

## ABSTRACT

Much attention has been given to the development of statements of essential competencies for special educators. There has, however, been relatively little attention to how these competencies are best developed. Assumptions have been made that postgraduate training in special education leads to competence in teaching and that this training is best preceded by mainstream teaching experience. This is the case in New South Wales (NSW) where the Department of School Education (DSE) has a funding tradition of favouring experienced teachers over inexperienced teachers in its sponsored special education training programs. The Commonwealth Government of Australia has also made this assumption.

This study examined the strength of association between several professional development factors and excellence in special education teaching. Factors such as experience, training, mentoring and teacher's age were identified through the literature or through practice. A multimethod approach, with both quantitative and qualitative procedures, was used. Special educators who taught in special units or special schools throughout NSW were self and supervisor appraised using a draft NSW DSE special educator competency statement. The association between their competency (self appraised and supervisor appraised) and the various factors was determined. Responses to open-ended questions were also analysed. Five excellent teachers were selected and each observed and interviewed over a two-day period. Their stories of the developmental paths of the various observed competencies (from the NSW DSE statement) were transcribed and analysed. The results of each of the quantitative and qualitative procedures were examined separately and then brought together to determine convergence and/or divergence.

There was not a clear answer to the research question "What are the factors associated with excellence in special education teaching?". There was strong evidence that the personal attributes of special educators are associated with excellence. With three other factors, total teaching experience in special education, postgraduate training and teacher's age, there was some weighting in favour of association but also some discrepancy. Other factors showed little or no association. The evidence

was clear that teaching experience prior to postgraduate training was not associated with excellence.

The results of this study highlight the need for a multimethod approach in this type of research. The use of just one method, or just one group of appraisers, would have resulted in a different finding than if another method or another group of appraisers had been used. In addition to the answers to the research question, there were several other important findings. The findings have implications for the content of inservice programs, university programs and NSW DSE training sponsorship programs as well as recruitment practices. The findings also have relevance further afield. There are clear directions for future research.

## Chapter 1

### CONCEPTUALISATION AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

In this study special education refers to provisions developed to serve the learning needs of children who, because of disabilities, are unable to learn in the usual way and/or at the usual rate. It is known that these children, given the best appropriate education which caters for their individual needs, can not only learn but in the majority of cases can do so to such an extent that they are able to lead fulfilled, independent and productive lives. To ensure that school students with disabilities do reach their highest levels of fulfilment, independence and productivity, it is essential that their special education teachers have developed a high level of professional competency: they must be excellent.

There is not a comprehensive body of research which clearly states how excellence in special education teaching is best attained. There are, however, widespread assumptions about this and these have driven the practices of both school education systems and teacher training institutions. Assumptions, however sensible they may seem, are not a sound basis for making decisions which affect the lives, present and future, of children with disabilities. These assumptions also affect the allocation of financial resources. This study seeks to redress the situation in which assumptions direct practice. It asks the question "What are the factors associated with excellence in special education teaching?" in order to add to the present meagre research. The intention is to assist all those involved to make informed decisions about the most effective ways of developing a special education teaching profession of the highest quality possible.

The present chapter will place this study in an historical and current practices context. It will be an overview, rather than a detailed statement,

in order to avoid duplication of material that is better placed in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature. Statements of policy, practice and research, which are made in this chapter, will be detailed and discussed in the next chapter. After discussion of the relevant historical and current practices, the purpose of the study will be outlined and the research question and the several subquestions will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning the study and by the rationale. There will then be a discussion of the limitations and assumptions of the study. Several concepts, definitions and abbreviations as they are used in this report will be explained. The chapter will conclude with a brief statement on the structure of this thesis.

