

# **Results of the Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA) Survey of Qualified Staff in Special Schools and Facilities**

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For the  
**Australian Special Education Principals' Association  
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# Results of the ASEPA Survey of Qualified Staff in Special Schools and Facilities

## SYNOPSIS

This paper summarises the findings of a survey of special school and settings undertaken by the Australian Special Education Principals' Association (ASEPA) into the age and special education qualifications of teachers and principals. Survey results were obtained from five states and the ACT.

The results show two concerns that need to be addressed by education authorities quickly and comprehensively.

- The first is that many of the 3289 principals and teachers in the 247 schools surveyed will be leaving schools in the next few years due to resignation or retirement, as 1,390 or 42.6% are aged 50 or over.
- The second is that only 62.3% of the principals and teachers in these schools had a special education qualification and, of the 1,219 staff that didn't, only 207 or 17.0% were currently undertaking courses towards the qualification.

These two concerns mean that Australian schools' ability to appropriately educate the students with special needs in our education systems, students who are among society's most vulnerable, is nearing a crisis point. It also means that this situation will become worse in the future unless concerted and immediate efforts are taken to attract teachers to these schools and to make sure that they can obtain the appropriate special education qualifications.

Furthermore, as these surveys were only undertaken in special schools and settings, the qualifications of teachers of students with special education needs in the nation's primary and secondary schools have not been examined. However, it is highly likely that the percentages of these teachers with special education qualifications in these schools would be much lower than in the surveyed schools. Thus, the situation for the students with special needs in many of our schools is probably not as decreed in the Disability Standards for Education (2005) in that they are not receiving an equal education.

## INTRODUCTION

In April 2006, the Principals Association of Specialist Schools of Victoria (PASS), an ASEPA state affiliate, concerned about member schools reporting an increasing difficulty in finding suitably qualified teachers for their schools, formed a qualifications sub-committee which developed and distributed a survey form to its member schools the next month.

This concern about a diminishing number of qualified special education teachers is not confined to Victoria. Following the publication of the results of the PASS survey (PASS, 2006), ASEPA distributed the survey form in other states and territories. This paper examines the combined results of these responses.

## THE NEED FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION QUALIFIED TEACHERS

In 2005, the Australian Secondary Schools Principals' Association surveyed 25 per cent of government high schools and found that "education standards are being compromised by a shortage of teachers that has forced about 300,000 high school lessons to be taught daily by staff with no expertise in the subject" (Ferrari, 2006, 1). Special needs was highlighted as one of the two areas most commonly taught by teachers with no expertise in the field.

A Department of Education, Science and Training report on literacy and numeracy and students with disabilities stated: "Most of the teachers we visited had some training or professional development in

special education. However, some of the teachers had little training and this may be true for the majority of teachers in Australian schools. We believe this is a concern." (van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer and Rickards, 2001, 6) This report did not investigate students in special schools.

In the United States, a Michigan Department of Education spokeswoman stated last year that there was a shortage of over 700 special education teachers in metropolitan Detroit and about 1,800 in the state. "The state lists special education teachers as one of its "critical shortage" categories, a problem reflected nationally, especially in the area of autism and speech, and language and emotional impairment. A similar shortage exists for special education administrators" (Lewis, 2006, 1). Another US report stated that "according to many education professionals, new teachers trained in general education often leave college with little experience or academic course work in working with students with special needs, despite the fact that special-needs students are becoming more common in the classrooms" and that "98 percent of school districts have reported shortages in special education professionals" (Gaetano, 2006).

Because of these shortages, many school districts in the U.S. use emergency licensing of teachers, whereby teachers are hired on the understanding that they will complete their studies and gain a full licence within three years. A study (Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropeiri, 2005) examining the 'effective teaching' (examining planning and preparation, classroom environment and instruction) of two groups of first-year teachers, one with licenses and the other with emergency provisional licences, found substantial differences between the groups exceeding 1.5 standard deviations. The paper concluded with the statement that educational authorities "must do everything possible to promote quality special education teacher education and to limit the extent to which untrained – and less effective – teachers are given responsibility for educating the nation's children with disabilities" (p. 227).

