

Supporting Students with Diverse Needs in Primary School Classrooms

Qualified special educators are essentially instructional and behavioural specialists, rather than curriculum content specialists. Of course, all high quality courses preparing special educators to work in the field will include evidence-based content in relation to literacy and numeracy instruction. However, special educators will also work in secondary schools and in pre- and post-school programs. In those environments, they will depend heavily on content experts working with them to develop individualised programs to meet the needs of the full range of children in their centres, students in their classrooms and adults in their post-school programs.

At the beginning of each school year, teachers are likely to have students whom they have not previously taught. With the inclusion of more and more students with significant disabilities and behavioural difficulties in regular education classrooms, teachers are required to provide for an increasingly diverse range of students. Unfortunately, not every teacher has access to a qualified instructional specialist who can assist not only with assessment of needs but with strategies for implementing individualised instructional adjustments where these are required. Unfortunately, some school leaders and teachers may resist receiving support from professionals outside the school system, despite the guidelines provided by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) directing schools to “collaborate with students, their guardian/s and associates, to identify the student needs and determine adjustments or improvements to adjustments together” (AITSL, 2023, p.10).

A young family member, who is on the autism spectrum, endured a truly horrible 2025 at his local primary school and is extremely anxious about the year ahead. Following teacher reports of challenging behaviour in the classroom, the child’s mother made many approaches to the school to have a special educator, who supported the child in childcare, observe in the classroom, implement a functional behaviour assessment, and work with the teacher to design and implement strategies for managing any difficulties he may be experiencing. The response from the school was that they were not permitted to have outside professionals, such as the one suggested by the child’s mother, in the classroom. This goes against the advice provided by AITSL, the state education department and the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO) that school leaders and individual teachers should work collaboratively with outside professionals who have supported children with additional needs and their families.

In this situation, parents are often hesitant to make a fuss because they are concerned that this will not be in the best interest of their child. As fewer schools now have qualified special educators who can assist classroom teachers to provide effective instruction for students with disabilities and significant learning difficulties, the opportunity to access this support outside the education system should be embraced. School leaders need to remember that special educators must have working with children checks and are generally qualified and experienced teachers with an additional qualification in special education. Further, it is not the role of the special educator to work one-to-one with the student but to *assist the teacher with assessment of needs, program design and implementation*.

Of course, not all students who may be disadvantaged in classrooms where there is a broad range of student ability will have a disability or learning difficulty. Some may be performing well above the expected level for the class. These students are not always obviously advanced. They may exhibit challenging behaviours or may be withdrawn. The concern is that many of these students will develop poor attention behaviours and lack of ability to persevere with a challenging task if their educational needs are not met and that this may disadvantage them in future educational and work settings.

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Hopefully information relating to the skills, knowledge and understanding of each student will be passed on by previous teachers. Even so, it is important not to assume that all students will fit comfortably into the syllabus planned for the coming year. Students with an intellectual disability or learning difficulty may not have the entry level skills needed to continue to progress. Those with advanced skills may have already mastered the skills, knowledge, and understanding planned for instruction in the coming year. For those students who do not fit comfortably into the curriculum planned for the year, off-level testing will be valuable in order to pinpoint what the student has mastered and the next learning objectives. Knowing both is critical if students are to continue to learn and, therefore, reach their potential. Taking into consideration information provided by family members, the student, and other professionals working with the student and family will be important.

References

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2023). Effectively implementing the Disability Standards for Education 2005, AITSL, Melbourne.

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