

Overview

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc (AASE) is a national peak body of professionals, paraprofessionals, and community members with expertise and/or interest in the education of children and young people with special education needs.

The aims of AASE are to:

- Provide educational leadership to the professional and wider community
- Advocate for quality education for all.
- Commission, participate in and disseminate quality research to inform educational practice.
- Arrange, promote and facilitate high quality professional learning events and conferences.
- Coach, mentor and model best practice in teaching and leadership.
- Build partnerships with universities, service providers and the community.
- Actively influence policy and decision making.

The focus of our submission is on the preparation of teachers to educate students with disability, as defined under Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) including those for whom educational adjustments must be provided.

Key Points:

- All teachers need preparation to enable them to teach students with disability. Students with disability are likely to present in every school.
- Content in initial teacher education (ITE) courses should include explicit and direct instruction methods and underpinning theories, shown to be effective for students with disability.
- The extent of philosophical commitment to constructivist teaching theories and approaches in many ITE courses should be re-evaluated and teaching standards reviewed in the light of existing and emerging scientific evidence demonstrating the benefits of explicit instruction.
- Content in ITE courses, particularly in reading instruction and behaviour management should be evidence-based, drawing on the research evidence rather than presentation of an eclectic mix of theories.
- Essential content in ITE courses on educating students with disability may best be presented through a stand-alone unit taught by academics with qualifications and experience in special education and through integration into other units.
- Essential content includes assessment and monitoring strategies (including curriculum-based assessment) and direct and explicit teaching strategies related to individualised planning.
- Collaboration and consultation with families, teaching assistants, and other professionals are essential skills and should be taught and practiced in ITE.

Introduction

There are many broad workforce factors that be relevant to the 2021 Quality Initial Teacher Education Review.

These include:

- teacher recruitment
- the content and pedagogy in teacher education courses, and
- the quality of professional experiences.

The additional factors such as career status, workload, job security, self-efficacy and promotional pathways are also relevant. While such factors likely contribute to creating a well-trained, stable workforce of teachers, AASE'S focus is primarily on those variables that relate to effective teaching and student outcomes, particularly for students with a disability.

Special and inclusive education teacher education programs have mainly been accessible at a post-graduate level, and have been strongly aligned with empirical research in areas of instruction, curriculum and programming. These courses are, however, designed to produce specialist teachers. Some preparation in the education of students with disability is essential for all teachers, given that In 65.9% of students with disabilities attend mainstream classrooms (Round, Subban & Sharma, [2016](#)) and the requirement that suitable adjustments must be made to facilitate their learning.

Place of theories in ITE

A theme in feedback from ITE students and school principals relates to a perceived imbalance in educational theory or conceptual content, in contrast to practical advice and professional experience (Australian Government, 2021). For example, the Discussion Paper noted that the *Studying the effectiveness of teacher education research* (Mayer et al, 2015) found that“Graduates, however, felt their preparation could have been enhanced by more time spent in schools, more time on strategies for teaching and less theory. Principals supported graduates in this assessment” (Australian Government, 2021 p 20). AASE would support further investigation of these graduate assessments, and assert that theoretical knowledge in a field is also needed for critical judgement and the generalization of skills. A theory-practice imbalance may exist, particularly with beginning teachers in areas where the fidelity of implementation of a teaching strategy is skill-dependent. Here, continued classroom practice with feedback may be needed for beginning teachers to use their theoretical knowledge to support on the ground teaching skills.

To generally assess the value of theories for teaching, Sweller & Chandler noted that they can contribute directly to instructional practices for teachers:

“There can be only one ultimate goal: the generation of new, useful instructional techniques. All other functions of a theory are surely subsidiary to this ultimate

function. Better understanding, increased predictive power, and elegance can all be important attributes of a theory concerned with cognition and instruction, but unless these positive characteristics can be followed by novel instructional procedures, the theory will be deficient” (1991, p 351)

Emerging theories of value to educators may be neglected in ITE. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) is a valuable positive example of a theoretical perspective that directly supports teaching, by helping to organize information to reduce the load on a student’s working memory. Cognitive load theory is providing further scientific evidence to support the use of explicit and direct instruction, especially for students in the early stages of learning in a discipline area. Both the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO, 2021) and the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation have created resources to assist in-service teachers to apply the principles of Cognitive Load Theory (CESE, 2018). It is unclear to what extent ITE providers, across and within Australian institutions, equip teachers to apply CLT and avoid its entanglement with conflicting perspectives.

Research on course content for social behaviour learning and behaviour management indicated that courses may present contradictory theoretical perspectives rather than focus on research-based strategies, particularly those emerging from behavioural approaches (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2012). More generally in the field of educational psychology and teacher education, Willingham identifies conflicting messages of the “mental model” (Willingham, 2017). Multiple and conflicting perspectives will likely devalue the model’s significance, and make their adoption by early career teachers arbitrary. For example, a recent NSW study of ITE students suggests that preservice teachers may at times have an unwarranted confidence in their understanding of student learning (Carter et al, 2020). Additionally, pre-service teachers may acquire discredited beliefs and neuromyths, such as those related to learning styles, and incorrectly invest resources in catering for various learning styles.

