

# Professional Standards for Australian Special Education Teachers

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Although professional standards for Australian teachers were developed several years ago, this country is yet to develop such standards for special education teachers. The lack of standards for the special education profession is associated with the absence of a consistent process of accreditation in Australia and a lack of clarity in the pathways that teachers may pursue to achieve accreditation. In this paper, we review professional standards for special education teachers in the UK and the US, and the related yet limited work completed in Australia. Substantial commonalities across these jurisdictions demonstrate that much of the groundwork has been completed in the important task of developing special education standards in this country.

**Keywords:** professional standards, special education teachers, teacher training

## Introduction

Concern about the qualifications of Australian special education teachers has been evident for some time. Writing within the auspices of the Australian Special Education Principals' Association, Forbes (2007) lamented the lack of clear training pathways for special education teachers and a perceived scarcity of suitably qualified special educators. Thomas (2009) noted that the percentage of qualified staff in special school settings ranged from just 53% in the ACT to 86% in Western Australia, and there were recognised shortages of special education teachers in some states (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013). More recently, Arthur-Kelly and colleagues (2012) lobbied for the development of agreed undergraduate and postgraduate pathways for recognised special education teaching qualifications. There is also evidence that Australian special education teachers with a special education qualification have more positive attitudes to inclusion than their colleagues without such a qualification (Hsien, Brown, & Bortoli, 2009).

In Australia, undergraduate training for the qualification of special education teaching is offered at universities in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Specialist qualifications in special education are offered in most of the states and territories at the postgraduate level, with specialisations in hearing and vision impairment, early childhood special education, autism, emotional disturbance and behaviour problems, and general special education. Although the public education systems in some Australian states have occasionally contracted selected universities to provide agreed special education training to their teaching staff, Australian school education

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providers do not have a consistent mechanism for the recognition of special education qualifications.

This concern about both the number of qualified special education teaching staff and the inconsistent pathways to special education teacher training in Australia has coincided with increasing numbers of Australian students recognised with additional needs and included in regular schools (Dempsey, 2011). One consequence of this increased number of students with special needs enrolled in regular schools has been calls for the role of the special educator in those settings to change. For example, some Australian public education providers have argued for a move away from disability-specific professional retraining to more generic special education training that permits special education teachers to support a wide range of students with diverse needs (e.g., NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013b). This trend matches the acknowledgment by other developed countries of the need for special educators with a broad knowledge of many disabilities to work effectively in regular classrooms (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013; The National Archives, UK, 2013a).

Demand for disability-specific special educators to assist students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., students who are deaf and/or blind and students with severe or profound intellectual disability) will continue for the foreseeable future as many of those students continue to be educated in segregated settings. Hence, some traditional special education teacher training models that have emphasised disability-specific professional preparation are under pressure to widen the scope of their training so that special educators will be better equipped to work across a variety of settings and with a variety of students with special needs.

At present, clear direction for Australian universities offering professional training in special education is absent because this country lacks any nationally agreed professional standards for special education teachers. Furthermore, Australian education providers do not have a consistent accreditation process for the recognition of special education qualifications. National professional standards for Australian regular class teachers were introduced in 2011 (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2012), following the development of initial teacher education standards across a variety of states in the previous decade (Ingvarson, 2010). The national standards, which are mandated for newly graduating teachers only, make explicit mention of students with additional needs and reinforce the role of the regular class teacher in supporting those students. For example, at the proficient level (i.e., postprobationary level), teachers are required to 'manage challenging behaviour by establishing and negotiating clear expectations with students and address discipline issues promptly, fairly and respectfully' (p. 8), and to 'design and implement teaching activities that support the participation and learning of students with disability and address relevant policy and legislative requirements' (AITSL, 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, the scope of the Australian national standards as they specifically relate to students with special needs is limited, and the standards do not address the diverse roles taken by special educators across both inclusive and segregated settings.

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), Australia's preeminent professional organisation for special educators, has several position papers on the need for initial teacher education professional skills in supporting students with special needs (AASE, 2013). However, at this time, AASE does not have an endorsed set of professional skills for special educators. Given the present Australian context, in this paper we seek to examine what work has been done in this country in identifying skills deemed to be essential for special education teachers at the generic level of professional special education training. That is, the goal is to investigate the existing Australian empirical and conceptual

work that relates to general special education teacher professional skills with a view to establishing a baseline from which an agreed set of standards can be built and validated. For reasons of comparison and because such comparison can be instructive, special education teacher professional standards in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) are now examined before the Australian work is scrutinised.