Students with special needs require teachers with extended, specialised skills. Unfortunately, most teachers are taught few of these skills in their pre-service teacher training. They need to be acquired later in additional qualifications.

To be successful, special education teachers must possess a set of highly specialised skills that can be applied to any core academic content area. More specifically, they are expected to possess and be able to apply highly specialised knowledge, skills, and teaching expertise, as they continuously assess student performance, to adjust the learning environment, modify the instructional methods, adapt curricula, use positive behaviour supports and interventions, and select and support appropriate accommodations to meet the individual needs of students. It is specialised teaching knowledge and skills in support of students with disabilities' learning and achievement that defines special education as a profession. Individualised teaching skills are at the heart of special education, and individualised learning needs of students at the centre of their practice (McCormick, 2005, 7).

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) presents a similar assessment:

The field of special education is not a place but rather provides an intensive analysis of curriculum, instruction and the school environment in order to maximise learning outcomes for students with special education needs. Thus appropriate curriculum, instruction and environment are the key to a quality education for the full range of students with special education needs (Australian Association of Special Education, 2004, 1).

Learning outcomes that the student needs to be taught must be enunciated in the curriculum. The content must cover all the skill, knowledge and values areas in a way that builds on prior knowledge and for continuous assessment. By basing the assessment on the curriculum, the teacher can monitor student progress and gain assistance with teaching points and instructional decision-making. To maximize class time and learning outcomes, effective instruction (also called effective teaching and explicit teaching or instruction) is advocated in special education. This employs critical teacher behaviours which can be used with other teaching methods to maximise students' on-task behaviours and minimise inappropriate behaviours. Added to this is the need for a positive school climate, one where positive, collaborative relationships exist between all involved in the education process. The

overall aim is quality educational outcomes for all students (Australian Association of Special Education, 2004).

Put simply, without special educators:

- students with disabilities will not get a comprehensive, appropriate education.
- students with hearing disabilities will not be able to learn to effectively communicate.
- students with intellectual disabilities will not learn the essential academic and daily living skills that they presently lack.
- students with physical disabilities will not learn how to properly use their abilities.
- students with autism spectrum disorder will not learn how to deal effectively with the society they do not presently understand.
- students with severe and challenging behaviours will continue to disrupt the learning of themselves and others or be expelled from their present schools.

Without special educators, schools could be in breach of the Disability Standards for Education (2005) in not providing equal education provisions for their students with disabilities. Students with disabilities, and their parents and carers on their behalf, could seek redress under the Act.

A recent article, "Towards inclusion: an Australian perspective", (Forbes, 2007) gives an excellent summary of the current scene in Australia and concerns about the future. The author points out that policy changes have not countered the continuing diminishment of professional knowledge in teaching students with special education needs. She also highlights the difficulties facing teachers obtaining special education qualifications, namely the cost and time involved, as well as a lack of appropriate courses in many cases.

**SURVEY FORM**

The simple survey form distributed is shown below. This is the Victorian version. For the other states surveyed, the 50+ column was split into two: 50 to 54 and 54+.

School .....

	Under 30	30-39	40-49	50+	Special ed Qualified (Please note if education of deaf qualification)	No special ed	Currently doing subjects
Principal class							
Teaching staff							

**SURVEY DISTRIBUTION and RESPONSES**

The survey was originally distributed in Victoria, and then later in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the two territories.

As can be seen from Table 1 below, the South Australian (15 out of 16 sent the survey) and Victorian (76 of 81 schools) responses to the survey were an excellent 93.8%. The ACT response rate was 75%, New South Wales was 71.6% and Western Australia's 42.9%. The number of Queensland respondents was 64. However, the survey was sent to 47 special schools and 400 units in the state, which gives a response rate of only 14.3%. (The overall response rate of 35.7% becomes 70.6% if the Queensland figures are not included.) These differing response rates should be remembered when looking at the figures obtained, with the validity of the Victorian and South Australian results being much higher than those of Queensland.

