



The role of the special educator in academic learning and engagement: Let's get professional

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The 1970s marked the beginning of a golden age in special education. Researchers had established that individuals with a range of abilities, including those with cognitive impairments, were able to learn, albeit at a slower rate than their peers. The first tertiary courses in special education were established in Australia, supported by state departments of education. Although there were classes for children with cognitive impairment prior to this, these were limited to children with mild disabilities. Children with more significant disabilities were accommodated in special schools, established by families and staffed by individuals without qualifications in teacher education or special education. In the 1980s the move to deinstitutionalisation coincided with the establishment of community-based early intervention programs, which supported families to keep their children at home. This, along with the acceptance of children with high support needs into state schools, initially special schools, changed expectations for learning and promoted the long-term inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream society. Departments of education recognised the need for qualified special educators to support these programs and indeed programs for all children with special education needs.

These initiatives were promoted by emerging support for the rights of all individuals to achieve their potential, regardless of ability, and by research into effective instruction. Learning was measured by changes in academic, social, communication and self-help skills. Engagement was identified as an essential prerequisite for learning and measures were developed to identify need and to monitor progress towards higher levels of engagement. Interventions that promoted learning were identified through research. Educators with special education qualifications were taught to identify and use evidence-based interventions.

Initially not all special education positions were occupied by qualified special educators. This was to be expected given that this was a newly emerging profession. Unfortunately, recent estimates suggest that in special schools in Australia, where one would expect the highest percentages of qualified staff, only about 64% are qualified. It seems that special education as a profession is not valued. This is glaringly obvious in the failure of the NDIS to recognise special educators, separate from teachers, as potential providers of services to individuals with disabilities. This presentation will overview the knowledge of evidence-based practice and practical skills that qualified special educators bring to enhancing the engagement and subsequent learning of all individuals with special education needs and will include suggestions for ensuring that special education becomes a recognised profession.