### **Historical and current practices context**

As this study was undertaken in Australia, in the State of New South Wales (NSW), the following information concentrates on this context. In the early part of the latter half of this century education in Australia was increasingly influenced by the human rights movement. This has had ramifications worldwide and has influenced the provision of services to students with disabilities. Nirje (1970), in Sweden, developed the concept of *normalisation*, that is, all children have the right to engage in all those activities, including educational activities, that are seen to be normal to the particular culture. This was further expanded and promoted by Wolfensberger (1972) in Canada. In the United Kingdom, the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) demonstrated a similar ideology. Australia too was caught up in this movement and as a result Australian parent, professional and community lobby groups pressured Departments of Education to review their services to students with *handicaps* (the term then used in Australia and now replaced by *disabilities*). Several reports and reviews at both State, for example, the NSW Doherty Report (1982), and Commonwealth levels, for example what has come to be known as the Schonell Report (Andrews, Elkins, Berry and Burge, 1979), were conducted as a result of this pressure.

Prior to the nineteen seventies, Australian government-run educational services for students with disabilities were very limited. Many children were excluded from public schools, some on the sole basis that they were not toilet trained. Most children with severe disabilities were *educated* in

privately-run schools or care situations, their *teachers* frequently having had no teacher training of any kind. In reality the situation was one of supervision and care for many of these students were regarded as ineducable. With the burgeoning advocacy of the 1960s and 1970s regarding human rights, including the rights of students with disabilities, State governments were forced to redress the above situation and to assume responsibility for the education of all children, regardless of the nature and extent of their disabilities. This drew attention to the fact that a suitably qualified teaching force was required. Australia has never felt the need to legislatively enshrine its obligation to provide educationally for all children and to do so with few exceptions within mainstream education, as has the United States with its 1975 Public Law 94-142, "The Education of All Handicapped Children Act". Nevertheless, Australia now takes very seriously its obligation concerning the education of children with disabilities. Education systems now see these obligations in the context of the 1992 Federal Disability Discrimination Act (enforceable from 1993) and are aware of possible legal repercussions if the rights of students with disabilities are not met.

In 1974 the NSW government program, which gradually took over the educative function of the 85 private institutions (McRae, 1996), was called "The Assumption of Responsibility Program". In assuming this or similar responsibility it became obvious to State Departments of Education and to the teacher training institutions throughout Australia that a large influx of suitably qualified special education teachers was needed. Thus the 1970s saw a growing number of tertiary courses in special education teaching. It was assumed that the best preparation for teaching in special education was through the study of formal tertiary special education courses. Preference in placement to vacant special education teaching positions was given to these graduates. This belief, and therefore this practice, has continued.

Two assumptions influenced the nature of these tertiary courses. Firstly, it was assumed by most tertiary educators that postgraduate training in special education following teacher education as a mainstream teacher was preferable to undergraduate training in special education without mainstream training. It should be noted that a small number of training institutions did not accept this assumption and provided full

undergraduate special education training. Secondly, it was assumed that postgraduate training should build on, not only mainstream training, but also teaching experience in mainstream classes. Thus entry to these postgraduate courses of study required a basic teaching qualification in either primary or secondary education followed by a stated minimum amount of satisfactory teaching experience. Because educational services in special education were then very undeveloped, the teaching experience of almost all course entrants was in mainstream classes.

It was considered that the demands of this postgraduate training, and then of teaching in special education as a fully qualified special educator, required a maturity and expertise that could only be gained through extensive prior teaching experience. As *entry* to special education teaching was to be through the experience/training process described above, prior mainstream teaching experience rather than special education experience, was the preferred path to a career in special education. Thus, in the 1970s most courses in Australian universities and colleges of advanced education (these colleges are now part of the university system) had a similar prior experience prerequisite, usually of five years. Most Australian universities offering postgraduate courses have since then gradually reduced the five year prerequisite so that there is now, almost entirely, no teaching experience requirement for course entry.

