

# On the Pulse of Change: The New Beat of Special Education in Higher Education

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The roles and responsibilities of special educators in both special and regular school settings are changing rapidly. More than two decades ago the move towards more inclusive practices disrupted the traditional, niche separatism of special educators to the extent that they are now an integral part of the regular school teaching staff. Today the broad agenda to facilitate access and participation for all students in education, not just students with disabilities, influences the roles and responsibilities of special educators. This article briefly identifies some of the generic pulses that are moving the special education profession from a focus on low incidence disabilities towards a more comprehensive approach to inclusion, school responsiveness and individualised learning pathways. From the foundation of inclusive practice, this article will describe how a qualitative study was used to understand the changing roles and responsibilities of special educators. A case-study analysis of 17 schools formed the basis of the investigation. Principals, lead teachers in special education and special education teachers were asked to identify trends and priorities in special education and also to identify rewards and challenges in their jobs. Further cross-referencing with teacher and special educator standards, a focus group, a stakeholder group and research in the field increased the opportunity for academics and special educators to critically reflect on the emerging demands placed on special educators and the attributes that are needed to be professionally effective.

**Keywords:** special education, accreditation, diversity, school responsiveness, student autonomy

The importance of special education teacher accreditation is substantiated by the finding from Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, and Weber (1997) that relevant teacher accreditation is the most significant recurring factor in a teacher's decision to leave the profession. Various studies from the United States from 1993 to 1999 identified

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approximately 11% to 50% of teachers working in the field of special education were unqualified or underqualified for their positions. Since then numerous licensing agencies have introduced programs of accreditation in special education to address this shortfall and the exact percentage of unqualified or underqualified special educators has become blurred, although Billingsley and McCleskey (2004) still describe the shortfall of special educators as severe, pervasive and chronic. In a 2007 study conducted in government schools in Australia (207 respondents), the percentage of qualified staff in special school settings ranged from 53% in the ACT to 86% in Western Australia (Thomas, 2009). Although the Boe et al. (1997) study indicates the importance of teacher preparation from an historical context, more recent information is required to identify the nexus between the changing nature of the role and how special educators can be more adequately prepared for their responsibilities.

More recently, Carlson, Lee, and Westat (2004) indicated that teacher accreditation was an important factor in the efficacy of a special educator. They also argued that an aggregate collection of special educator attributes may be collectively more powerful than expertise in one particular area so they included four different factors in their aggregation: number of years of experience, self reported efficacy, professional activities, and classroom practices. It is important to note that these factors are indicators of success for all teachers and do not specifically identify the unique qualities of special educators that could more specifically inform teacher preparation. The observation that special and regular educators have the same inherent attributes may suggest the fields of regular and special education are converging to some extent. Further insight from the discussion of the limitations of the Carlson et al. (2004) study suggests special educator attributes such as teacher attitudes and the concepts of life long learning may need further research. Teacher attitudes that are informed by a strong sense of social justice, lifelong learning, critical reflection, problem solving and understanding stereotypes are themes that recur in various ways in this study and in position papers by various special education, professional associations (see, for e.g., Pre-Service Teacher Training, AASE, 2004).

Previously, children with disabilities were the only group considered for inclusion in Australian schools and some funding was provided to support this movement. Until more recent times, the low incidence nature of special education not only defined the parameters of inclusion for students with disabilities (and funding) but also defined the purpose, expertise and the scope of the role of the special educator. Special Education programs in higher education reflected the low incidence nature of disability specialisation with streams of subjects in the areas of vision, hearing, physical and language impairments.

