

## Qualifications in Special Education: Are departments of education ensuring that universities are including the relevant evidence-based content?

We note that the Federal Minister for Education has put universities 'on notice' that they must now include evidence-based content for teaching early literacy and numeracy skills and implementing behaviour management strategies in their initial teacher education courses. This follows countless submissions and research demonstrating that evidence-based content has been lacking in many Australian university courses preparing teachers to work in school education (see e.g., Meeks & Stephenson, 2020; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2014). With two years to ensure that the necessary content is included, there is hope that, in future, teachers will be better prepared for this important professional role.

It is our hope that it will not take as long to rescue many of the postgraduate university courses preparing teachers and other professionals to teach students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties. Having teachers who are wedded to evidence-based practice is a good start. Including content related to the instruction of students with additional educational needs in initial teacher education courses is also important. However, there is still an urgent need to have specialist teachers with in-depth skills and knowledge of the full range of evidence-based approaches to providing education to students with disabilities and learning difficulties. The InSpEd Board advocates for the inclusion of a qualified special educator in every mainstream school as well as having all special education positions in special classes and schools filled with qualified special educators.

From our perspective, there are two major problems that impact the quality of education provided to students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties in Australian schools. The first is the low number of qualified special education teachers employed in special education roles and the second is a concern about the quality of postgraduate university courses in special/inclusive education (Stephenson et al., 2022, 2023). It is unfortunate that state departments of education are providing scholarships to universities offering postgraduate courses in special/inclusive education that may not include the evidence-based content required to prepare graduates to take up special education roles. We call upon departments of education across Australia to ensure that all courses in special education meet high standards for the inclusion of evidence-based practice.

In a publication outlining the position of the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools (PASS) on the importance of qualifications in special education, the organisation stated its commitment to principals of government specialist schools in Victoria having appropriate special education qualifications.

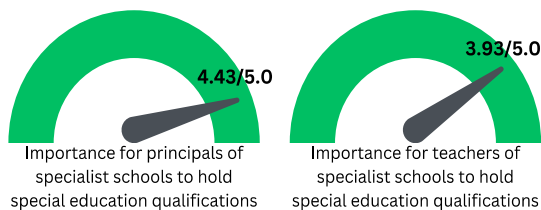
As a context for the position taken by the organisation, the following points were made:

- *There is a steady increase in the number of principals in specialist schools who do not hold approved special education qualifications.*
- *Principal positions are sometimes advertised without the requirement for special education qualifications included in the position description.*
- *Such appointments are not communicated clearly to stakeholders as to why or how the exception has been made.*

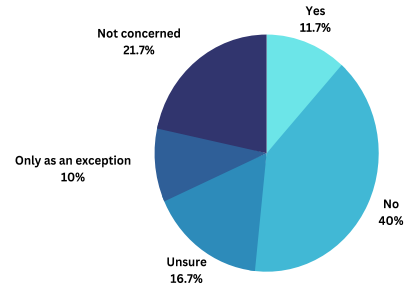
- *The role of the principal, especially in specialist schools, is becoming progressively complex. There is a distinct need for expertise in specialist education becoming increasingly necessary to negate harm and increase educational outcomes.*
- *There was a lack of clarity and consequently often conflicting messages from DE [the Department of Education] in the requirement and importance of holding special education qualifications.*
- *The coaching and mentoring provided to new principals in specialist schools is not satisfactory and requires significant development.*

In addition, the results of a survey recently conducted of its members (60 members participated) were provided in that document. They indicated that while principals generally agreed that it was important for specialist school principals to hold a qualification in special education, only around 69.6% held such a qualification. Although the principals were less in agreement about the importance of all teachers in specialist schools holding a qualification in special education, they still generally supported this ideal. Unfortunately, the survey indicated that only approximately 38.3% of teachers in specialist schools were qualified special educators. As there are no special classes in regular schools in Victoria, we would expect that most students with disabilities and many with learning difficulties would attend specialist schools.

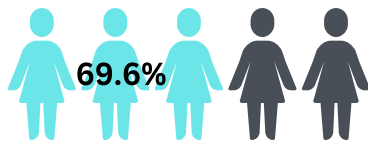
### Victorian Specialist School Leaders Survey on Special Education Qualifications May 2023 (n=60)



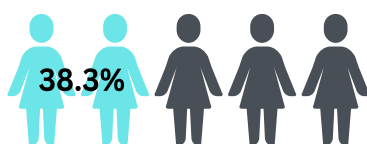
Should special education qualifications be specific to school type (e.g. ID, PD, Deaf, ASD, etc.)?



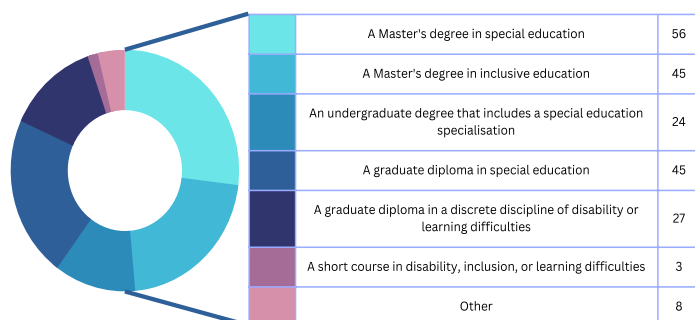
What percentage (approximately) of leaders in your school hold special education qualifications?



What percentage (approximately) of teachers in your school hold special education qualifications?



What do you deem as special education qualifications?



The figures provided by PASS, as indicated above, do not support the statement in the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report that "close to one-third of teachers who teach special education have no specialised training" (Australian Government, September, 2022, p. 10). Indeed, the figures for Victoria,

one of the most populous Australian states, are more likely to suggest that a little more than a third of teachers in specialist schools in Victoria have a qualification in special education. Further, although most principals agreed that a postgraduate course in special/inclusive education was a required special education qualification, some accepted a lesser qualification. Given the skills and knowledge required of the profession, it is hard to accept that a teacher could gain the requisite skills and knowledge with a course of less than one year of full-time study and without a substantial practicum component that allows for coaching and mentoring by a supervisor with the requisite qualifications and experience.

The data for Victoria gathered by the Principals' of Specialist Schools Association is unlikely to be vastly different from that of other Australian States. Concerns relating to both the number of special education professionals and the quality of courses preparing them to work in special education roles remain. The future for students with disability and special education needs looks bleak unless departments of education ensure that these students receive high-quality, evidence-based educational programs and instruction from professionals who are fully prepared for the role. Departments would do well to value the service of well-qualified special educators by acknowledging their expertise and their important contribution to the education of students with special education needs. Perhaps the Education Minister should extend the examination of teacher preparation courses to those purporting to prepare special/inclusive educators. The content of those courses must also be based on rigorous research in order to adequately prepare teachers to fulfil the expectations of this challenging role.

**Cameron Peverett and Jennifer Stephenson**

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## About the Authors

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**Dr Jennifer Stephenson** is a member of the InSpEd Board and an active member of the Australian Association of Special Education. Jennifer is an experienced special educator, teacher educator, consultant, and research in special education. Her research interests include effective and evidence-based practices in special education, alternative and augmentative communication, teacher education, challenging behaviour, children with autism spectrum disorders and students with high support needs.