No university in NSW now has teaching experience as a prerequisite for entry into a *generalist* post-graduate special education course. Generalist, using the NSW terminology, refers to special educators whose postgraduate training prepares them for teaching students with learning difficulties, intellectual and physical disabilities and behavioural and emotional disorders. It does not include sensory impairment. Universities, such as the University of Western Sydney, which offer training in this disability area have maintained the prior teaching experience prerequisite for course entry. Generalist also does not include early childhood (birth to four years) as this area also is considered to require more specialist training.

Very few universities and colleges of advanced education have provided programs which have combined mainstream and special education teacher training at the undergraduate level with graduates thus receiving dual certification. These institutions had no teaching experience

prerequisite for the special education component of the course. Macquarie University in NSW continues to offer a program of this type, although in a slightly different form from its original program. Likewise, a very small number of teacher training institutions have offered undergraduate courses in special education alone, their graduates receiving certification as special education teachers only. Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education (now part of the University of Technology, Sydney) is an example of such an institution. This course no longer exists and this is the general pattern of such courses. It should be noted that these undergraduate courses in both these institutions were not commenced until some years after the early 1970s. From the 1980s the experience prerequisite was already being reduced by the institutions running the earlier postgraduate courses.

It is not known whether the general abandonment by the teacher education institutions of the assumption that experience was necessary is due to a reconsideration of the value of this or whether it has been driven by the need to attract students. It suggests that there is a belief that all those skills and understandings, previously believed to be acquired through experience, are now seen as either no longer necessary to a good special educator or able to be learnt in other ways. Perhaps the abandonment of the experience criteria had a different reason. In the current Australian climate of financial restraints and the associated need on the part of tertiary institutions to actively attract students it may be that the quality of the graduates is regarded as of less importance than budgetary issues. Whatever the reason there is no research evidence concerning the benefit of either the teaching experience prerequisite or for the more recent discarding of this prerequisite by the training institutions.

The major Australian special education association, the Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), in 1988 developed a policy which supported the notion of specialist training following teaching experience. It is the current intention that this be reviewed. Whilst the NSW AASE policy did originally conform to the 1988 national policy, the current policy (undated) does not stipulate teaching experience prior to postgraduate training although this is the preferred option.

Influenced by the advocacy activities of AASE, the Report of the Schools Council for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (Schools Council, 1989, p.49) also accepted both the postgraduate training and prior experience assumptions.

... the training of specialist teachers to work with students with more severe disabilities and to provide advice and support to regular classroom teachers will be best achieved through the provision of post-graduate award courses following appropriate regular teacher training and experience.

The term "appropriate " as it applies to "experience" is not clarified. The reference to "severe disabilities" is to students who were then believed to be best served in separate classrooms. The reference to "support" is to special educators who collaborate or team teach with or advise mainstream teachers about their students whose disabilities and learning difficulties are such that they are best served in the mainstream classroom.

There is evidence that this belief in the importance of prior teaching experience and postgraduate training has been held for the past 20 years by the NSW Department of School Education (DSE). Since 1974, Department sponsorships, in the form of up to 120 full-time cadetships (teachers receive full salary and some other costs), have been offered each year to selected applicants who have a minimum of two years prior teaching experience in either regular or special education (McRae, 1996). Applicants for full-time cadetships do not need to be already employed by the DSE. A large number (111 in 1996) of part-time cadetships (some release from DSE teaching granted for study purposes) are now also being offered. In 1995, the cost of full-time and part-time cadetships was \$4.6m (McRae, 1996).

Although there is some difference between the Commonwealth and State requirements concerning amount and type of experience prior to training, both support the principle that teaching experience prior to specialist training is preferable to no experience. Part of the cadetship DSE/teacher agreement is that the teacher will on graduation teach for a period of three years in a geographic area of need (there being a particular shortage of qualified special educators in some areas of NSW). The cadetship program was designed to increase the percentage of teachers formally qualified and working in special education. High attrition rates (after the



first three years of teaching in special education) have, however, militated against this. A large number of special educators in NSW still do not have specialist postgraduate training.