Recently, however, the prevalence of students on the autism spectrum and students with mental health difficulties are challenging the notion of low incidence. In 2007 the Autism Advisory Board Centre for Disease Control and Prevention estimated the prevalence of a person being diagnosed with autism at 1:150 in 8-year-olds in Australia; however, the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention now estimate the prevalence of autism at 1:110 students at the age of 8 years. Students on the autism spectrum will experience pervasive difficulties that significantly influence success at school and learning (Dodd, 2005). To provide quality educational experiences for a student with autism, the teacher must begin with:

- an in-depth understanding of the nature of autism
- a rapport with the student and parent to identify strengths, interests and abilities

- various teaching strategies that relate to communication, social skills, behaviour and increased sensory awareness
- a knowledge of learning disabilities
- technical skills that relate to individualised planning
- differentiating the curriculum, and most importantly high level communication skills to maintain relationships with the student, family, support networks and colleagues.

The complex personal and pedagogical nature of meeting the educational needs of students with autism challenge the skills and abilities of most regular teachers. It is therefore important for the special educator to have a working knowledge of all these skills but also to provide mentoring advice and support for the teacher in the regular classroom.

In the same way, The National Health Survey (2007) has identified mental health difficulties as the leading cause of disability burden in Australia. Although the national average of 20% of Australian persons will experience a mental health illness in any one year, this level is significantly higher for the 16- to 24-years age group, with a prevalence of 26.4%. In addition, a study completed by Mission Australia shows that young people will approach their equally vulnerable peers instead of going to doctors or parents for advice about mental health issues. In that case, it seems likely the prevalence rate is significantly higher than 26.4%. This means teachers are working with students who largely do not understand how they are feeling and what is happening to them. Anxiety and depression are common classmates in the modern classroom, and these difficulties are exacerbated by teachers, schools and systems that are not informed and not responsive to the social and educational needs of students with mental health difficulties. Irrespective of the importance of this issue, building resilience for life's challenges and tribulations is not a current priority for whole-school approaches, and the responsibility for responding effectively to the needs of individual students with mental health difficulties remains with the school nurse, the guidance officer, individual teachers and the special educator.

These high prevalence rates should make subjects related to understanding the social, emotional and educational needs of students who have autism or those with mental health difficulties, a significant part of the regular undergraduate curriculum in higher education. However, competition with more strategic national priorities makes the nature of learner needs much less important than measurable outcomes in literacy and numeracy. At the coalface, however, principals, teachers, parents and the students themselves know that literacy and numeracy standards will not be met if schools are not responsive to a broad range of social and emotional issues that underpin each student's learning success. In the meantime, schools sometimes turn to special educators for emergent advice on teaching strategies and school responsiveness to meet the complex needs of individual students.

School retention debates have also highlighted the need for more individualised attention to learner needs. In addition to autism and mental health issues, broad social issues such as homelessness, abuse, poverty, eating disorders and violence challenge schools to become more responsive. Teachers face increasingly complex learning contexts as each student manifests different learning needs according to their own life stories and experiences. Although a generic understanding of social issues is important in schools today, each teacher also has to understand the individual needs of each learner and how to maximise learning outcomes in challenging circumstances. Again, the voice of the special educator in the school advocates for an appropriate response from schools to fulfil the needs of individual students or groups of students who are experiencing difficulties.

Many schools have responded to diversity with a range of approaches that suit the needs of each learning community. One such approach is a move towards student autonomy, or as it is sometimes known, self-directed learning or independent learning (Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, & Faraday, 2008). Although poorly defined in the literature, student autonomy relates to the student developing an understanding of their own learning strengths, interests and abilities and having some say in the progress of their own learning pathway. Student autonomy requires the support of teachers as mentors and advocates while at the same time the positive relationships that surround student decision-making also connect the student to the school culture and learning experiences and gives them a sense of belonging. The democratic and negotiated premise that underpins student autonomy is unlike the traditional autocratic nature of teaching and learning content and is rather based on relationships that promote learning. These are the basic tenets of inclusive education as described by Booth and Ainscow (2002) in the Index for Inclusion. As student autonomy is explored more comprehensively in a number of different settings, the changing responsibilities of teachers are becoming more clearly defined. Teachers must now be experts in relationships, communication, negotiation, problem solving and student autonomy as well as curriculum content. It seems the once divergent set of responsibilities of regular and special educators now involves an assimilation happening from both directions.