*Table 1 – Survey response rates*

State	No of surveys distributed	No. of surveys completed	% completed
ACT	4	3	75.0%
NSW	95	68	71.8%
Qld	447	64	14.3%
SA	16	15	93.8%
Vic	81	76	93.8%
WA	49	21	42.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>692</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>35.7%</b>

Table 2 shows the numbers of principals and teachers in the responding schools.

*Table 2 – Number of schools, principals and teachers*

	Schools	Principals	Teachers
ACT	3	4	45
NSW	68	68	603
Qld	64	68	530
SA	15	15	109
Vic	76	160	1491
WA	21	24	172
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>2950</b>

When examining the numbers of principals, it should be noted that the Victorian figures include assistant principals who, with principals, comprise the group known in that state as Principal Class Officers (PCOs). Hence the ratio for Victoria of just over two PCOs per school, compared to the one principal per school in the other states.

There was a large variation in the number of teaching staff per setting between the states, as can be seen in Table 3. South Australia had one setting with two staff. Western Australia's smallest had four staff, while the smallest for each of the other states was three. While South Australia's largest school had 16 staff and Western Australia's 23, New South Wales has a school with 37 and Queensland 40. However, one Victorian school has principal and teacher numbers of 81. The three ACT schools varied between 11 and 21.

*Table 3 – Number of principals and teachers in responding schools*

	<10	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89
ACT		2	1						
NSW	33	29	5	1					
Qld	44	11	6	2	1				
SA	10	5							
Vic	7	34	19	11	2	2			1
WA	13	6	2						

## RESULTS

### Principal Age Range

We shall first examine the age range of staff in special schools and facilities in the five Australian states, beginning with principals.

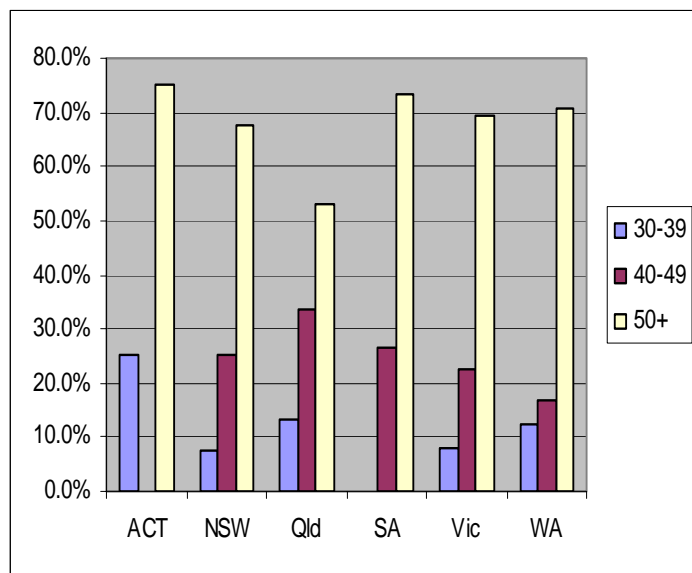
As can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 1 below, the vast majority of principals are over 50, ranging from 52.9% in Queensland to 73.3% in South Australia and 75.0% in the ACT. These figures are not unexpected in that one of the criteria for gaining a principal's position is experience. There should be a

concern, however, in South Australia, where there is no principal under 40. In Queensland and Western Australia, the corresponding figure is about 13% of the total number.