### *Special Education and Professional Standards in the UK*

Legislation regarding the provision of education to students with additional needs and the professional skills of special education teachers has been in place for over a decade in the UK. In 2001, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act extended the existing responsibilities of schools by specifying that a child ‘... must be educated in a mainstream school unless that is incompatible with the wishes of his [*sic*] parent, or the provision of efficient education for other children’ (The National Archives, UK, 2013a, ‘Education in mainstream schools’, para. 1). In association with a Schools Admission Code (UK Department for Education, 2013), this legislation ensures that parents have choice on educational placement, that schools develop a detailed statement of how students’ needs will be met, and that students have full access to an appropriate education, which includes access to the regular curriculum.

If a student, the student’s parents or educational provider believe that the student’s needs cannot be met by the regular school, a formal assessment can be requested that may lead to a Statement of Educational Needs. This statement details the student’s support needs, and the local authority responsible for the student’s education is obliged to provide funding to meet those needs. In 2011, 17.8% of the English school population had special education needs without statements, 2.8% of all students had a statement, and 1.2% of all students attended a special school (UK Department for Education, 2011).

In the UK in regular schools, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCo) play a crucial management role in the provision of support to students with additional needs. SENCo status was first defined in 1994 and the National Standards for SENCos, introduced in 1998, detailed their required knowledge and skills. In 2001, the Special Education Needs (SEN) Code of Practice further explained and expanded the role of the SENCo (UK Department for Education and Skills, 2001).

In 2008, newly appointed SENCos were required to be qualified teachers who had successfully passed their induction period (The National Archives, UK, 2013b). In the following year, regulations were amended to require new SENCos to undergo generalist special education training (The National Archives, UK, 2013c). These regulations do not extend to special schools and independent schools, or to SENCos who were employed prior to 2008. Regardless, the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination training is provided by a number of UK universities over one year of part-time study. The content of this training addresses the SEN Code of Practice.

Table 1 presents a summary of the important content from the SEN Code of Practice, as it relates to the required professional skills of SENCos. Their duties include supervision of the school’s special education needs policy, maintenance of a register of students with special needs, assisting teachers to support those students, and liaison with parents and outside agencies (Mackenzie, 2007).

### *Special Education and Professional Standards in the US*

In the US, mandated educational services to students with special needs have had a relatively long history, dating from 1975. This legislation has ensured that an educational

**TABLE 1**  
**Categories and Content of Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCo) Professional Skills**

|    | Categories   | Examples of professional skills  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | Principles and policies  | Awareness of relevant law and policy and philosophies of support   |
| 2  | Working in partnership with parents                                  | Effective parent communication and support approaches  |
| 3  | Pupil participation  | Student engagement in learning and decision-making   |
| 4  | Identification, assessment and provision in early education settings | Supporting students in preschool settings, including development and review of IEPs                      |
| 5  | Identification, assessment and provision in the primary phase        | Supporting students in primary school settings, including development and review of IEPs                 |
| 6  | Identification, assessment and provision in the secondary sector     | Supporting students in high school settings, including development and review of IEPs                    |
| 7  | Statutory assessment of special educational needs                    | Awareness of student health, social and academic needs, and legal procedures for referral and assessment |
| 8  | Statements of special educational needs                              | Developing statements for students whose needs cannot be met by the regular school                       |
| 9  | Annual review  | Developing an annual report for each student, preparing for a review meeting and transitions             |
| 10 | Working in partnership with other agencies                           | Effective collaboration with other government and nongovernment agencies                                 |

*Note.* IEPs = individual education plans.

service is provided to all students, that the features of this education are relatively consistent across the country, and that students with a disability are included in national assessments (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2013). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2009) permits parents to be involved in the educational process and also addresses the quality of educational programs delivered to students by requiring an individual education program. One outcome of this legislation is that the proportion of students with a disability who are educated in either regular schools or in regular classes has considerably increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). A further important US initiative has been the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2013), which has heightened accountability for students and teachers alike. This legislation requires teachers to use evidence-based practices to enhance student outcomes.