As a first step, an exploration of the range of theoretical models and perspectives evident in ITE across Australia would be helpful. With that, we could consider Willingham’s advice for ITE to promote agreed *empirical generalizations*, and only select models or constructs that help teachers make sense of the generalization (2017).

Although explicit and direct instruction has been known to be effective for over fifty years, a major barrier to its use has been the philosophical commitment to constructivism and practices such as problem-based and discovery learning, especially in universities. AASE is of the view that all teachers should be competent in a wide range of instructional strategies and should be able to use direct instruction with beginning learners and with those who struggle, and move to more discovery-oriented approaches when students have a firm grasp of basic skills and knowledge. The accreditation of teacher education courses that ensure the content is research-based, may require ITE providers to include the evidence base for course content for scrutiny by the accreditors.

If all ITE providers worked closely with school systems around targeted initiatives and agreed content, then school-based coaching or mentoring systems could assist to integrate research-based practices such as those based on CLT across KLAs. More generally, collaborative relationships between schools and universities could improve ITE, continuing teacher education and research.

Reading Instruction

The Discussion Paper refers briefly to Accreditation Standards relating to early reading instruction. In particular, the requirement to address the elements of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and oral language (Australian Government, 2021). While a specific reference to this requirement is welcome, the extent of the problems within ITE is not acknowledged. Notwithstanding the evidence to support explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, the influence of a whole language approach to teaching reading is still evident in many ITE programs. Recent investigations of the knowledge of pre-service teachers concerning the five elements of effective reading instruction, suggests that significant gaps are evident in the knowledge of research-based pedagogical strategies, and that awareness of the significance of phonics is lower than is desirable (Meeks, Madelaine & Kemp, 2020). AASE NSW strongly supports initiatives to prescribe evidence-based practice in reading instruction for ITE and Accreditation standards.

Classroom management

The capacity of ITE programs to develop classroom management skills is a recurring topic in the literature (O'Neill, 2016). Teachers often report low confidence and feelings of inadequacy with preparation for classroom behaviour management (Paramita, Anderson & Sharma, 2020). In Australia, and elsewhere, the persistence of disruptive and non-compliant behaviour is often associated lower student achievement, wellbeing and teacher self-efficacy.

Qualitative-based inquiries in NSW suggest that punitive and restrictive practices, continue to be used in schools inappropriately, in response to disruptive and challenging behaviour. Students with disability or with an experience of trauma are likely to experience punitive responses more than others. Moreover, school-based behaviour support practices tend not to be aligned with recommended evidence-based practices (NSW Ombudsman, 2017; Hepburn & Beamish, 2019).

There exists a strong evidence base that focuses on the importance of creating a positive classroom environment and strengthening student-adult relationships. The evidence relates to a number of practical skilled-based strategies that can be taught during initial teacher education and developed with coach-guided feedback. These include structured instruction, teaching expectations, instructive feedback, providing opportunities to respond and active supervision (CESE, 2020; Simonsen et al, 2008). For the purposes of the current review of ITE in Australia, it is important to determine how accurately and effectively these strategies are taught by ITE providers. Explanations for teacher difficulties with classroom management are

often connected to ITE programs that have deficits in knowledge, skills and specific evidence-based strategies (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; O’Neill, 2016). A 2012 study by O’Neill and Stephenson of ITE providers in the area of classroom behaviour management, indicated significant levels of eclecticism involving thirty-six various models within teaching units, each with varying degrees of validation (2012). AASE NSW strongly supports initiatives to prescribe evidence-based practice in classroom behaviour management for ITE and Accreditation standards.

Minimum Requirements for ITE

In some Australian universities, there is currently a shift-away from the teaching of researched-validated practices for students with a disability. In some cases, special education faculties are being marginalised and specialist courses are being replaced with more generic subjects under the label of diversity. Although it is important that ITE courses present content on historical and philosophical developments regarding the education of students with disability, it is crucial that content includes strategies for assessing, teaching, monitoring and evaluating the learning of students with disability. There exists a strong evidence base for teaching students with disability, following decades of research (McLesky et al., 2017). All teachers need skills in differentiating instruction, providing adjustments, and monitoring student progress, with or without the support of a special educator. All initial teacher education programs should contain a stand-alone unit on special education, and in addition, strategies to meet the needs of students with disability should be incorporated throughout teacher education programs. For students with disability, research shows that the use of direct and explicit instruction is more effective in teaching basic skills and knowledge than child-centred constructivist approaches espoused by most universities and education departments. As noted, effective approaches for students with special education needs are likely to include direct, teacher centred instruction, regular formative evaluation of teaching programs and individualised planning (Purdie & Ellis, 2005; Rowe, 2006). Many of these strategies, often drawn from applied behaviour analysis, are likely to be beneficial for all students, as a recent analysis of research on education has shown (Hattie, 2009). It is important to note, that many of these effective practices are not routinely used in schools, and are not included in many teacher education programs.