*Table 4 – Age range of principals*

STATE	30-39	40-49	50-54	55+
ACT	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	75.0%
NSW	7.5%	25.4%	41.8%	25.4%
Qld	13.2%	33.8%	25.0%	27.9%
SA	0.0%	26.7%	6.7%	66.7%
Vic	8.1%	22.5%	69.4%	
WA	13.0%	17.4%	17.4%	32.2%

*Figure 1 – Age range of principals*



The initial survey conducted in Victoria did not split the 50+ age cohort in two as was done later in the other states. When looking at the split into those aged 50 to 54 and those above 55, the figures for South Australia are particularly disturbing in that one principal (6.67% of the total number of principals) is aged 50 to 54, while there are ten (66.67%) aged 55 and over. This could mean a massive loss in percentage terms over the next five years or so due to retirement. In New South Wales, the corresponding split is 41.8% aged 50 to 54 and 25.4% 55 or over. In Queensland there are almost the same percentages either side of 54/55, while Western Australia had 17.4% of principals aged 50 to 54 and 32.2% aged 55 or over. The retirement policies, practices and trends in each education department are an important consideration in looking at prospective possible losses.

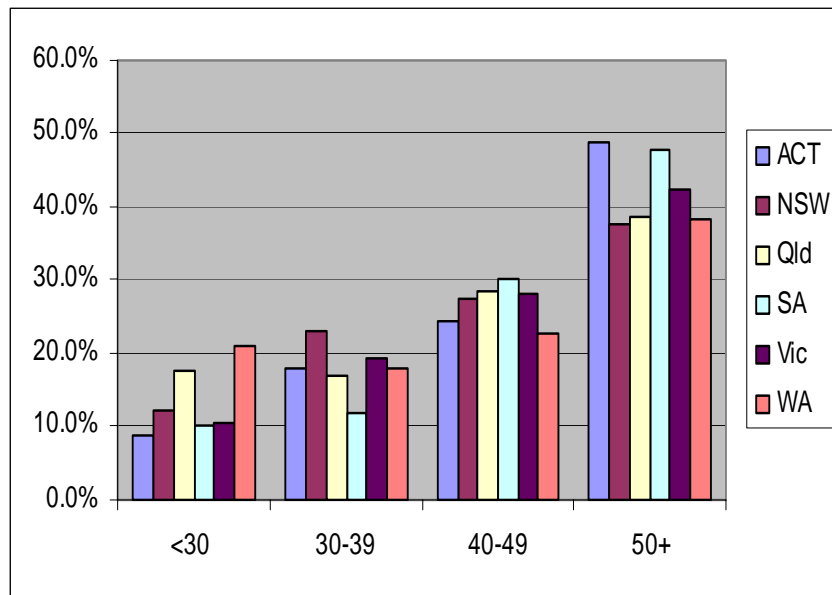
### Teacher Age Range

We shall now examine the corresponding data for teaching staff as seen in Table 5 and Figure 2.

*Table 5 – Age range of teachers*

	<30	30-39	40-49	50-54	55+
ACT	8.9%	17.8%	24.4%	22.4%	26.7%
NSW	12.1%	22.9%	27.3%	20.2%	17.5%
Qld	17.6%	17.0%	28.5%	21.5%	15.5%
SA	10.1%	11.9%	30.3%	23.9%	23.9%
Vic	10.5%	19.2%	28.0%	42.3%	
WA	20.2%	18.5%	22.5%	17.3%	21.4%

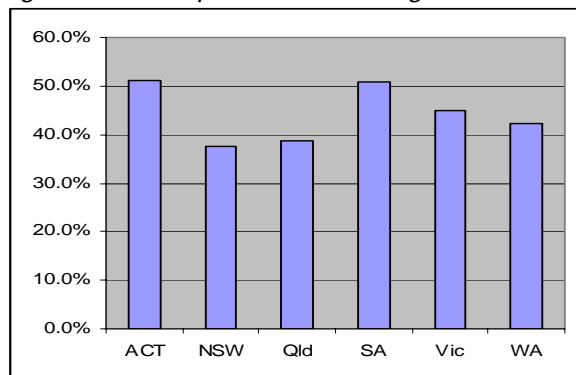
Figure 2 – Age range of teachers



As can be seen in Figure 2 above, South Australia has the highest percentages of teachers aged 40 to 49 and aged 50+. This trend corresponds to that state's percentages of older principals. Western Australia, with 20.2%, has the largest percentage of teachers in the under-30 age range followed by Queensland with 17.6%. In the 30 to 39 age bracket, New South Wales has the highest percentage (22.9%). The next highest state percentage is Victoria's 19.2%.

