

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms

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 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 area.

Standards for Specialist Teachers

Following its establishment, researchers and practitioners across Australia who have considerable expertise across a range of areas relating to disability and learning difficulty were invited to be part of a panel <https://www.insped.org.au/expert-panel-members/> to advise the InSpEd Board on standards for certified membership and for preservice training and ongoing professional development in special/inclusive education.

Resources for Teachers and Others

In addition to its role in developing and monitoring standards in specialist instruction based on research evidence, a major objective of InSpEd is to support special/inclusive educators in their work with individuals with disability and learning difficulties by providing free online resources <https://www.insped.org.au/resources-2/> and a free quarterly newsletter that includes summaries of research and information relevant to those working in the field.

InSpEd and Research

InSpEd also has teams of researchers, one of which has been investigating the quality of university courses preparing instructional specialists to support teachers who are including students with a disability. Findings from this research, included in a paper under review for publication, and earlier research by our members, contribute to the response from the InSpEd Board to the Productivity Commission's *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report*.

This submission

In our submission we will focus on the role of **qualified special educators** in supporting teachers and students particularly in relation to preventing and addressing problem behaviour. This issue is related to the terms of reference: **(c) what can be done to assist classroom teachers** and the **actions that could be taken** to improve the quality of the support provided to teachers and students. **Poor achievement in literacy and numeracy (g)** is related to problem behaviour, and a pro-active approach to behaviour will likely improve academic learning in schools.

Background

Teachers report finding it difficult to support the growing number of students with disabilities and those with problem behaviour enrolled in their mainstream classrooms. Students with disabilities may present with challenging behaviours for which regular classroom teachers have not been prepared to plan and implement interventions (see for example, O'Neill & Stephenson, 2014). Where schools are not proactive and cannot manage problem behaviour, this can lead to reactive and punitive responses of suspension or exclusion and further disadvantage for students with disability. It can also lead to teacher "burn out" and attrition.

There can be complex interactions between academic difficulties (such as poor literacy skills), learning and/or communication difficulties, lack of pro-social skills and problem behaviour. For this reason, regular classroom teachers will benefit from expert support provided by special educators to assess students and implement effective interventions to address academic, literacy, communication and social skill needs as well as related behaviour problems.

The way forward

InSpEd endorses the adoption of proactive and positive approaches to behaviour in school, currently adopted in Australia. Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (PBIS) is an evidence-based, whole school approach based on the principles of applied behaviour analysis. It has robust research support and has been shown to improve academic outcomes and behaviours for all students, including in schools in impoverished areas. It has been promoted in several Australian states, for example, as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) in NSW, but has never been mandated. PBIS is a tiered approach with the lowest tier supporting all students to develop, teach and acknowledge appropriate values and behaviours across all school contexts. The values and the behaviours that demonstrate those values are developed by the whole school community (for example, listening quietly to a teacher or fellow student demonstrates the value of respect for others). In the second tier, students who are experiencing difficulty receive small group interventions targeted at their area of difficulty (for example, teaching social skills for appropriate play in the playground). In the third tier, which applies to the small minority of students with on-going and more serious behaviour problems, individual assessment using functional behaviour assessment leads to an individualized intervention plan. The framework also includes (a) a system for tracking behaviour data to ascertain the impact of school actions, and (b) strategies to monitor fidelity of implementation across settings. More detail on PBIS and the research base supporting it may be found at <https://www.pbis.org/>.

We do not underestimate the difficulties in changing whole-school approaches to behaviour, and acknowledge that in any school it may be two or three years before the framework can be effectively implemented. PBIS also requires systemic supports outside the school to train and support staff, monitor implementation fidelity and provide consultative support. These demands must be balanced against the time and energy currently spent on dealing with student behaviour in a reactive manner. We are confident other submissions will also endorse this approach, and believe it should be strongly promoted and supported by all education sectors.

Role of qualified special educators in supporting students and teachers

To draw a parallel with the medical profession, we do not expect general practitioners to be expert in specific specialist areas. We accept that specialist knowledge, over and above that possessed by a general practitioner is required to treat and support some people. We accept that GPs can manage ongoing care and support when advised by a specialist. The same is true for the education of students with disability and those with more complex behaviour problems. **Specialist teachers can provide the advice and support needed by classroom teachers, and classroom teachers should not be expected to be expert in supporting students with disabilities or emotional and behavioural problem.**

Many students with disability do not reach their full potential, partly because regular classroom teachers do not have the skills and knowledge to provide appropriate adjustments to curriculum, teaching, and the environment. Poor academic achievement, including poor literacy skills, and

disengagement from schooling is linked to problem behaviour, as are difficulties with communication and language. Thus, comprehensive intervention to address both academic and behaviour problems will be needed by many students.

Appropriately qualified special educators have the necessary skills and understanding to assess the reasons why problem behaviour occurs (functional assessment at tier 3 in PBIS) and to design, implement or guide, and monitor interventions that remove triggers for problem behaviour and teach replacement, pro-social skills. They also have the skills to assess the academic and social/communication difficulties that may be related to problem behaviour and to suggest appropriate interventions. They may work directly with the child to deliver intensive instruction or, preferably, may work with the classroom teacher to build their capacity through co-teaching, feedback and coaching.

Evidence-based practices that fall within the remit of special educators include practices drawn from applied behaviour analysis and integral to PBIS (functional assessment and positive behaviour intervention and supports), direct, explicit and systematic instruction in academics, social and communication skills. They are also specialists in assessment and monitoring of interventions to ensure successful outcomes.

InSpEd believes that the provision of at **least one qualified special educator in every school** would provide a valuable resource and support for regular educators and school leaders in meeting the needs of students with disability and also those with academic or behavioural difficulties.

Professional learning, providing information and models, is helpful but teachers also need in-class coaching with feedback to develop the necessary skills in behaviour management. This kind of professional learning can only be provided by qualified special educators who themselves have the required skills and the ability to support other teachers. Providing fragmented professional learning opportunities will not create teachers who are competent to manage more complex behaviours

Need for more qualified special educators

We note the evidence that there is a lack of qualified special/inclusive educators in Australia. A number of reports and enquiries have expressed concern about the lack of specialist support. There are also no Australian Institute of School Leaders (AITSL) standards outlining the desired competencies for specialist teachers as there are for regular classroom teachers and executives.

Role of InSpEd

In the absence of any standards for specialist teachers, such as behaviour support teachers, members of the InSpEd Expert Panel have developed a set of standards for special educators (<https://www.insped.org.au/special-education-certification/#standards-for-eligibility>) and for the university courses that prepare them (<https://www.insped.org.au/university-courses-how-courses-are-endorsed/>). These standards cover assessment individual planning and intervention in collaboration with families and other stakeholders in academic, social, communication and behaviour areas.

Specifically, in relation to behaviour support the standards cover:

- expertise in positive behaviour support including functional behavioural assessment, the design and monitoring of behaviour support and intervention strategies and instruction of pro-social skills.
- Skills in providing professional learning, including coaching and feedback to other teachers and teacher assistants

Conclusion

InSpEd endorses pro-active approaches to behaviour in schools, particularly the PBIS model. We believe this model will be best implemented when each school has a qualified special educator to advise and support teachers in assessing academic and behavioural difficulties and developing evidence-based interventions.

Sources

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