



Australian Association  
of  
Special Education (AASE)

*Quality  
education  
for all*

**POSITION PAPER**

**JULY 2009**

**QUALITY  
EDUCATION FOR  
STUDENTS WITH  
SPECIAL NEEDS**

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### **AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION INC. POSITION PAPER ON QUALITY EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

#### **Background**

AASE Inc is committed to advocating for the provision of quality education services for students with special educational needs. It is imperative that such provisions be based on current research and exemplary practice. AASE's position is informed by the Disability Standards for Education 2005 which require that students with disabilities are treated on the same basis as other students in regards to enrolment and participation in education. Full participation may require the provision of specialised support services, adjustments to curriculum, assessment activities and pedagogy. We endorse the Melbourne declaration which calls for all children to receive high-quality schooling, regardless of disability or other factors. This paper will review the literature to pinpoint the essential features of a quality evidence-based educational program for school-aged children with special education needs. These features should be apparent in any adjustments to curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and support services and in both mainstream and segregated settings, and are likely to reflect good practice for all students. This position paper refers to quality programs in school settings, quality programs for very young children and for adolescents who are in transition to the work-place may have different characteristics.

The literature review identifies a range of concepts and issues which can be addressed through the contexts of curriculum, instruction and school environment. Consideration of these contexts is the same when planning programs for all students. The field of special education provides an intensive analysis of curriculum, instruction and the school environment in order to maximise learning outcomes for students. Its critical features are the individualising of instruction and programming and the use of effective teaching strategies. As such, special education is a process rather than physical place

#### **Curriculum**

Curriculum is the mechanism that organises the knowledge, skills and values expected to be achieved by students during their school life. It provides a set of learning outcomes which allows for the development of knowledge and skills as well as strategies for learning how to learn across the full range of content areas (Howell & Nolet, 2000; Shelden & Hutchins, 2008).

Well designed curriculum delineates well connected and extensive knowledge structures which enable

students to build on prior knowledge, chunk increasing amounts of information and provide a framework to access and integrate new information (Howell & Nolet, 2000). This statement recognises that some content can be analysed into a fixed sequence of steps whereas some higher order skills are less structured yet build and depend upon prior knowledge (Rosenshine, 1995).

A thorough knowledge of a content domain and curriculum design principles is the foundation for effective assessment, evaluation, decision-making and instruction (Heward, 2003; Howell & Nolet, 2000). To fulfil these roles, the curriculum must be “developed so information in a particular domain ... is selected, prioritised, sequenced, organised and scheduled for instruction” (Simmons & Kameenui, 1995, p. 5) and be flexible in assisting to meet positive learning outcomes for individuals. Thus curriculum articulates what has to be taught in the academic and social domains rather than prescribing how the skills, knowledge and values are to be taught (Howell & Nolet, 2000). Such a curriculum can be adapted to accommodate individual student’s needs through organising content into smaller or larger segments, accommodations that have significant effects for instruction learning (Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, 2002; Wehmeyer, Lattin, & Agran, 2001). A good understanding of the principles of well designed curriculum sets higher expectations for all students and increases the chances of meeting the needs of the full range of students with special education needs (Westwood, 2007). For some students with higher support needs, a validated process for personalised curriculum planning will be necessary to ensure that as well as having access to the general curriculum, students have the opportunity to learn functional skills important for an independent adult life (Shelden & Hutchings, 2008),

Curriculum needs to be the basis upon which assessment and subsequent programming and instructional decisions are made. Curriculum-based assessment and curriculum-based measurement both assess student performance in relation to the curriculum (Deno, 2003; Hosp, Hosp & Howell, 2007). These assessments, which can be implemented by teacher, are more sensitive to student learning than traditional assessment methodology and reflect a closer match to knowledge, skills and values taught in classrooms (Deno, 2003; Hosp, Hosp & Howell, 2007; Howell & Nolet, 2000). Curriculum-based assessment directly assesses curriculum outcomes being taught in classrooms and forms the basis for instructional decisions. Curriculum-based measurement assists in monitoring student progress and making decisions regarding placement and resource allocation by comparing peers on content drawn from the curriculum (Deno, 2003; Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007).