High-level communication skills have always been regarded as important for the special educator. Discussions with parents and caregivers about issues of care and curriculum are usually intimate and integral to the wellbeing of each child. Collaborative negotiations with a range of medical, therapeutic and educational experts are also a routine part of the job description. In the context of student autonomy, the focus for collaboration will begin with the interests, skills and abilities of the learner and progress towards curriculum performance, learning pathways and career or study options. The whole concept of individualised learning pathways and programs should recur in higher education preparation for special educators.

Issues related to informed and ethical decision-making create important considerations for teacher preparation in special education, particularly when the parameters of inclusive education are extended to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness, poverty, abuse, or as previously mentioned, mental health difficulties. Beginning teachers who are inexperienced in these contentious social agendas may be unable to respond effectively to develop effective and supportive learning environments. Their teaching may also be limited by prejudicial and stereotypical assumptions. To reduce the possibility of making unsound decisions, the beginning special educator must develop a level of critical awareness. Although this is often referred to as problem-solving, it is the process of reflection before the problem is solved that leads to ethically sound and informed decisions and processes. As such, the beginning special educator must identify the problem, search for information, access various stakeholder perspectives, communicate effectively, and collaborate with various stakeholders. Developing a critical awareness that is based on ethical processes and empathic responses has the influence of extending the comparatively vague notion of social justice to a more participative framework for action for beginning special education teachers.

It is argued in this article that if accreditation is the crux of satisfaction and efficacy for special educators, then the nature of the accreditation must be a professional priority. It is also proposed that traditional approaches to special education teacher preparation are no longer adequate to fulfil rapidly changing demands from the field.

The focus of this study is not to identify those general teacher attributes that maximise learning outcomes for students as it is accepted that special educators, like all other teachers, must be intelligent, professionally connected, long serving, report self-efficacy, and implement effective classroom strategies as suggested in Carlson et al's study. Rather, it is those particular attributes of special educators that identify and respond effectively to the individual social, emotional and educational needs of all students, particularly those students who experience learning difficulties that we seek to interrogate in this study. The purpose of this study was to identify those attributes of special educators that will inform the development and implementation of special education programs in higher education.

## **Method**

### *Sample and Participant Selection*

Phase 1 of the study began with surveys and data gathered from 17 school principals, 16 lead teachers in special education and 74 special education teachers. As the purpose of the data was to collect attributes from those working in the field, a convenient sample of all the schools and special education facilities in one educational district in Australia were surveyed.

The second phase of the study involved substantiating, expanding and explaining various issues that emerged from the surveys. Education authority representatives and teacher accreditation authorities in two states in Australia were interviewed. A focus group and a stakeholder group were convened to validate data collected in the surveys or raised in the interviews. The focus group involved special education teachers and lead teachers in special education. Finally, a stakeholder group was convened to match the attributes identified in the field with the subjects being developed in higher education. The stakeholder group involved a special school principal, parents of children with a disability, representatives from Disability Services, undergraduate students, academics and general teachers. The cross-referencing between the survey results, the interviews, the focus group and the stakeholder group created a broad range of proposed attributes of special educators and also analysed the potential depth of each attribute.

Attributes emerged from the surveys and were then discussed, defined and interpreted as foundational elements for the development of the special education component of the undergraduate program. The attributes were then mapped against teacher accreditation requirements for both special education and general primary teachers. The design of the degree was to qualify undergraduates to teach in both general primary and special education settings.