Late in 1988 the then NSW Minister for Education, Dr Terry Metherell, introduced a second DSE sponsorship program in special education training. This was in response to the continuing concern about the less than desirable level of qualified special educators. Unofficial estimates (no official estimates existed) at that time were that fewer than 40% of special educators had specialist training and that in country areas this was considerably lower. Records of this do not exist but this was the figure known to this writer who had DSE responsibilities in this area at that time. The situation was regarded as unsatisfactory and in urgent need of redressing. Metherell's purpose was to alleviate a near crisis situation and not to deny the preference for the training of teachers who had prior experience.

This comparatively new DSE program provides an annual number (in the past four years between 16 and 35 annually) of sponsorships in the form of scholarships to students end-on to their basic teaching qualification, that is, to qualified teachers without teaching experience. Scholarships provide students with an allowance of \$10,000 during the year of study. That the program was, and is, considered to be an interim and less than satisfactory measure designed to meet a particular current need is shown by the fact that many fewer scholarships than cadetships are provided annually and that each scholar receives about one-fourth of the financial assistance that a cadet receives. The cadetship and the scholarship programs have now run side-by-side for eight years. Clearly the belief that experience prior to post-graduate training is preferable to no experience is strongly held within the NSW DSE. It could be an unnecessarily expensive assumption.

The two very different groups of students (cadets with a minimum of two years teaching experience and some with two decades or more, and scholars, who are mostly in their early twenties, with no teaching experience) are enrolled in the same postgraduate courses of study at the various universities. They attend the same lectures, tutorials, seminars and practical experiences and complete the same course requirements. It would appear that the universities which continue to enrol these two

disparate groups of students find that neither group is seriously disadvantaged through sharing sessions with the other.

Whilst the scholarship program was introduced to increase the numbers of qualified special educators, it was recognised that the initial benefits were a year away and that any significant improvements would take some years. Late in 1989 it became apparent to those responsible for special education staffing that 1990 would be a crisis year in terms of finding adequate numbers of teachers with any sort of training or experience in special education to fill new positions or other vacancies in special education. The writer at the time was involved in attempts to alleviate this DSE crisis. Teacher shortages were of particular concern in the areas of mild intellectual disability, behaviour disorders and learning difficulties. Intensive full-time 10 week courses were mounted in these areas with the specific intention of training mainstream teachers to work in just one category of special education. This move was regarded as essential but regrettable. Many felt that the introduction of such courses had the potential to erode the long fought-for requirement of a full year (or part-time equivalent) of post graduate training. Concern was expressed about the quality of the graduates of such courses and whether their future employment would be restricted to their area of intensive training or whether they would, at a later date, be seen as qualified for other special education positions. Whilst there were assurances that this would not happen, there was an air of scepticism and concern. The holding of long inservice courses has continued but in more recent years the nature of these has changed. Courses such as the "Learning Assistance Support Team", the "Reading Recovery Program" and the "Special Education School-based Training Program" are not full-time courses although they are demanding and cover a period of between eight weeks and one year. The last course does not focus on one particular area of disability whilst the first two do.

That the NSW DSE regards these as providing only part-training is evidenced by its seeking (and attaining) university credit, of one or two semester units, for these inservice courses and its encouragement of their graduates to complete their postgraduate study. This suggests that there is an assumption that the long inservice courses, sometimes in one area of disability only, are, in some way, not as satisfactory as a full university

generalist postgraduate course. It is possible that this is because completion of some inservice courses then restricts the DSE's options in terms of special education placement (completion of an inservice course in behaviour disorders should mean placement as a teacher of students with this disability). It is also possible that the DSE regards the nature and/or length and/or content of the various inservice courses as inadequate compared with full university training. If this is the case, it too would appear to be an assumption for there has been no study which has compared the competence of the university graduate with that of a major DSE inservice course graduate just as there has been no study which has compared the competence of the experienced graduate with that of the inexperienced graduate.