Careful assessment of the needs of students with disability is a requirement if effective programs are to be implemented and progress monitored. There is a considerable evidence base that supports the use of curriculum-based assessment to place students in a curriculum and to define student outcomes that are realistic and challenging. Teachers should evaluate the effects of their instruction through regular monitoring of student progress and academic engaged time (Howell & Nolet, 2000).

Since 1994, NSW initial teacher education programs have been required to include a stand-alone semester unit of study in special education. AASE NSW strongly supports this requirement.

The delivery of this unit appears to vary considerably in quality across ITE providers, depending on the strengths of each course provider. *At the very least*, ASE believes that this unit should be maintained, along with the embedding of relevant content in other units throughout initial teacher education programs courses.

AASE believes it is crucial that the units on inclusive and special education should be taught by academic staff who have both post-graduate qualifications and practical classroom experience in the area.

Also crucial is program content that prepares teachers for consultation and collaboration. The Discussion Paper highlights comments from graduate teachers who reported being less well prepared among other things, in 'Professional engagement with parents/carers and the community (Australian Government, 2021).

The NSW Department of Education recommends a team-based approach for planning for students:

- Firstly, consultation with families and students themselves in student-centered education planning, including the selection, implementation and monitoring of any adjustments which may be required. This is outlined in the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Legislation.
- Secondly, as teacher aides or assistants are commonly employed in schools as a support for students with disability, it is essential that teachers are prepared to work productively with teacher aides.
- Thirdly, schools may employ support teachers who can provide assistance to teachers educating students with disability and provide specialized support for the students themselves.
- Fourthly, many students with disability will be receiving services from other professionals, such as those delivered under the NDIS. Teachers need an understanding of the roles of speech pathologists, psychologists and allied health workers, to ensure that educational goals are integrated and that interventions are delivered accurately and consistently.

About AASE <http://aase.edu.au/> Contact: NSW@aase.edu.au

References

- Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], (2021). Explicit Instruction. Know how to teach your students retrieved 16.07.21 from <https://edresearch.edu.au/trying-and-tested-explicit-instruction>
- Australian Government (2021). *Discussion paper: Quality Initial Teacher Education Review*. Canberra.
- Carter, M., Van Bergen, P., Stephenson, J., Newall, C., & Sweller, N. (2020). Prevalence, Predictors and Sources of Information Regarding Neuromyths in an Australian Cohort of Preservice Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(10).
- Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation [CESE], (2018). *Cognitive load theory in practice: Examples for the classroom*, NSW Department of Education, Sydney.
- Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation [CESE] (2020). *Classroom management - creating and maintaining positive learning environments*, NSW Department of Education, Sydney.
- McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M. C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D. (2017, January). *High-leverage practices in special education*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning*. Routledge: New York
- Hepburn, L. & Beamish, W. (2019). Towards implementation of evidence-based practices for classroom management in Australia: A review of research. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44, 2, 82-98.
- Howell, K., & Nolet, V. (2000). *Curriculum-based evaluation: Teaching and decision-making* (3rd ed.): Wadsworth.
- O'Neill, S. (2016). Preparing preservice teachers for inclusive classrooms: does completing coursework on managing challenging behaviours increase their classroom management sense of efficacy? *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 40, 2, 117-140.
- O'Neill, S. & Stephenson, J. (2012) Classroom behaviour management content in Australian undergraduate primary teaching programmes, *Teaching Education*, 23:3, 287-308.

- Meeks, L., Madelaine, A. & Kemp, C. (2020) Research and theory into practice: Australian preservice teachers' knowledge of evidence-based early literacy instruction, *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 25:2, 215-233.
- NSW Ombudsman (2017). *NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into behaviour management in schools*. Sydney.
- Paramita, P., Anderson, A., & Sharma, U. (2020). Effective teacher professional learning on classroom behaviour management: A review of literature. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45 (1).
- Round, P. N., P. K. Subban, and U. Sharma. 2016. "I don't have time to be this busy.' Exploring the concerns of secondary school teachers towards inclusive education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20 (2): 185–198. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1079271
- Scott, T., Hirn R. & Cooper, J. (2017). *Teacher and student behaviors: Keys to success in classroom instruction*. Roman & Littlefield: Maryland.
- Simonsen, B., Fairbanks, S., Briesch, A., Myers, D. & Sugai, G., (2008). Evidence based practices in classroom management: Consideration for research practice, *Education, and Treatment of Children*, 31(6), 351-380.
- Stephenson, J. (2017). An overview of survey-based research carried out with Australian preservice teachers (1995-2015). *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 63, 159-167.
- Sweller, J. & Chandler, P. (1991) Evidence for Cognitive Load Theory, *Cognition and Instruction*, 8:4, 351-362.
- Willingham, D. (2017). A Mental Model of the Learner: Teaching the Basic Science of Educational Psychology to Future Teachers. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 11, 4, 166-175.