### *Assessment and Measures*

The surveys were developed to provide a spotlight on professional attributes as those working in the field saw them. Demographic data included age, gender, role, qualifications, type of school, type of special education setting, and number of years in special education. Survey questions for principals and lead teachers related to: the qualification levels of their staff; the implications a reduced level of qualifications may have for site governance; and their perceptions of the roles and needs of the special education teachers in their school/setting. The teachers were also asked about the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of their position. In addition, a Likert scale

was used to assess teacher satisfaction. The scale ranged from *Extremely satisfied* in their job to *Extremely dissatisfied*.

### **Procedures**

Responses were gathered from 12 primary schools, 5 secondary schools and 16 special education facilities. The special education facilities included 4 special schools and 12 school-based special education units. Demographic data from the 17 regular school principals who participated in the study claimed they had all governed special education units for between 3 years and 8 years; they had more than 10 years school leadership experience and they governed an average of 46 teachers in their schools. Lead teachers in special education ( $n = 16$ ) managed an average of 14 staff but the range was from 3 staff for small special education facilities to 22 staff for the special schools. The lead teachers had an average of 4 years of administration experience in the area of special education. Three of the lead teachers did not have special education qualifications although they did have Master of Education degrees and this may have included research into topics related to special education.

Demographic data about the 74 teachers who responded to the survey indicated that 45% ( $n = 33$ ) had no qualifications in special education at all or only had one unit of a higher education degree in special education. Eight out of the 12 newly appointed special education teachers had no qualifications in special education. To confirm the observations of Boe et al. (1997) that special educators stay in their jobs if they are appropriately qualified, only six of the long-term special educators ( $n = 33$ ) did not have qualifications.

The survey data were ranked by frequency of response and descriptive statistics were used to interpret recurring themes. Some participants expanded on the responses in substantial detail and this seemed to indicate the level of importance the participants felt about the issues. Data from the surveys were substantiated in the interviews and the focus group.

### **Results**

The issue of qualified staff in special education was regarded as extremely important by principals and lead teachers. Recurring difficulties with unqualified staff included decisions that lead to further difficulties in communication; legal, health, safety and educational issues; the inadequacy of 'learning as you go'; lack of confidence; time involved in supervision; emotional support; and on-the-job training in the very basics. Unqualified teachers in the field echoed their concern to claim that role complexity, isolation and responsibilities in extreme situations of safety and learning made them feel ineffective and overwhelmed. One lead teacher, however, claimed that her staff, who held general education qualifications, introduced different perspectives into the teaching of students with special needs and she valued their innovative approaches and high expectations. Her comments suggest a level of dissatisfaction with more traditional approaches used in special education.

Qualified teachers were more concerned with role negotiation that related to the problematic interface with teachers in the regular classroom and the pressure of caseload management. Further research is needed to clarify whether special educators are feeling some discordance as they transfer skills and approaches from an old regime based on disability to a new interface with curriculum and more curriculum-based needs for many students.

Not surprisingly, teacher accreditation was identified as the most important priority of Teacher Registration Authorities; however, they also had great concerns about the lack of undergraduate programs and the nature of postgraduate programs. This confirms Forbes's (2007) finding that higher education is not responding adequately to the needs of the field. The Teacher Registration Authorities raised the points that most postgraduates were encouraged to specialise in specific fields of disability and this was not conducive to raising the general standard of teaching in special education sectors, particularly in the regular school classroom. In addition, they queried the ongoing funding for more specialist or advisory roles (e.g., advisory roles in hearing impairment or vision impairment) when more generic links to curriculum, behaviour and communication were required. Clearly, the vision for teacher accreditation in the field of special education in two Australian states did not include a disability specific focus on specialisation.

In regard to the most positive aspects of their work as special educators, 77% of teachers' responses identified student growth and learning as most rewarding. The next most commonly identified quality related to communication where 64% of teachers found that communications with parents made their work life positive and meaningful. In addition, 82% of lead teachers enjoyed working collaboratively with parents and the teamwork that was involved in working with colleagues. Teachers and lead teachers claimed the collaborative process of sharing expertise and experience, though time consuming, built confidence in all aspects of the learning context and provided feedback for both teachers and parents. They valued flexible and positive staff relationships, supporting parents, specialist advice from therapists and experts, and the willingness to discuss and resolve difficulties. It was interesting to note that the small group of teachers who described themselves as 'extremely dissatisfied' with their work (4%) described workplace and parent communications as challenging.

