

The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd) aims *to improve the quality of education for individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties in Australia* across all settings. This includes all age groups and individuals prior to school, during the school years and post school. InSpEd aims, also, to support families and all professionals and carers providing services to individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties by offering up-to-date, **evidence-based**, information on approaches and specific intervention strategies. **Our priority is the quality of education programs and provision of skilled specialist educators to deliver or support the delivery of those programs. Location is secondary to quality.**

The board of InSpEd is advised by a panel of experts with qualifications and experience in the education of people with disabilities and includes leading Australian researchers in the field.

We would like to acknowledge the work of the Royal Commission in identifying the many hardships and inequalities faced by individuals with disability and for the many positive recommendations of the Commissioners. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of experts in the field but, particularly, the contributions of individuals with disability and their families.

### **1. Which recommendations do you think are most important, and why?**

We endorse the recommendations that protect the rights of individuals with disability to equality, and access to quality health care and education and information affecting their lives. These are the basic rights of all human beings, regardless of ability, socio-economic situations, culture, religion and race. We also endorse the recommendations intended to reduce violence, abuse and neglect of people with disability.

### **1. Do you disagree with any of the recommendations? Why?**

#### ***Phasing Out Special Schools and Units***

Unfortunately, the debate about closing special schools has overshadowed the overriding importance of effective education programs regardless of setting. It has, also, obscured the role of special educators in supporting students regardless of setting and the need for appropriately qualified specialist teachers.

We strongly reject the recommendations of Commissioners Bennett, Galbally and McEwen that special schools should be phased out. Of particular concern is the timeline, with no new enrolments in special schools from 2032, no new enrolments in special schools or units from 2041 and no children with disabilities in special schools from 2052. We believe in the rights of individuals with disability, including intellectual disability and multiple disabilities, to the highest quality education that equips them to live their lives as independently as possible, and to participate in the social life of their communities. We also support the rights of families/caregivers to choose the education setting that they think best meets the needs of their child (Aspland et al., 2021).

#### ***The ability of mainstream teachers to provide a quality education for students with intellectual disability and multiple disabilities in mainstream classrooms***

Despite the rhetoric of many writing on this topic, research does not unconditionally support the efficacy of including students with intellectual disability and multiple disabilities in mainstream education environments. If, however, students are in inclusive environments, they must have access to a quality education that meets their needs. The adjustments that are referred to in the final report cannot be provided by teachers who do not have the necessary specialist skills. Unfortunately, regular classroom teachers are not currently equipped with these skills and the situation is unlikely to change in the proposed time frame. Two important skill sets, the ability to work collaboratively with families

and skills in the delivery of explicit instruction are unlikely to have been included as part of teachers' pre-service courses.

Indeed, mainstream teachers are struggling to provide quality instruction for students with learning difficulties, as their initial teacher training does not provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills, and teacher training institutions are yet to include evidence-based content and pedagogy in their courses (e.g., Meeks et al., 2020; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Meeks & Stephenson, O'Neil & Stephenson, 2014; Australian Government, 2023). We also note that in the report itself there were many accounts of students not receiving appropriate supports and, also, accounts of inappropriate behaviour management.

Support for teachers who are including students with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities in their mainstream classrooms is promoted as a way of providing quality inclusive education. Such support might be provided by a teacher assistant or a specialist teacher.

#### *The use of teaching assistants*

A common way of supporting students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms is to provide either a part-time or full-time teaching assistant (teacher's aide). The research into the use of teaching assistants in mainstream classrooms has not endorsed this type of support, as the use of teaching assistants often results in unintentional detriments such as: interference with the student's engagement with the class teacher; stigmatisation; and instruction from unqualified or minimally qualified personnel (e.g., Giangreco & Broer, 2005, 2007). Giangreco et al. (2010) suggest that this is an example of the least qualified, member of staff instructing the most vulnerable student with the most complex learning needs. Often the teaching assistant is seen as **the** adjustment, and little thought is given to (a) the use of other adjustments; (b) how the teaching assistant will provide support to the student; and (c) how that support will be faded. Teaching assistants may even be given inappropriate responsibility for making adjustments (Carter et al., 2024). If teaching assistants are to be used to support students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, they need to be properly trained and supervised. Unfortunately, most mainstream class teachers do not have the skills to do this because evidence-based content and pedagogy relating to the education of students with disabilities are not necessarily included in their pre-service teacher training courses (Carter et al., 2024; Stephenson, et al., 2012).

#### *Specialist support*

Specialist support may be directly provided to students or by coaching regular teachers to provide the direct support. In their report, the Commissioners agreed that specialist expertise was required "to make reasonable adjustments for students with disability and support them to participate fully in school life" (p.95). Such support must be provided by specialist teachers who have the required skills to assess, program, teach and monitor learning, and the strategies to teach pro-social skills and reduce challenging behaviour. We would suggest that such expertise should be provided by suitably qualified teachers in lead teacher positions. Specialist support should be provided by qualified special educators (at least one year full time study in a recognised course). InSpEd has a system of endorsement for teachers who meet our rigorous standards (<https://www.insped.org.au/special-education-certification/#standards-for-eligibility>).