In terms of special education teacher qualifications, IDEA requires all special education teachers to be licensed in special education and to meet the highly qualified teacher status demanded by NCLB (Boscardin, 2011). The US professional organisation, Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), has a long-established set of professional standards for special education teachers. The most recent version of these standards, along with standards for special educators in leadership positions, has been endorsed by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013). CEC has also developed draft standards for the specialisations of hearing and vision impairment, deafness and blindness, developmental disability and autism, early childhood, emotional and behavioural disorders, gifted and talented, learning disability, and physical health disability. In 2012, CEC noted that 29 US states required that their initial special education

**TABLE 2**

Standards and Skills From the Council for Exceptional Children's Professional Standards for Special Education Teachers

|  | Standards   | Examples of professional skills  |
|--|---|--|
| Learner and learning                           |   |  |
| 1  | Learner development and individual learning differences | Understand how exceptionalities interact with development and learning and use this to provide meaningful learning experiences                                     |
| 2  | Learning environments                                   | Create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to develop emotional wellbeing, positive social interactions, and self-determination.          |
| Content knowledge and professional foundations |   |  |
| 3  | Curricular content knowledge                            | Use knowledge of general and specialised curricula to individualise learning for individuals   |
| Instructional pedagogy                         |   |  |
| 4  | Assessment  | Use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making educational decisions  |
| 5  | Instructional planning and strategies                   | Select, adapt, and use evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning   |
| Professionalism and collaboration              |   |  |
| 6  | Professional learning and practice                      | Use foundational knowledge and professional ethical principles to inform special education practice, to engage in lifelong learning, and to advance the profession |
| 7  | Collaboration   | Collaborate with families, other educators, service providers, and individuals with exceptionalities in culturally responsive ways                                 |

Note. Source: CEC (2013).

preparation programs comply with CEC standards and that the balance of states had signed agreements to comply in the near future (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012).

Table 2 shows CEC's seven preparation standards for initial general special education organised into four areas of focus. Supporting documentation notes that these standards recognise the knowledge and skills deemed to be essential for the effective practice of special education teaching in the US.

Each standard is supplemented with two to seven key element statements that provide more specific detail on the professional skills expected. For example, within the learning environments standard, the key elements are:

- *Beginning special education professionals through collaboration with general educators and other colleagues create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to engage individuals with exceptionalities in meaningful learning activities and social interactions.*
- *Beginning special education professionals use motivational and instructional interventions to teach individuals with exceptionalities how to adapt to different environments.*
- *Beginning special education professionals know how to intervene safely and appropriately with individuals with exceptionalities in crisis (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013, p. 3).*

### *Special Education and Professional Standards in Australia*

In Australia, all jurisdictions must follow the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). These standards clarify for education providers their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). Public education and Catholic and independent systems each have their own approach to providing special education services, and different nomenclature is often used to describe these services. However, all Australian states and territories maintain special education support in both regular schools and special schools. The proportion of students recognised with a disability in Australian schools increased from 2.6% in 1998 to 4.8% in 2009 and virtually all of that increase was confined to regular classes (Dempsey, 2011). In NSW, 12% of the school population was identified as having special needs in 2011. In addition to disability, these special needs included students with learning difficulties, behavioural disorders and language or communication delay (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013a).

As professional standards for Australian special education teachers have yet to be developed, the following methodology was used to identify professional skills that the Australian literature has recognised as important in the initial and/or ongoing training of special education teachers. A two-stage approach was employed: first, a search of the relevant peer-reviewed literature, and second, a search of descriptions of special education professionals' roles across Australian public school education providers.

**Search of the Peer-Reviewed Literature.** The first search was of the following Australian refereed journals for either empirical or conceptual articles and reports that directly related to professional training for Australian special education teachers: *Australasian Journal of Special Education* (AJSE; 1993–2013), *Special Education Perspectives* (1998–2013), *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* (1993–2013), *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* (1996–2013), and the *Australian Journal of Education* (1993–2013). This was supplemented by a web search with the following search terms: *Australia, Australian, special education professional standards, special education teacher training*. Items were included only if there was explicit mention of the need for one or more professional skills in the profile of Australian special education teachers. Items were excluded if the link between desirable skill and profile was less clear. For example, the authors who contributed to AJSE's March 2008 special issue on scientific methods and evidence-based practice, although implicitly supporting the use of such approaches, did not explicitly recommend their addition to the professional skill profile of special education teachers, and so these papers were not included in further analysis. This search yielded seven papers with clear recommendations for specific professional skills, and these studies and their findings are now described.