Teachers who identified as extremely dissatisfied with their career also claimed to feel inadequate in managing students with autism and challenging behaviours. In fact, 40% of all teachers believed they needed professional development in this area. Principals (60%) and lead teachers (also 60%) confirmed that teachers required professional development to effectively address the educational needs of students with autism and challenging behaviours. Principals wanted special education teachers to support regular classroom teachers in the areas of students with autism and challenging behaviours, other behaviour difficulties, individualised planning, and students with more complex learning difficulties.

Other areas cited by teachers for further professional development included systemic requirements and reporting (25%) and more information about specific learning disabilities (23%). Principals also added curriculum development to the requirements for professional development (27%). It was interesting that special educators did not identify curriculum as an area for ongoing learning.

The onerous commitments to bureaucratic and systemic requirements featured heavily in the lead teachers' negative responses (42%). Funding processes, individualised planning, reporting and other accountability requirements consumed post work hours for most lead teachers. They claimed the communication and management skills were a priority during working hours and this left paperwork to be covered after hours. Interviews with the Education Authorities' representatives emphasised the need for accountability and reporting to be included in higher education programs.

Most importantly, the topic of inclusion was raised as a concern with all groups, including principals (27%), lead teachers (31%) and teachers (30%). Although the explanation for the contention between regular and special educators has not been



specifically examined in this study, focus group explanations related to basic philosophical differences, a need for role clarification, credibility, funding and resources, and different educational priorities. It seems special educators are highly motivated to make the inclusive experience a success for students experiencing difficulties in the regular school setting. Indeed, previous results indicated student success and achievement had the highest priority for special educators and this reflected a basic premise that guided their job purpose and the nature of their practice. To counterbalance these perspectives, lead teachers identified the success of inclusion as a significant feature of positive regard in their work (55%). They claimed that student success at school helped to improve the quality of the students' lives and to reduce prejudice within the school environment.

Interestingly, the topic of students with multiple disabilities was not specified as a major focus for special educators. The issue was raised by education authorities who believed a more comprehensive understanding in this area would result in more effective inclusion into regular school settings. The focus group and stakeholder group concurred with this observation and added that students with learning disabilities and acquired brain injury should also be given special consideration in the regular classroom. They believed the cognition and organisational processes needed for these students would benefit all students and inform all learning in the classroom.

To interrogate the relationship between attributes identified in the field and teacher preparation in higher education, a stakeholder group was convened. This group consisted of a principal of a special school, academics, teachers from regular and special schools, and most importantly, parents of students with learning disabilities. The group insisted that school or teacher responsiveness, specifically in the form of respect for the student, was the start of a constructive learning experience. They believed the role of the special educator could facilitate positive rapport between teachers, students and parents and also provide instructional information to the teacher. They also agreed that the classroom teacher should have this level of awareness without having to access specialist information. They claimed a large part of the special education component in higher education should be gathering information to make informed decisions and the facilitation of effective communication with parents. Essentially, parents in the stakeholder group wanted teachers to understand and respect their child and to advocate for the needs of all students in the class.

## Discussion

Three clear themes emerged to aggregate the comments about the attributes of special educators and, like many higher education teacher development programs, these clusters included:

- learning, curriculum and content
- facilitative processes such as relationships and problem-solving
- professional issues.

With regard to learning, curriculum and content, the surveys, interviews and groups demonstrated a consistent high regard for an individualised focus on learning success and the wellbeing of the individual student. This was the most rewarding aspect of work for the special educator and the most challenging when the student-focused priority was not reciprocated by general classroom teachers. To achieve this, special educators need to be confident in their knowledge and understanding of both individual student needs and generic curriculum requirements. Special educators require a comprehensive understanding of the processes and practices of student autonomy as this current trend



in learning provides occasion for the demonstration of a range of special educator skills, particularly when the attribute of relationships is added.

