draw a parallel with other professions, we do not expect general practitioners to be expert in specific specialist areas. We accept that specialist knowledge, over and above that possessed by a general practitioner (GP) is required to treat and support some people. We accept that GPs can manage ongoing care and support when advised by a specialist. We do not accept that they can do some reading and watch a video and then possess the depth of knowledge of a specialist. The same is true for the education of students with disability. Specialist teachers can provide the advice and support needed by classroom teachers, and classroom teachers should not be expected to be expert in supporting students with hearing impairment, vision impairment, intellectual disability or emotional and behavioural problem.

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). Many teacher education courses take a constructivist stance, advocating enquiry and problem based approaches, which have been shown to be ineffective for students with disability. It is unlikely that a few fragmented professional learning courses can address both the philosophical differences between instructivist and constructivist approaches, and provide an in depth knowledge of the research and evidence base underpinning instructivist approaches.

3. What types of practices should be looking to capture for our “In the classroom” videos?

We believe the most important element would be how to work with a qualified special educator. Following that, teachers need a solid foundation in implementing explicit instruction (and this would require coaching and feedback) and how to combine it with their current practices. Explicit instruction is likely to be the most effective differentiation of teaching. Ideally all teachers would have some understanding of the areas of specific expertise outlined in the InSpEd standards.

We note that concerns about the lack of qualified special educators have been raised in several enquiries relating to the education of student with disability.

- The 2016 NSW Auditor-General’s Report on Supporting Students with Disability in NSW Public Schools

- The 2017 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry (2017) into the Education of students with a disability or special needs. Specific recommendation (36).
- The 2016 Victorian Review of the Programs for Students with Disabilities

References

- Ayvaxo, S., Inbar-Furst, H., & Meadan, H. (2021). Technology-based model to support and enhance field experience in special education training programs in Israel. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(9), 14-26.
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- Meadan, H., Snodgrass, M.R., Palomo, I., Amenta, C.G., & Halle, J.W. (2017). A framework for defining contextual features of training and coaching practices. *Exceptionality*, 25(4), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2016.1196451>