A series of Australian studies examined best teaching practices with students with high support needs who are educated in support classes and special schools. The basis of these studies was a set of 42 best practice indicators developed by Chalmers, Carter, Clayton, and Hook (1998) from four US publications that recommended a pool of nearly 300 teaching practices for students with a disability. The Australian authors reduced this pool to a set of best practices relevant only to students with high support needs. The final set of 42 items covered teaching program philosophy, increasing student choice and control, instruction, collaboration, staff development, and transition. In addition to checking on 83 special education teachers' perceptions of and use of the practices, Carter, Chalmers, Clayton, and Hook (1998) also reported differences in use of practices related to whether

**TABLE 3**  
Skill Areas and Descriptions for Australian Special Education Teachers (Palmer, 2007)

|   | Skill area                 | Description  |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | Professional values        | Special education teachers value individual difference, evidence-based and reflective practice, inclusive practices and partnerships with others.                    |
| 2 | Professional knowledge     | Special educators are informed by educational theory, curriculum instruction and assessment options, knowledge of the learner and by state and federal requirements. |
| 3 | Professional practice      | Special educators model best practice, keep informed of current research, provide differentiated instruction, and maintain accountability through documentation.     |
| 4 | Professional relationships | Special educators collaborate with a range of professionals and families. Families are respected and valued.   |

the teachers had a special education teaching qualification and whether they taught in special schools.

Nearly a decade later, Stephenson and Carter (2005) surveyed 108 preservice special education teachers who had completed a practicum with school students with severe or profound intellectual disability. Using the same set of 42 best practice indicators from the 1998 research by Chalmers and colleagues, the more recent study compared the student teacher data with the earlier collected teacher data and found relatively few differences between student teachers and experienced teachers in their rating of the importance of the best practice items. In addition, there was little variability in the perceived importance of these indicators by the special education teachers (the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that each item was important).

Fielding-Barnsley (2005) used focus groups and survey research with regular classroom teachers and with learning support teachers to develop an instrument measuring the essential attributes of learning support teachers in Queensland. Following content analysis of the focus group transcripts, the 22 clearly differentiated attributes were grouped into the 4 categories of personal traits, organisational skills, knowledge and experience, and communication. With a separate group of 117 regular and learning support teachers, Fielding-Barnsley found that learning support teachers rated knowledge and experience as the most important category; for regular class teachers, personal traits was the highest ranked category.

Based on the results of focus groups with an unspecified number of accomplished special education teachers in South Australia, Palmer (2007) advocated for the development of nationally agreed special education teacher standards. She found that these experienced teachers gave priority to a range of skills across the areas of values, knowledge, practice and relationships. These skill areas and detail on their content appear in Table 3.

In a larger study examining the changing roles and responsibilities of special educators, Keefe and De George-Walker (2010) asked 17 Australian principals, 16 lead teachers in special education and 74 special education teachers to identify trends and priorities in special education. Although the basis of this study was a survey of the participants' characteristics, their job satisfaction, and their perceptions of the roles and needs of special education teachers, data also included recommendations on essential professional skills. These skills are detailed in Table 4.

**TABLE 4**

Essential Skills for Australian Special Education Teachers (Keefe &amp; De George-Walker (2010))

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | Communication and collaboration with parents, colleagues and other professionals       |
| 2 | Reporting and accountability   |
| 3 | Information on specific learning disabilities and the learning needs of these students |
| 4 | General curriculum development   |
| 5 | Inclusive practices  |
| 6 | Individualised focus to ensure positive learning outcomes and student wellbeing        |
| 7 | Proactive management of challenging behaviour  |
| 8 | Awareness of needs of students with mental health difficulties                         |

Finally, using action research with 20 teaching staff from a special school, Beamish and Bryer (2012) used an iterative process over two years to permit these staff members to refine a set of best practice indicators; the latter were the outcome from earlier unpublished research by the lead author. The nine best practice areas were mechanisms to monitor program quality, partnerships with parents and professionals, presence of collegial support, valuing students, student access to relevant learning technologies, positive behaviour support, student opportunity for decision-making, use of natural teaching context, and good use of individual education plans.