A high level of understanding of the psychological components of cognition was also required by special educators, particularly as cognition is experienced by students with learning disabilities (including ADHD and autism), intellectual impairments and acquired brain injury. The current understanding of cognition is only one component of an otherwise busy psychology agenda in teacher preparation programs, and more specific information is required if special educators and regular teachers are to develop learning strategies for students with special cognition needs.

A comprehensive understanding of curriculum levels for all ages and subjects is required if special educators are to demonstrate an expertise in student autonomy, self-directed learning, independent learning as well as the differentiated curriculum, modifications or alternative programs.

A focus on autism spectrum disorder will inform undergraduate students of the need to understand a specific disability area, but more importantly it reinforces a strengths-based approach to learning for all students. Approaching an individual's learning difficulties or disabilities through their strengths, interests and abilities improves learning and also creates a climate of respect in the classroom. The opportunity to study autism spectrum disorders also introduces complex contexts that relate to communication, social skills, behaviour, anxiety, and sensory awareness.

The proactive management of students with challenging behaviours is regarded as a priority by the principals, lead teachers and education authorities, particularly as the implications of the increasing prevalence of anxiety and depression are realised. Understanding and managing student behaviour is identified as a priority for ongoing professional development by most special educators and is also identified as a trigger for thoughts of leaving the profession from teachers who are unable to cope. More research is required to improve the way teachers understand the impact of anxiety and depression on all students, but particularly students with disabilities or students experiencing difficulties. Raising teacher awareness of the needs of students with mental health difficulties will improve school responsiveness and reduce behavioural tensions.

Relationships are the core of all facilitative processes in special education. Positive regard for students, parents and colleagues seems to underpin all processes required to make learning happen for students with special needs and to make professional satisfaction happen for special educators. Skills in collaboration and negotiation are required to resolve a range of difficulties, particularly those that relate to inclusion and to the needs of students with challenging behaviours.

Ongoing problem-solving must be prefaced with a level of critical enquiry that will inform ethical decision making for special educators. Research skills should not only relate to evidence-based learning and the implementation of effective teaching strategies but also to problem solving and understanding prejudices involved in complex educational situations. Those with the ability to view contentious issues and contexts from a variety of perspectives will be able to propose school and classroom strategies that are responsive to the diverse needs of all learners in the school. The ethical skill to see the reciprocal interplay in each contentious context in a school or classroom is informed by the larger picture of the rights of the child and the understandings of difference in our society. Rights, respect, dignity and success seem to be recurring values that shape the special educators attitude that was poorly defined but regarded as important by Carlson et al. (2004).

The outstanding need for professional accreditation in special education has been emphasised throughout this article. Equally, ongoing professional development helps to build confidence and efficacy, particularly when that professional growth relates to fulfilling the educational needs of all students. In addition, the legal requirements that underpin disability discrimination may need to be revisited as an important factor in higher education programs, particularly considering the increasing prevalence of students with autism and students with mental health difficulties who require access and support to participate in quality education programs.

This study has provided a small and personal view of the attributes and program priorities of a group of special educators, their lead teachers and their principals in an effort to more clearly define the role of special educators in schools. The qualitative and introductory nature of the study begins a more rigorous analysis of those attributes that are specifically 'special'. This study is ongoing and more information is needed about the career skills and aspirations of current graduates in special education to see whether the nexus between regular and special education is creating a highly qualified and informed educator. The special education programs in higher education that have resulted from this and other similar research seem to indicate a renewed interest in the role of special education in schools and in universities. There is also a heightened sense of graduate commitment and community interest in the wellbeing and achievement of all students, particularly those students who experience life and learning difficulties.

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