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 have been recently published and accepted for publication.

This submission

In this submission, we will focus on the **education of students with disability and special education needs**. In Australia, 7.7% of children under 15, two thirds of whom attend mainstream schools, have a disability. The prevalence rates of some disabilities appear to be increasing and recent estimates give a prevalence of autism spectrum disorder at 12 years of age as 1.3% (Nielsen et al, 2022). The presence of students with disability in mainstream classrooms means all teachers need some preparation for inclusion in their initial teacher education. We recognise that the day-to-day practices of classroom teachers impact all students, as well as those at risk of learning failure through disability or other factors.

InSpEd strongly **endorses the focus on evidence-based teaching practices and the scientific theories supporting them** in the Discussion Paper. Special education has a strong focus on the use of evidence-based practices defined in a similar way as in the Discussion Paper as practices shown through robust research studies to be effective in improving student outcomes. Many practices endorsed in the paper have been routine special education for many years including direct and explicit instruction of academics and social behaviour, regular formative assessment to monitor learning and allow data-based decision making, mastery learning, planning and sequencing curriculum content with clear goals and objectives, pro-active

behaviour management with established rules and routines. Many of these practices have a foundation in, or are consistent with applied behaviour analysis (see Alberto & Troutman, 2012 for a summary of research).

We also agree with the statement that the use of evidence-based practices for all students will go some way to addressing the needs of students with disability or learning difficulties. Direct, systematic, and explicit instruction with teacher explanation and modelling followed by guided practice with reducing teacher support before independent practice is a key approach to instruction in special education and has been shown to be effective for students with learning difficulties and mild intellectual disability (Hughes et al., 2017; Vaughn et al., 2000), and those on the autism spectrum (Hume et al., 2021). Teaching to mastery as measured by ongoing formative assessment rather than time-limited instruction is essential for learners with disability and special education needs. In addition, the deliberate planning and sequencing of curriculum content and teaching activities, setting specific and measurable learning goals and objectives and monitoring learning against the goals is integral to good special education practice.

We also support the use of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) based on constant and regular formative assessment as a framework to provide targeted intervention for learners who do not progress at the same rate as their peers. Tiered systems for pro-actively and explicitly teaching appropriate rules, routines and acknowledging appropriate behaviour and strategies like pre-correction are also supportive of students with disability (Gable et al., 2009).

We also strongly endorse the debunking of myths in education and this should not be limited to neuromyths. There is no shortage of unsupported and potentially harmful interventions suggested for students with disability (Bowen & Snow, 2017), and teachers need some knowledge of these.

Responses to Selected Questions

- **Evidence-based teaching practices:** Are there other evidence-based practices which should be prioritised in ITE programs?

The Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006) require consultation with the student and/or their carers regarding adjustments to provide access to the curriculum for students with disability. Adjustments may be required to be made to curriculum content, instructional strategies, assessment strategies or to the environment and resources. This legal requirement means that all teachers must have knowledge of the relevant legislation and standards and some capacity to make adjustments to meet student needs and some skills in collaboration.

Although this appears to be briefly addressed under the content related to *Enabling factors for learning: Diverse learning needs*, the ability to make adjustments for students with disability is not optional. Some adjustments will fit easily into the explicit instruction framework, for example, providing visual supports (McLesky et al., 2017) and providing more intensive instruction through additional guided and independent practice or Tier 2 instruction (Fuchs et

al., 2014). Some students will need individualised instruction and collaboration with a qualified, special educator or external professionals, or delivery by a qualified special educator may be needed (Fuchs et al., 2014). Managing small groups to facilitate adjustments according to student need will be supported by effective classroom routines (Fuchs et al 1992).

Content on peer assisted learning (PALS) developed by Lyn and Doug Fuchs could also be included as a way of proving more explicit instruction and practice for students with special education needs. This is a whole-class approach suitable for all students, and although originally developed for the middle primary years, has been extended down to kindergarten and upwards into secondary schools. Students work in pairs using structured activities. See, for example, McMaster et al. (2006) for the use of PALS in reading instruction; Fuchs et al., (2002) for the use of PALS in maths; Sporer and Brunstein (2009) for use in a secondary setting and Rohrbeck et al. (2003) for a widely-cited meta-analysis.

We endorse the content on collaboration with families for planning and problem-solving. This is particularly pertinent to the education of students with disability (McLesky et al., 2017). For students with disability and special education needs, the legally required collaboration is much more intensive and should include students, families, other professionals and teacher assistants. This additional content should be included. Regular classroom teachers may be supported by a qualified special educator who can provide advice through collaboration, co-teaching or through observation and coaching with feedback; thus beginning teachers need some background on how to work with specialist teachers. It is also important that the students themselves are consulted about adjustments. In addition, for some students, their needs will be so complex that collaboration with outside professionals will be needed (Ballard & Diamond, 2016).