The close link between assessment and curriculum assists in providing feedback to parents, students and the community as well as providing a credential at the end of schooling for all students.

## Instruction

Curriculum is what we teach;  
Instruction is how we teach it; and  
Evaluation guides the process.

(Howell & Nolet, 2000)

The characteristics of effective instruction are reported by educational researchers who study the critical teacher behaviours in classroom settings (Ellis, 2005). The literature also refers to the terms *effective teaching* and *explicit teaching or instruction*. However, it must be noted that effective instruction is not defined as a single method of teaching but rather as a series of characteristics which can be embedded into a range of teaching approaches (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). Effective instruction enables the efficient use of class time to maximise learning outcomes for students maximises on-task behaviour of students and minimises inappropriate behaviour

The effective instruction literature identifies a number of teacher behaviours that positively correlate with academic success for students, and which also support the learning of typical and high-achieving students (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Effective instruction involves implementing strategies in planning, managing, delivering and evaluating instruction (Heward, 2003; Ysseldyke, 1995). Meta-analyses of the research indicate that teaching approaches that combine direct instruction (explicit, teacher-directed instruction in basic skills and content) and strategy instruction (explicit instruction to teach cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies) are most successful (Ellis, 2006). Effective teachers are competent with a wide array of instructional strategies, including teacher-directed, explicit instruction and are able to select the most appropriate strategies for individual students and specific content (Bakken, 2008; Hattie, 2003; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Effective teacher use the following strategies with high fidelity:

### Planning instruction

- Use assessment, including curriculum-based measurement to determine place in the curriculum and monitor the effects of instruction and evaluate programs (Deno, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Hosp & Ardoin, 2008; Howell & Nolet, 2000)
- Define expected student outcomes/goals (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Hattie, 2005; Ysseldyke, 2001)
- Set challenging and realistic expectations for all students yet allowing for individual differences (Hattie, 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2001)

### Managing instruction

- Establish a positive class environment (Hattie, 2003; Westwood, 2007)
- Establish then teach lesson rules and procedures (Kern & Clements, 2007; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers & Sugai, 2008)
- Allocate time for directly teaching skills, knowledge and concepts Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, Dolezal, 2002)
- Maintain a high rate of task engagement (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Kern & Clements, 2007; Simonsen et al., 2008; Westwood, 2007.)
- Minimise disruptions by organising the physical space, keeping transitions between activities short and restricting interruptions (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Simonsen et al., 2008)
- Where necessary, teach and reward the social skills needed for classroom participation (Landrum, Tankersley & Kauffman, 2006).

### Delivering instruction

- Provide tasks which ensure students achieve a high rate of success (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Kern & Clemens, 2007; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)
- Inform students of the instructional goal (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Heward, 2003; Westwood, 2007)
- Use clear and precise instructions/language (Hattie, 2009; Westwood, 2007)
- Review previous work at the start of the lesson and provide advance organisers (Gagnon, Maccini & Maccini, 2001; Swanson & Deshler, 2003)
- Analyse tasks into components (Ellis, 2005; Swanson, Hoskyn & Lee, 1999; Vaughn, Gersten & Chard, 2000)
- Actively teach cognitive strategies (Ellis, 2005; Hattie, 2009; Swanson et al., 1999; Westwood, 2007)

