

Submission to the Review of the Disability Standards for Education from the Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd)

The Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to **improve the quality of education for individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties in Australia** across all settings and 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.

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.

More information on the activities of InSpEd is at <https://www.insped.org.au/>

In this submission we will focus on the role of qualified special educators in supporting teachers, families/caregivers and students to make collaborative decisions about effective adjustments and to monitor the effects of those adjustments on access, participation and learning.

What are special educators and what can they do?

A qualified special educator holds a special education qualification, generally accepted to be a minimum one-year full-time university course or equivalent, following a relevant university degree. These courses, at master's level, are offered at several Australian universities but only a few have endorsement from InSpEd.

InSpEd has developed a set of standards of necessary competencies for special educators, based on current research on effective practices as well as standards for courses preparing special educators. The standards include knowledge of the DDA and Education Standards as well as other relevant laws and policies.

TOPIC 1

Effective Implementation of the Standards

InSpEd is concerned with the education of students with disability of all ages and in all settings, so is highly aware of the standards.

Putting Standards into Practice – Reasonable Adjustments

The standards can only be effectively implemented when the adjustments made to allow access to instruction and curriculum are effective. Research in NSW on how schools make decisions about adjustments for students with disability, what these adjustments are and how they are monitored in regular classes in government schools (Carter et al., 2022a; 2022b; Stephenson et al., 2022) found that schools did try to make decisions that met perceived student needs but a limited palette of adjustments was provided. There was heavy reliance on employing teaching assistants (often on a 1:1 basis) without specifying how they would support the student. It seems the presence of a teaching assistant in and of itself was seen as an adjustment, rather than the nature of the support the teaching assistant would provide. In about one third of the participating schools, there was a focus on care, participation and

safety as opposed to a broader educational focus to teach academic, social and other skills. This suggested that some schools may have been employing the same limited number of options for adjustments across students, and that these options may not always meet student needs. Indeed, at least one participant in over half the schools believed that student needs were not being met. The adjustments that were provided tended to be “light touch” that did not require major changes to teaching practices or curriculum. Adjustments were often limited in areas such as communication and social skills, which may be crucial areas for students with disability. Very few participants described regular monitoring of the effects of adjustments or of student learning. Best practice for students with disability includes regular and systematic monitoring of student learning through the collection of data, and it is of concern that so few schools reported this practice. In terms of the standards, it is a concern that adjustments may be made that do not meet student need and that do not allow or improve access to instruction, curriculum and learning.

Further Support and Guidance Needed for Schools, Teachers, Parents Carers and Students

We believe that special educators who have received training in research-based approaches, as identified in the InSpEd standards are a necessary resource to support the planning and implementation of effective adjustments. They may do this as part of their role as support teachers in mainstream schools, or as class teachers in specialist classes or schools. Qualified special educators can ensure adjustments are appropriate and effective because they:

- are familiar with a wide range of research-based assessment and intervention strategies that could be used as appropriate adjustments for students with disabilities, thus broadening the range of effective strategies employed in schools;
- can facilitate planning of adjustments with families and others as they have expertise in collaboration and consultation;
- can support the monitoring of the effect of adjustments, and make appropriate changes if required;
- can provide in-class support for classroom teachers implementing adjustments in regular schools through assessment of student needs, co-teaching or providing coaching and feedback in the implementation of adjustments and through regular monitoring of student learning and the effect of adjustments.

Special Educator Preparation

If the standards are to be fully implemented, both regular and specialist educators need to be not only fully aware of their obligations, but also have the skills, knowledge and resources to implement them. It is accepted that regular classroom teachers are not always adequately prepared to teach students with disability (Dally et al., 2019) and may not have access to a qualified special educator for support. Research carried out by InSpEd on the content of master’s level courses preparing qualified teachers to become special educators has revealed that not all courses appear to include content related to the DDA and Education Standards. Of the 28 courses we identified, 22 included relevant content (Stephenson et al., 2022) and few courses met the full InSpEd standards. This means that many graduates may not have the

skills to plan, implement and monitor effective adjustments, particularly those relating to assessment and explicit instruction in literacy and numeracy. Other areas that were lacking in a third or more of courses, that would impact on the provision of appropriate adjustments, included content on teaching early communication skills, learners with high support needs, and working with families.

TOPIC 2

Inclusive decision making

Collaborative decision-making for individual students is part of good educational practice, apart from the legal requirement of the standards. Skills for effective collaboration with other teachers, families, carers, other professional and students are an element in the InSpEd standards. Special educators also have the skills to teach students, including those with complex communication needs, the social, communication skills and self-advocacy skills needed for them to have a say in decision-making. Many students with more severe disability may be excluded from participation in planning because their teachers do not have the skills needed to teach essential communication skills. Once students move into post-school options, TAFE or universities, their self-advocacy skills may become more important in accessing supports and adjustments.

InSpEd endorses the development of principles on consultation, issues resolution and complaints handling. We would support that the principles be a requirement when education providers, families, carers and students are planning and reviewing adjustments as well as when issues and complaints are addressed.

It appears that the draft set of principles relates primarily to resolving issues and complaints. We believe that for many students with disability, involving a qualified special educator in the initial decision-making would ensure the consideration of a broader range of potential effective adjustments and that there would be a focus on what support teacher assistants would provide. We recognise that this may not currently be possible, given the shortage of qualified special educators, but it could be noted as a desirable element for both initial planning and issues and complaints resolution.

We would like to see more pro-active principles included that would require regular review of adjustments during each year with all stakeholders, as well as an initial meeting, with consideration of the effectiveness of current adjustments. This should be informed by sound data collected on student access, participation and learning. Several of the principles relating to meetings regarding issues and complaints should also relate to initial planning (e.g. support people, record of outcomes distributed, documentation of decisions and the rationale for those decisions). We believe transparent initial planning may reduce the issues and complaints.

TOPIC 3

Assessment Authorities and Course Developers

It would seem that if a student had a set of effective adjustments developed collaboratively (as per the suggestions for Topic 2) over their school career, in most cases the adjustments made for assessment tasks within the school should automatically be made available for external assessments. Adjustments developed in accordance with the suggested principles

should be supported by comprehensive documentation that details the adjustment and its rationale, enabling transparent communication with examination authorities. Such a document could also travel with the student to other educational settings including TAFE and university, as a starting point for determining adjustments in those settings. It may also inform adjustments required in the workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that decisions about the adjustments provided to students with disability require input from educators with skills and knowledge regarding assessment, curriculum and instruction that meet student needs. This means that in the area of needed resources:

- the role of teachers with specific specialist skills (special educators) in planning, implementing and monitoring the effects of adjustments should be recognised in the standards;
- nationally recognised standards for special educators and the courses that prepare them should be developed;
- Implementation of these recommendations will require sufficient funding to ensure schools can employ qualified special educators.

We endorse the development of specific principles to apply to both initial decision-making and to the resolution of issues and complaints. Transparency around the reasons for adopting (or not) particular adjustments and information about the effect of adjustments is essential for educators, families, carers and students.

InSpEd is committed to working with governments, education providers, and communities to ensure every student with disability has equitable access to quality education supported by qualified professionals.

References

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