Combining these two cohorts together for the 50+ age group for each jurisdiction, we arrive at Figure 3 below; the ACT and South Australia both have over 50% in this age range, while Victoria and Western Australia have over 40%. The other two states have well over one-third.

Figure 3 – Principals & teachers aged 50+



### Special Education Qualified

Teachers working with students with special needs should have teachers with qualifications in the area for the reasons enumerated above. This is as fundamental and important as teachers of Physics having a degree encompassing Physics subjects and a music teacher having a music qualification. The results of the survey are in Table 6 below.

The ACT, Queensland and South Australia have not many more than half their principals and teachers with special education qualifications. New South Wales has 60%, while Victoria has over 2/3. The Western Australia figure is excellent with 86.6%.

*Table 6 – Percentage of principals and teachers with a special education qualification*

ACT	53.1%
NSW	60.0%
Qld	53.7%
SA	54.8%
Vic	68.9%
WA	86.6%
TOTAL	70.4%

The final aspect the survey examined was to look at the number of staff without special education qualifications who are currently studying for such a qualification. In Victoria, a number of specialist schools make this a provision of permanent appointment at the school. Table 7 below looks at the percentages and numbers of teachers undertaking these studies.

*Table 7 – Staff members without special education qualifications currently working towards the qualification*

	%	Number
ACT	8.7%	2
NSW	6.5%	17
Qld	17.6%	43
SA	21.4%	12
Vic	24.0%	123
WA	36.4%	8
TOTAL	18.2%	205

As can be seen above, the percentages of teachers currently undertaking special education qualifications because they are unqualified varies widely from state to state. New South Wales has only 6.5% while Western Australia has over 1/3. As Western Australia already has the highest percentage of staff with special education qualifications, this is a very good trend in this state.

## DISCUSSION

The results noted above show a very concerning picture of the number of special educators in Australia at the present time and into the future. While it is not surprising that the majority of principals are aged 50 and over, the percentage of teachers also in that age range means that over the next five years or so, there will be a massive loss in expertise and experience.

The other major concern is that the percentage of special education qualified staff is only 70.4% of the total. What other profession would allow this? Further, of the 1,196 unqualified special education teachers in the 668 surveyed special settings, only 17.0% are currently undertaking the necessary studies to gain the qualification.

This survey looked only at special education schools and settings. It can be presumed that the many students with special needs enrolled in mainstream schools are less likely to have teachers with a special education qualification than those in special education facilities. Therefore, the situation for these students in obtaining a suitable education is even more concerning, now and in the future.

Every Australian child deserves the best possible education. Students with special needs should not be demeaned by being taught by teachers who are not properly trained to teach them. They should be taught, not just minded or looked after. They should be taught by teachers who understand their needs and can teach them a curriculum appropriate to their needs and aspirations.

Without adequately qualified teachers, students with special needs will not reach their full potential, which currently leads to some finding employment. If the skills shortage is not addressed, these students will leave school and require high levels of support from post school government agencies.

ASEPA believes that students with special educational needs require a unique professional response. To ensure this, the profile of special educators across Australia must be raised in the following ways:

1. The Commonwealth government needs to take the lead and fund training programs for special educators.
2. The Commonwealth government needs to take the strategic lead in promoting best practice in special education across Australia.
3. Pre-service training must include special education units of high quality which reflect best practice.
4. The school practicum component of under graduate course must include a block in a special education setting.
5. The states need to have workforce policies and practices that encourage staff to move between settings to allow for professional development in the area of special education.
6. The education systems need to monitor, evaluate, research and develop pedagogy to continue to adapt to the changing face of disability.
7. The characteristics of the teaching profession ensure that the most efficient learning occurs within the profession in mentoring roles; this must also be applied to the special education settings.
8. Internships need to be made available in the teaching profession.

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