One area that is not mentioned in the section on diverse learning needs is working effectively with teacher assistants (teacher aides). Evidence shows that the use of teacher assistants is not always optimal and may in fact be detrimental (Webster et al., 2010). They may, at times. take undue responsibility, perhaps because the teacher is unsure about instruction for students with special education needs. Schools in Australia may rely on the presence of teacher assistants as adaptations for students with special needs with no clear plan for how the assistant will be employed and what the outcomes of their involvement should be (Carter et al., 2020). Teacher assistants can be used effectively when their deployment is purposeful and they implement evidence-based practices; see for example, Brock and Carter (2016) for their involvement in peer support; Fried et al. (2012) for their implementation of a reading intervention; Kim et al. (2017) for supporting socialisation. Guidance on the use of teacher assistants has been produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (Sharples et al., 2016). Constructive use of teaching assistants should be included in ITE content relating to dealing with diversity.

In summary InSpEd would endorse the evidence-based practices discussed. We suggest there needs to be additional content on collaboration and working with others (including families, specialist teachers and other professionals). We suggest that the addition of peer-assisted learning to the teaching strategies included in ITE. We would also like to see content on evidence-based ways to work with teacher assistants.

- **Amending Accreditation Standards and Procedures:** How should the Accreditation Standards and Procedures best be amended to ensure all ITE students learn and can confidently use these practices? Should the Accreditation Standards and Procedures be amended to require TPAs to assess these practices?

InSpEd believes that if evidence-based practices are to be used in classrooms, there must be a requirement to demonstrate competency in a classroom setting. Beginning teachers must generalise theory and course content to actual practice. This would require a clear description of the behaviours and competencies that trainee teachers should demonstrate. If students can be placed with good mentors who have the skills to support the practicum experiences of pre-service teachers, an additional level of compliance may be unnecesssary.

Perhaps direct, observational assessment of the teaching competency of graduates of programs completed by independent observers should be established at all universities. This will require additional resources for teacher education programs to cover the costs.

- **Curriculum specific content:** What steps should be taken to ensure curriculum-specific ITE content embeds the evidence-based practices?

The evidence-based strategies described generically in the discussion paper are applicable to all curriculum areas and there should be a requirement that trainee teachers demonstrate the competencies in actual teaching across curriculum areas. This will require more specific demands on schools providing practicum placements and on mentor teachers, which has resource implications for schools and universities.

- **Ensuring consistent, robust delivery of evidence-based teaching practices:** What changes to the authorising environment are required to ensure consistent application of the Accreditation Standards and Procedures and implementation of core content in ITE programs?

Initial teacher education courses are approved by AITSL with input from their expert advisory panel (Teacher Education Expert Standing Committee). We note that no one on the panel has expertise in the area of disability, specifically intellectual disability and autism. Given that many children with disability and autism are now included in mainstream classrooms and that these children have the right to have their educational needs addressed, we suggest that it is important to have a member of the expert advisory panel with both a teaching and research background in the area of special education.

- **System level agreements:** Would establishing more comprehensive system level agreements between school sectors/systems and higher education providers address challenges in the school matching process and deliver more effective placements? How could these agreements complement current localised arrangements?

Given the often politicised decision-making around education, system-level agreements may not function in a way that ensures that evidence rather than political preference drives practices in ITE.

- **Centres of excellence:** Would encouraging centres of excellence, such as hub schools, support high-quality practical experience? What are the impediments to delivering these centres of excellence?

The major impediments would be finding teachers who can demonstrate the recommended research-based practices and also mentor trainee teachers through coaching and feedback. There will also be difficulty in finding teacher-educators who are well-versed in these research-based practices and are able to teach them as well as guide trainees and mentor teachers. As recently as 2020, Meeks and Stephenson (2020) showed that evidence-based practices for early reading instruction appeared to be missing from many courses and fewer than half of the teaching staff appeared to have expertise in evidence-based reading instruction.

- **National frameworks:** Would higher education providers, schools and teachers benefit from more specific guidance in delivering practical experience? What guidance would be beneficial to address key barriers to high-quality practical experience?

The key barrier will be finding mentor teachers who are well-versed in the recommended practices. Considerable professional learning will be needed across schools for these practices to be widespread and to be implemented with fidelity.

- **Student support during placements:** What support for students would be beneficial to assist in managing their practical experience requirements?

Student teachers need to be placed with a skilled teacher for their practicum experience. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. It is important, therefore, that the students are mentored on site by university staff who have had a successful teaching career and who also include evidence-based practice (content and pedagogy) in the university subjects that they are teaching.

- **Integrating theory and practice:** How can practical experience be better integrated with the academic component of ITE programs to support ITE student learning and preparedness to teach?

This is a key issue. It is not enough for trainee teachers to know about effective practices; they must be able to plan and implement them in classrooms. This will require co-operation between schools, mentor teachers and university staff. This implies more frequent visits and collaboration between teachers and university staff, which has workload implications for academic and school staff involved. It may require financial support from governments for practicum placements so ITE providers can allocate the hours needed for academic staff to establish relationships, make the required additional visits and provide instructional coaching.

- **Role of schools in supporting practical experience:** What incentives can be offered to schools to be more active participants in ITE placements?

Being an effective mentor of trainee teachers takes time. Schools that participate in ITE mentoring programs need to be compensated with additional funding to release teachers to mentor effectively, including supporting the trainee teacher and communicating with university staff. Similar support will need to be provided to universities to release staff to work with the school. As part of this arrangement, university staff could also provide professional development to the school staff.

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