Three assumptions have been discussed. All three have concerned training, either formal university training (with or without prior teaching experience) or inservice training. Several other assumptions are also current. These concern the ways in which people can learn other than through attendance of training courses. Whilst there is much evidence (discussed in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature) that adults learn, perhaps best learn, through actual experience, this is not seriously acknowledged by the NSW DSE which continues to encourage, through the cadetship program, completion of approved university special education programs. This encouragement includes special educators with many years of experience. There appears not to be a point at which NSW DSE equates learning through teaching experience in special education with learning through formal training in special education. The learning that can take place through other less formal, school-based arrangements and activities is also not recognised. This particularly includes mentoring, an approach to the development of professional skills which is finding increasing favour, particularly in Great Britain.

All these assumptions need to be tested. Continuing to uphold and base practices on unfounded beliefs is not justified in education generally. It is particularly not justified in special education where the input of teachers is so very vital to all those children who have difficulties in learning and who, consequently, may or may not face a precarious adulthood. It is urgent that there be a body of sound research evidence that will clearly

establish the key factors associated with excellence in special education teaching.

These assumptions are held throughout Australia and, indeed, in the special education world generally. There is a plethora of statements emanating from many countries, especially the United States, concerning the competencies, that is, the skills, knowledge and attitudes that a special educator must have in order to be effective. It is important that these be known; equally important is the knowledge of how these are best developed.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify the factor, or combination of factors, associated with excellence in special education teaching. This knowledge can then be used to improve the quality of the special education teaching force and thus the learning of school students with disabilities.

Whilst there will be a strong focus on collecting evidence on the parts played by postgraduate teacher training and by teaching experience, both before and after specialist training, this study will also examine related factors such as mentoring, inservice courses, professional reading and personal attributes. Information regarding the last factor will not be directly sought but survey participants have the opportunity to include this in an open response if they consider this or any other factor relevant as a contributor to excellence in teaching.

### **The research questions**

The broad research question concerns the factors that are *associated with* excellence in special education teaching. Because this study is being conducted by just one researcher, it must necessarily be limited in scope. It therefore examines *associated* factors rather than *causal* factors. A much more comprehensive study with a larger group of special educators would be necessary to establish a causal relationship.

Subquestions arise from the broad question. Each addresses a specific factor that has been attributed, either in the literature or in practice, to excellence in special education teaching.

### **The broad research question**

What are the factors associated with excellence in special education teaching?

### **The research subquestions**

In answering the broad research question, it is necessary to answer first the individual subquestions. These are:

- (i) Is postgraduate special education teacher training associated with excellence?
- (ii) Is mainstream teaching experience prior to special education training associated with excellence?
- (iii) Is total teaching experience prior to special education training associated with excellence?
- (iv) Is total teaching experience in special education associated with excellence?
- (v) Are special education inservice courses associated with excellence in special education teaching?
- (vi) Is special education mentoring associated with excellence in special education teaching?
- (vii) Is belonging to a special education association or group associated with excellence in special education teaching?
- (viii) Is the reading of special education journals associated with excellence in special education teaching?
- (ix) Is age associated with excellence in special education teaching?
- (x) Are there other factors associated with excellence in special education teaching?

## Theoretical framework

Two theoretical assumptions have directed this study: the first concerns competencies whilst the second concerns training. Each has two aspects.

### (i) Competencies

- (a) A statement of competencies can encapsulate the professional qualities of a good special educator.
- (b) The NSW DSE draft discussion paper on competencies "Critical attributes for beginning special education teachers" (NSW DSE, 1994) encapsulates the professional qualities of a good special educator as required in NSW.

In Chapter 2, Review of the Literature, there is a discussion of the professional competency movement as well as the formulation, design and contents of competency statements. The selection of the NSW DSE list, referred to above, in order to identify excellent special educators, rather than one of the many other similar statements, is discussed in later chapters. This study uses the above as a base to investigate the following.