***Search of Recommendations From Australian Public School Education Providers.*** The second search involved checking the websites of the departments of school education across Australia's states and territories, supplemented with general web searches with the search terms of *special education*, *teacher*, *teachers*, and the name of the relevant state or territory. Web searches of the Catholic and independent school systems were not conducted because public schools support the majority of students with additional needs in Australia (Dempsey & Davies, 2013), and because approaches to special education support vary within the independent and Catholic school systems. Descriptions of specialist special education positions (e.g., teacher of the deaf) were excluded and descriptions of generalist special education positions were included. This search yielded descriptions from two state departments of education of the duties of a number of staff who are responsible for the support of students with special needs. The two states were NSW and Queensland and the descriptions from these two state education departments are now provided.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (2013a) provided a description of the role of the Learning and Support Teacher who works in a similar manner to SENCos in the UK by collaborating with classroom teachers in regular schools. In Queensland, the Department of Education, Training and Employment (2013a) provides advice to specialist teachers responsible for implementing the Education Adjustment Program (see Table 5). This program identifies students with a disability and provides educational adjustments to assist the learning of those students. Advice also extends to Advisory Visiting Teachers who provide specialist information related to students with sensory, communication, physical and intellectual disability, as well as students with autism spectrum disorder (Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013b). Table 5 lists the essential features of the role of Learning and Support Teacher in NSW schools, along with the roles of similar positions in Queensland.

Although no publicly available position descriptions for Victorian special education teachers were found, Victoria has clear requirements on the special education qualification pathways for both teacher trainees and for already qualified regular classroom teachers.



**TABLE 5**

Skill Descriptions for Teaching Staff Who Support Students With Additional Needs in Public Schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (Qld)

| NSW Learning and Support Teacher  | Qld teachers implementing the Educational Adjustment Program, and Advisory Visiting Teachers                                       |
|---|--|
| Work collaboratively with classroom teachers and other school staff   | Refer students to appropriate education specialists and request additional support<br>Work collaboratively with other school staff |
| Provide specialist advice to classroom teachers and other school staff on catering for diverse needs and on working with students' families | Provide professional development to school staff<br>Provide specialist advice on equipment   |
| Plan, implement, monitor and evaluate teaching programs and adjustments with classroom teachers, students and their parents/carers          | Collect relevant data on students' learning and functioning  |
| Provide direct instructional support to students with special needs in literacy, numeracy, social inclusion and language and communication  | Implement appropriate educational adjustments  |
|   | Identify students with additional needs<br>Work collaboratively with parents   |

These pathways stipulate specific undergraduate and postgraduate courses of study at Victorian universities (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2013).

### *Comparison of Professional Skills in Australia, the UK and the US*

Table 6 synthesises the professional skills reported in the seven Australian studies, as well as position descriptions across Australia's states and territories, and maps those skills against the UK SENCo and US CEC standards. There is close correspondence between virtually all of these standards and skills, although the level of detail and emphasis within the standard areas varies. For example, although all three countries agree on the importance of collaboration between special educators and families, colleagues and other professionals, the US standards note the need for cultural awareness in this collaboration. An understanding of learner development and learning needs is also identified across all countries; however, the UK equivalent standard is less explicit than the US and Australian statements.

Some standards map against multiple standards from other countries. As an example, the UK requirement for identification, assessment and provision in early education, primary and secondary settings addresses the US and Australian areas of assessment, knowledge of individual learner differences, and instructional strategies. Finally, there are a few examples of standards in some countries not having counterparts in other countries. Knowledge of the general curriculum is not covered in the UK standards; however, as SENCos work extensively with regular classroom teachers, then an understanding of the regular curriculum may be taken as a given for UK SENCos. Also, ongoing professional development is not explicitly mentioned in the SENCo standards.

**TABLE 6**

Professional Standards for Special Education Teachers in the UK and US Aligned With Professional Skills Identified in Australian Studies and by Australian Public Education Providers

| UK SENCo standards  | US CEC standards  | Skills identified in Australian studies and position descriptions                            |
|---|---|--|
| Statements of special educational needs   | Learner development and individual learning differences                               | Knowledge of specific learner needs<br>Transition planning                                   |
| Identification, assessment and provision in early education, primary and secondary settings | Creating positive learning environments   | Inclusive approaches<br>Positive management of behaviour<br>Use of evidence-based approaches |
| Statutory assessment of special educational needs   | Curricular content knowledge<br>Use assessment to make relevant educational decisions | Use of general curriculum<br>Maintain relevant assessment of students                        |
| Pupil participation   | Instructional planning and strategies   | Individualised processes<br>Student engagement and participation                             |
| Working in partnership with parents   | Professional learning and practice  | Maintain and improve professional skills   |
| Working in partnership with other agencies  | Collaboration with all stakeholders in culturally appropriate ways                    | Communication with parents, colleagues and others<br>Families are respected and valued       |
| Principles and policies   |   | Law and policy requirements  |
| Annual review   |   | Reporting, documentation and accountability  |

*Note.* SENCo = Special Education Needs Coordinator; CEC = Council for Exceptional Children.