#### *A decline in the number of appropriately qualified specialists*

Support from qualified specialist teachers may be used to advise the classroom teacher and train the teaching assistant. This would be a good option, providing the specialist teachers are appropriately qualified. Having a specialist who is also a qualified teacher has the advantage of shared knowledge of the school curriculum and classroom environments. Unfortunately, the number of qualified special educators appears to have declined over the past few years. In 2009, Thomas reported that 68.9

percent of principals and teachers in special schools across Australia had qualifications in special education with the percentage across states ranging from 53.1% to 86.6%. Data on the qualifications collected recently in Victoria (Peverett & Stephenson, 2023) suggest that these figures are likely to be a lot lower now. The data collected for Victoria in 2007 and published in 2009 indicated that two thirds of principals and teachers in special schools in Victoria had a qualification in special education. That figure had dropped to just over one third by 2023. The number of qualified special education teachers in special classes and mainstream classes in regular schools is likely to be much lower.

Unfortunately, departments of education do not require formal qualifications for staff teaching in special education roles. This is reflected in both the information provided on departments of education websites (see e.g., <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teach-nsw/explore-teaching/high-demand-teachers/special-education-teachers>; <https://www.vic.gov.au/types-teacher#special-education>; <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/school-teacher-roles>; <https://teach.qld.gov.au/latest-articles/life-as-a-special-education-teacher>) and in advertised special education positions. If qualifications are not required, there is no incentive for those working in the field to complete a postgraduate qualification, which might take up to two years of full-time study and which will not attract a higher salary.

### *Quality of postgraduate university courses in special education*

In some states, departments of education are offering postgraduate scholarships for teachers in special education roles or wishing to take up a special education position. Unfortunately, in recent years, not all postgraduate courses in inclusive/special education include the necessary skills and knowledge relating to content and pedagogy, and are not taught by academics with special education qualifications or with practical or research experience in the field (Stephenson, et al., 2022, 2023).

### *Summary*

We agree that inclusion is a human right but so is quality education that prepares individuals to live their best lives. Until the appropriate supports are available in regular schools, not all students with disabilities will have access to a quality education in regular education classrooms.

Given the decline in numbers of appropriately qualified special education teachers in recent years, it is not only impractical to suggest that special schools and classes should be phased out by 2052, but such an occurrence is likely to have a life-long negative impact on many individuals with intellectual and multiple disabilities. We note, that in the section on health and mental health support, the need for appropriately qualified personnel is acknowledged, especially for people with cognitive impairment. Surely this should also be the case for those supporting students with disabilities in education environments. While there are insufficient specialist teachers in mainstream schools with the skills to provide the necessary supports to students with disabilities and their mainstream teachers, there is a potential role for specialist schools with specialist teachers as hubs providing resources and supports for teachers in regular schools.

Unfortunately, the push for educational inclusion may have contributed to a decline in the quality of postgraduate courses in special education. Our own research has indicated that many university courses may not include evidence-based pedagogy and content in their postgraduate special/inclusive education courses (Stephenson, et al., 2022, 2023). Contributing to this decline is the fact that we have found that many academics convening and/or teaching on these courses may not have qualifications, practical experience or research background required (research submitted for publication).

### ***Phasing Out Day Programs***

Regardless of the place of education, it is important that individuals with intellectual disability and multiple disabilities have access to ongoing education. For those who, at least initially, are not able

to work in open or supported employment, opportunities for ongoing education are important. Too often people with intellectual disability languish in day centres where opportunities for social participation are limited. Australian research indicates that individuals who attend day recreation programs often experience increasing behavioural challenges and increasing social exclusion (Foley, 2014) due to a lack of meaningful and challenging activities. We would, therefore, agree that day programs as they now operate should be phased out. However, these should be replaced with programs that provide educational opportunities and opportunities for social participation. Such programs would require specialist support.

### ***Phasing Out of Supported Employment***

We agree with the Chair and Commissioner Ryan that, at this point, Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) should not be phased out. However, we do believe that there are individuals in supported employment who may well be able to transition to open employment and that ADEs should be looking for opportunities to teach the skills required to achieve this. Employing a qualified instructional specialist in ADEs is likely to increase the number of individuals able to transition to open employment. We do know from research that individuals with disability working in supported employment have fewer challenging behaviours than those in day programs, possibly because they are engaged in more meaningful activities and there are more opportunities for establishing friendships (Foley, 2014).

### ***Workforce Capabilities, Expertise and Development***

We are concerned that there appears to be a human-rights focus on amending the *AITSL* standards for teachers of students with disabilities in mainstream classes, and not a skill-based approach. The human rights of individuals with disabilities would be better enhanced by a focus on the skills needed to assess, program for, and teach individuals with disabilities using evidence-based practices. Teachers also need the skills to work collaboratively with both specialists and family members in order to achieve this. Mainstream teachers need qualified specialist support to plan adjustments that meet student needs. Having lead teachers in specialist roles working across schools will not make a difference unless those specialist roles are filled with skilled, experienced and qualified practitioners. We suggest that every school should have a qualified school-based specialist to assist teachers to plan and deliver instruction for all students with special education needs. Teachers of students with vision and hearing impairment could access support from district-based specialists unless the students had additional needs.

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