### (ii) Training

- (a) The best preparation for teachers in special education is postgraduate teacher training in special education following mainstream teacher training.
- (b) It is preferable that this postgraduate training be preceded by teaching experience.

Part (ii) (a), above, was stated by both the Commonwealth Government (Schools Council, 1989) and AASE (1988) and was, and is, implied through its practices by the NSW DSE. It is included in overseas statements, for example, that of the Council for Exceptional Children (1995) and by what has come to be known as the Salamanca Statement (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994), the name often given in special education circles to the "Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" written in Salamanca, Spain. All these statements and practices are fully discussed in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature.

Part (ii) (b) was stated by the National Council of AASE in 1988. The type of teaching experience was not specified. NSW AASE more recently (undated but thought to be 1988 or 1989) has stated, as its preferred option, training preceded by experience but it does also list other options. The NSW DSE preferred practice, shown by the cadetship program, does not take into account the type of teaching experience but does require at least two years of prior experience. However, the Commonwealth statement, referred to above, stipulates that this experience should be in mainstream or regular education. The Salamanca Statement accords with the Commonwealth statement. "Specialised training in special education needs leading to additional qualifications should normally be integrated with or preceded by training and experience as a regular education teacher ..." (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994, item 43).

The World Conference was jointly organised by the Government of Spain and UNESCO with the purpose of writing and subsequently obtaining Government signatories world-wide to an agreed statement of principles to be the basis for the development of special education internationally. This is, "The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education" (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994). However, whilst the AASE and Commonwealth statements value teaching experience prior to postgraduate training, because it is perceived that this leads to quality teaching, the statement made in Salamanca is not based on this value judgement but rather on other issues. The above quotation attributes other aspects of employment to the preference for training and experience, that is, "... in order to ensure complementarity and mobility" (section 43, p.8). It is not intended to pursue the reasoning behind this statement but rather to point out that again, for whatever reason, there is, and this time on the international stage, an acceptance of specialised training built on experience.

## **Rationale for the study**

It has already been stated that there is a copious amount of literature concerning the competencies needed by special educators and that this is discussed in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature. It has also been previously stated that there is little research concerning how these

competencies are best attained. Thus there is some general agreement concerning what constitutes a good special educator. The goal is stated; it is not known how best to get there. This research is about how best to reach the goal of excellence in special education teaching.

This is an early study in this area and so is breaking new ground and certainly not claiming to provide all the answers. Its major achievement may well be that it directs further research attention to this very important area.

Secondary to the above need to know how to reach the goal is the need to manage, in the most effective way possible, the limited financial resources that governments of necessity are able to allocate to special education. This includes teacher training in special education. In 1996, the NSW DSE allocated over \$4.6m for a postgraduate teacher training program, the special education cadetship program (McRae, 1996). This type of annual allocation has been made since 1974. The program has not been proven to be more effective than the other DSE sponsorship program, the special education scholarship program (introduced in 1989) which receives less than one-tenth of the cadetship allocation. The difference in expenditure appears to be based on the assumption that the experienced graduates will be better teachers than the inexperienced graduates and therefore that the cadetship program is a more responsible way of spending money.

Since 1994 the DSE, faced with the increasing need in the current climate of economic rationalism to justify its expenditure, has offered part-time special education cadetships for experienced teachers in special education teaching positions. These part-time cadetships cover a high proportion of the students' study costs and as well provide one day per week release from teaching duties for the purpose of course study. A similar amount of money per student is allocated for the training of a full-time inexperienced scholar who studies internally and a part-time experienced cadet who studies through distance education. The scholar completes the course in one year whilst the cadet, in the part-time program, normally takes two years. Even though the scholar is available more quickly as a fully qualified special educator, the evidence suggests that the DSE prefers the experienced teacher. There was a greater number of part-time cadetship students (77 in 1995, 111 in 1996) in the program than full-time scholars (35 in 1995, 1996 figure not published) (McRae, 1996).