### *The Way Forward in the Development of Professional Standards for Australian Special Education Teachers*

Based on the experience of AITSL in developing standards for regular classroom teachers, it is reasonable to assume that there is good potential for developing a generic set of professional standards for Australian special education teachers. Generic professional preparation standards are best developed first before considering specialised standards in areas such as hearing and vision impairment. The mapping exercises reported earlier in this paper demonstrate that there are substantial commonalities within the limited Australian work already conducted in identifying essential general special education teaching skills, and that these skills align with standards currently in operation in the UK and the US.

Notwithstanding the above, the validation of professional standards for Australian special education teachers will be a complex and likely time-consuming process. Although smaller in scope than the development of standards for regular class teachers, developing standards for Australian special education teachers demands consideration of the diversity of roles these teachers play, the variation among the settings in which they work, and the broad range of students' needs and abilities. Such teachers continue to work in special schools, in separate support classes in regular schools, and in the regular classroom. Special education teachers may be appointed to work with students with additional needs ranging from learning difficulties, to diagnosed disability, and to behavioural problems and emotional disturbance. Furthermore, special education teachers are expected to

regularly interact with a wide range of interested parties, including parents and caregivers, colleague teachers, and outside specialists. Another consideration in the complex process of standards development is the extent of stakeholder involvement in the validation process. Logical stakeholder groups in the validation process for Australian professional standards include AASE, the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, special education principals' associations, and universities currently offering training in special education.

To counterbalance this complexity in the validation process the well-established procedures for standards development used by AITSL (2012) and by the Council for Exceptional Children (2010) could serve as helpful guidance. For example, there may be synergies in the use of the existing AITSL framework for regular teacher standards with the development of standards for special education teachers. The current AITSL standards are grouped into the three domains of professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement, and seven standards are embedded in these domains. In addition, the seven standards comprise 35 focus areas. On face value, there are intuitive similarities in the relevance of these domains to special education settings. Some existing AITSL focus area statements at the proficient level capture the role of special educators (e.g., 'Use effective verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to support student understanding, participation, engagement and achievement' [p. 6] and 'Manage challenging behaviour by establishing and negotiating clear expectations with students and address discipline issues promptly, fairly and respectfully' [AITSL, 2012, p. 8]). Nevertheless, other focus area statements do not readily transfer to the specialised knowledge and skills required to support students with significant learning difficulties or moderate to severe levels of intellectual, physical or sensory disability. For example, the statements 'Apply knowledge and understanding of effective teaching strategies to support students' literacy and numeracy achievement' (p. 4) and 'Understand and participate in assessment moderation activities to support consistent and comparable judgements of student learning' (p. 10) do not address the complex and specific instructional strategies that are needed by many students with a disability. In addition, some roles undertaken by Australian special education teachers (e.g., the individualised planning process, inclusive approaches, and evidence-based practice methodologies) are not adequately captured in current AITSL standards.

Once developed, Australian special education professional standards should be evaluated across a diversity of special education settings. As AITSL is presently doing with standards for regular class teachers, it will be important to check on the usefulness of special education standards and the relationship between the use of the standards and issues such as school improvement and student outcomes. Such evaluation will assist in ensuring that special education professional standards make a positive contribution in enhancing the quality of teaching for the over 10% of the Australian school student population with additional needs (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005).

In conclusion, we have briefly reviewed in this paper the professional standards for special education teachers in the UK and the US. Although such standards are yet to be developed in Australia, a useful foundation exists in this country (in the form of past research with special education teachers and recommendations on professional skills from some public education providers) that may serve to guide the next steps in the Australian validation process. An example of one such step is additional empirical research to examine the relevance of potential generic professional skills to a wide range of special educators who work in a variety of different settings. That work might logically extend to examining the relationship between potential professional skills and a range of variables (e.g., teacher disposition and school climate) related to desired school and student outcomes. Ultimately, the speed of development of professional standards for Australian special

education teachers will be almost entirely dependent on the enthusiasm of our profession to demand such standards.

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