

Research Summary: Provision of Practicum in Australian Postgraduate Courses Preparing Special/Inclusive Educators

Following is a summary of the latest published article, part of a suite of articles, produced by the InSpEd team, investigating university courses preparing special/inclusive educators for their specialist roles. To date, the research team has identified problems with coverage of evidence-based content in courses and the validity of claims of evidence-based practice made by universities. The current open access paper investigates the practicum allocated to special/inclusive education courses and compares the pre-service special education experience to that of initial teacher education courses and courses preparing other professions working with populations of individuals with disability.

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Introduction

There is consensus among educators that practical experience is an important component of initial teacher education courses (Le Cornu, 2015). Supervised teaching practice is required for undergraduate and double degree teacher education programs (at least 80 days) and graduate entry programs (at least 60 days) (AITSL, 2022). Unfortunately, because there are no AITSL standards for courses preparing teachers to become special educators, universities are not obliged to provide professional experience as part of these courses and, indeed, there may be cost disincentives for them to do so.

In addition to accessing evidence-based practice in special/inclusive education, trainee special educators need to be able to demonstrate their implementation of these practices in work experience placements. Indeed, there is consensus that these placements should include contact with students with disability and that this is an important, if not essential, component, of courses preparing teachers to work in special education roles (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2024).

The aims of the current research were to investigate:

- whether Australian postgraduate special/inclusive education courses required practice in a school setting where students with disability were included,
- what, if any, practicum was required, the type and length of the practicum, the supervision or mentoring required and the involvement of university staff in the supervision, and
- the content included in the units to which the practicum was attached, how the trainee special educators were assessed and who assessed them.

Method

Data extracted from university websites were used to investigate the practicum experience of trainee special educators completing Australian postgraduate courses in special/inclusive education. The specific details examined were: length of the practicum; content of the unit related to the practicum; supervision and placement arrangements; and assessment.

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Results

Courses with Practicum Attached

Thirty four master's level courses in special/inclusive education from 24 universities were identified as preparing qualified teachers to teach students with disability.

Twenty courses had one or more units with practicum attached. Sometimes the same unit was used for more than one course, leaving 16 units for analysis. For nine of those units a claim was made that the content was evidence-based but this was sustained for only three of them.

Length of Practicum

For two units the length of the practicum was not provided. For the others the length ranged from 10 days (one unit) to 25 days (two units), with one unit having two practicums of 15 days each. For two of the units, longer practicums than specified could be provided if this were required by employers.

Assessment

No information relating to assessment was available for two of the courses. Variation was identified in the content assessed in the remaining courses. While intervention planning was commonly assessed, only two units required assessment of intervention implementation. One university did not include information for the how the practicum was to be assessed.

For six units, the mentor teacher provided an assessment report; for one unit the mentor teacher assessed aspects of teacher behaviour; and for two units the university staff and mentor teacher collaborated on the assessment. For six of the units there was no mentor involvement or it was unclear as to the role of the mentor teacher in the assessment of student skills. In no unit did it appear that skills in assessment, instruction, monitoring progress and evaluation were assessed.

Qualifications of Staff Supervising/Assessing Practicum

For five units it was reported that university staff would be involved in either assessment or supervision of trainee special educators but there was no information about the university staff involvement for any of the other units. Staff background was not provided for four units. Of the 13 unit staff identified in the remaining units, four held a special education qualification, three had experience in a special education or a disability related setting, and 12 had recently published relevant research. Only one was qualified and experienced and had published recent relevant research. Eight of the staff appeared to have neither a qualification nor research in special education or a related area.

No information was provided about the qualifications of the mentor teacher, but one unit guide did indicate that the mentor teacher would have appropriate qualifications.

Discussion

The number of days allocated for practicum was far fewer than the number allocated to initial teacher training (60-80 days) and to postgraduate allied health courses preparing graduates to work with individuals with disability and other learning and behaviour difficulties (120 + days). The supervision of allied health students is also provided by qualified staff across a range of settings. In contrast, mentor teachers and unit staff involved in the supervision of trainee special educators were not necessarily qualified in special education.

Little information was available with respect to mentor teacher background and not all university staff co-ordinating the units with practicum attached had either a qualification or experience in special education. Settings for trainee special educator placements were also limited, given that most courses

only offered a single practicum despite the fact that the need for trainee special educators to practice skills in a range of settings is recognised (Brownell et al., 2019). It appears, also, that many practicum units do not include content specific to special education with much of the content related to general teaching strategies.

Recommendations made by the authors were:

- practice-based tasks embedded in all special/inclusive education course units,
- the provision of practical experience in collaborating with families/caregivers and other professionals,
- the provision of longer and more varied student placements,
- supervision and mentoring to be provided by qualified and experienced special educators, and
- ongoing research into the practicum experiences of trainee special educators.

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