This study has the potential to provide the NSW DSE and other similar bodies with a research-base for making policy decisions concerning both the training and selection of special education teachers as well as the allocation of funds and resources. The study also has the potential to inform the policies and practices of tertiary institutions which train special education teachers. Such information may influence both course content as well as the selection of students. Special education associations involved with the formulation of teacher education policies should also benefit from this study.

The above discussion demonstrates that this research study is stimulated by both theoretical and policy/practice issues. It is what Biddle and Anderson (in Wittrock, 1986, p.247) refer to as "grounded (or earthed) research". The questions it asks are of both theoretical and practical interest: the answers it seeks to provide have the potential to inform both policies and practice.

In broad terms the ideologies underlying the special education practices in the various Australian states are very similar. They are consistent also with those recently adopted in Salamanca, Spain (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994) concerning the major special education issues and particularly those relating to the rights of all children to an education, the emphasis on inclusive education and the need for a well-trained regular and special education teaching force. The timing and details of translating ideologies into practice may differ to some extent between the Australian states, and between the signatories to the Salamanca Report, but there is a remarkably large degree of congruence between the different special education systems within developed countries. This means that this research study, set in NSW, Australia, has relevance to systems much further afield.

### **Limitations of the study**

There are a number of limitations to this study. The major limitation is that the study is based on the participants' **perceptions**. These perceptions concern professional appraisal and the contributors to the participants' individual professional development. All that can be

responsibly claimed is that the stated perceptions represented reality for the participants at the time they were made.

Another major limitation of this study concerns the nature of the sample and the sample size. The broad research question is of such significance in the special education world that a larger sample of special educators drawn from at least a number of Australian states would have done greater justice to the imperative for this type of research. The results of such a study might be more compelling in their influence on policies and practices. However, it was considered that a NSW state-wide study would be able to illuminate to a worthwhile extent what is currently a little-researched area, to provoke the querying of long-held assumptions and resulting practices and to provide a basis for larger-scale Australian and overseas studies.

Whilst this research was restricted to NSW, there were also some sampling restrictions within NSW. It was the writer's intention to collect data from as large a sample of special educators as possible throughout the State. Two factors affected this intention: the first related to the DSE requirements for conducting research; the second arose from the writer's knowledge of the nature of the NSW school system and culture, in particular that pertaining to special education. The writer has had long experience as a special education teacher and as a school and system administrator much of this being in NSW. This is explained further below.

In the NSW DSE a state-wide study requires the approval of the Quality Assurance Directorate which might, in giving this, stipulate certain conditions. One of the conditions that this writer was required to observe was that the special educators and their special education supervisors (who were being asked to cooperate by also completing a questionnaire) should not be approached directly but rather through their school principal. In the case of the supervisors this meant a *two-gate* approval system. The principal, on receiving the questionnaires, could, if he/she so decided, not pass them on. If they were passed on, they then needed the approval of the special education supervisor, that is, a special educator in a senior position who had supervisory responsibilities for three to five special educators. At this stage the supervisor could decide not to complete his/her questionnaire. If the decision was to cooperate then that

supervisor completed his/her questionnaire and passed on the teacher's questionnaire to one of his/her staff. There was thus a *three-gate* approval system in terms of the teachers. The principal, the supervisor and finally the teacher each needed to approve cooperation before the teacher's questionnaire was completed. This whole process meant that the return rate of completed questionnaires could not be expected to be as high as could have been expected had the questionnaires been sent directly to the intended recipients.