- Model skills and strategies and provide worked examples (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Gagnon, Maccini & Maccini, 2001; Pashler et al., 2007; Rosenshine, 1995; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)
- Maintain a brisk pace (Ellis, 2005; Kern & Clemens, 2007)
- Provide a variety of exemplars (Ellis, 2000; Howell & Nolet, 2000;; Rosenshine, 1995)
- Question students frequently to check understanding (Ellis, 2005; Hattie & Timperley, 2007)
- Scaffold instruction to support students to complete a task (Dickinson, Chard, & Simmons, 2000; Kameenui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons, & Coyne, 2002; Larkin, 2001)
- Provide for guided and independent practice which allows for a mix of lower and higher order thinking skills (Ellis, 2005; Hattie, 2003; Maccini & Hughes, 2000; Swanson & Hoskyn, 2001)
- Practice skills or apply concepts, using distributed practice, until the students are fluent (Hattie, 2009; Heward, 2003; Swanson & Deshler, 2003; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001)
- Use peer assistance, classwide peer tutoring and collaborative learning (Anderson, Hamilton & Hattie, 2004; Baker, Gersten, Dimino, & Griffiths, 2004; Simonsen et al., 2007)
- Actively supervise or monitor the work of all students (Rosenhine, 1995; Simonsen et al., 2008; Westwood, 2007)
- Use errors as opportunities to provide further instruction (Rosenhine, 1995, Simonsen et al., 2007)
- Provide immediate feedback to students which is specific to the situation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Pashler, 2007; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)
- Teach the use of mnemonic strategies to help students remember important information (Kleinheksel & Summy, 2003; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)
- Adjust the lesson to meet student needs (e.g., extra instruction or intensive review) (Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks & Jacobson, 2004; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)
- Provide a closing summary at the end of the lessons (Marzano et al., 2001)
- Include cumulative reviews (Pashler et al., 2007; Kameenui et al., 2002)
- Take advantage of technology to support and assist student learning (Simonsen et al., 2007; Wehmeyer et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2001)
- Teach in small interactive groups, and provide 1:1 instruction if required (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003)

### Evaluating instruction

- Monitor student progress (Baker et al., 2004; Howell & Nolet, 2000; Heward, 2003; Rosenshine, 1995; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003; Ysseldyke, 2001)
- Use student progress data to make instruction decisions (Deno, 2003; Howell & Nolet, 2000)

### School environment

The context of the delivery of any program is vital to meeting the needs of all students. The amount and quality of instruction, classroom management, climate, student/teacher interactions, motivation and parental encouragement and support of learning are critical variables in influencing students learning (Anderson et al., 2004; Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002; Hattie, 2003; Simonsen et al., 2008). In addition, school culture, administrative issues and community influences are a moderate influence (Hattie, 2003). High quality special education programs recognise the impact of the school and seek to positively structure or restructure the environment to ensure success for all students (Sigafoos, Arthur & O'Reilly, 2003; Sugai, 2003).

Teacher-student relationships directly influence students' attitude and achievement (Hattie, 2009). There is a danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers have low expectations of students with special educational needs (Hattie, 2009; Westwood, 2007). Teachers and school executive are able to create a positive school climate that values and accepts all students (Eber et al., 2002; Sugai, 2003). School climate can foster learning when high expectations are held for all students. High expectations, combined with work at an appropriate level and effective teaching strategies serve to strengthen student/teacher interactions, student motivation and academic achievement (Westwood, 2007).

Parents, along with their children, are partners with teachers in the education process (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Effective home-school links should be based on mutual respect, recognition of the equity of the differing roles of parent and educator, sharing of information and skills leading to participation in the decision making process. Schools should support parents in maintaining high expectations for their children and ensure parents comprehend the "language of schooling" (Hattie, 2009). Parent involvement in school activities will enhance the working partnership and assist the student to receive the best possible education (Hattie, 2009).

With the advent of inclusive curriculum, collaborative partnerships between students, families, special educators, teachers, teacher aides and other relevant professional are imperative (Hines, 2008; Shaddock, Smythe-King & Giorcelli, 2007). Collaboration provides the vehicle for the pooling of knowledge about curriculum, current curriculum trends, and the knowledge of effective practices to meet the needs of the diverse range of students in any class (Hines, 2008; Hoover & Patton, 2008). It should be noted, however, that there is little research evidence to support some collaborative approaches such as team-teaching (Hattie, 2009; Murawski & Swanson, 2001)

The above mentioned features underpin quality educational programs. Students need to access relevant curriculum and appropriate instruction within a positive school environment. A highly trained teaching force is essential if students with special education needs are to access quality educational programs. Teacher and administrators need the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the diverse range of educational needs within every classroom. Special educators need to be trained in curriculum design, instructional methodologies, consultancy skills and collaboration.

These conclusions have implications for teacher training and the professional development of teachers. Training course must provide graduates with the necessary competencies if students with special education needs are to receive a quality educational program. After graduation, teachers and administrators require systematic development of their skills, knowledge and values, to ensure curriculum and instruction practices benefit all students, and are based on research validated principles.

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