The nature of this research required that questionnaires be sent in pairs, a Supervisor Questionnaire with a Teacher Questionnaire. Each supervisor in NSW was, through his/her principal, asked to cooperate by completing a questionnaire, part of which contained appraisal questions about a supervisee (a special education teacher supervised by that supervisor). The supervisor was also asked to pass on the Teacher Questionnaire, part of which contained parallel self appraisal questions. Each questionnaire was estimated to take approximately half an hour to complete. It was considered unlikely that many, if any, supervisors would be willing to spend more than half an hour completing the questionnaire, that is, it was considered unlikely that they would be willing to complete more than one questionnaire about one of their supervisees. Thus whilst all special education supervisors in the State were asked to cooperate in the study, only one teacher per supervisor was asked to cooperate. Isolated special educators, that is, those who do not have special education supervisors, because there are fewer than three special education positions within the school (this number does not generate a special education supervisor), were not asked to participate in the study. These teachers are supervised by a senior mainstream educator. It would be unlikely that there was anyone in a supervisory position in that school who could knowledgeably appraise their teaching from a special education perspective. The need for the *pairing* of supervisors and teachers meant that whilst all special education supervisors in NSW were invited to participate not all special education teachers were so invited.

As already stated a major part of the questionnaires to both supervisors and to teachers involved appraisal of the teacher. Whilst the questionnaires were anonymous and returned in separate envelopes by the supervisors and the teachers, the concerns that are held by many

teachers about professional appraisal (Cavenagh, 1994) and the vulnerability that many would have felt on receipt of the questionnaire, were recognised. The writer felt concern that some would be reluctant to cooperate by completing the questionnaire. A novel attempt (discussed in Chapter 3) was made to make participation as attractive and non-threatening as possible.

The above explains the anticipated difficulties in obtaining a high percentage of questionnaire returns from a cross-section of special education supervisors and teachers. As all supervisors within NSW DSE were invited to participate it was still expected that a more than adequate number of responses would be received.

It was also expected that one particular group of special educators would be underrepresented. These were those who were either itinerant (some teachers of students with vision, hearing or behavioural/emotional disabilities) or taught in two or more schools (some teachers of students with learning difficulties). All of these teachers had one school nominated as their base school. Many of these teachers were in the isolated situation described above and so these teachers did not receive a questionnaire. Of those who were not isolated (their base school had a special education supervisor) it was possible that their special education supervisors may not have felt that they knew the teachers' work adequately to responsibly appraise those teachers. There could thus be a lower representation of these itinerant teachers than of special educators teaching in the one school only. This lower representation was most likely to occur in relation to the teachers of students with learning difficulties for, in 1994, when the data were being collected, there were no supervisors teaching in the area of learning difficulties. This was the only teaching area in special education that did not, prior to 1996, have senior teaching positions. It was anticipated that the supervisors who responded to the questionnaires may have encouraged questionnaire partnership with a teacher with whose teaching area they felt more familiar.

Within the limitations described above, it was assumed that there would be a proportional representation of special educators according to the students being taught in terms of age, level and, in most cases, type of disability as well as the type of setting and service. An examination of the demographic aspects of the questionnaire responses will establish

whether representation was adequate. This examination is carried out in Chapter 5, Data Analysis: Description of Stage 1 Participants.

It is not as easy, however to confirm whether the sample was representative in terms of teacher performance, that is, that there was a range of teacher competence in the respondents that equated with the range of performance in the whole special education teaching community in NSW. It was considered that only those confident about their teaching might have chosen to participate in this study which required a willingness not only to expose themselves to their own professional appraisal but also to that of their supervisors. Teacher appraisal in the 1994 (and current) education climate in NSW was a very sensitive issue and one which the NSW Teachers Federation was reluctant to see as a condition of employment. It is not known if special education teachers, as a distinct group, in any way differed from the general teaching population in this regard. It was accepted as possible that the teacher respondents might not represent a cross-section of the special education teaching profession's competence but every effort was made to ensure that the group was as representative as was possible.

Attempts were made in three ways to overcome any reluctance to complete the teacher questionnaire by those who may have felt less able professionally. Firstly, in the covering letter which explained the study, its importance was highlighted as was the need for a representative sample. Secondly, participants were assured of a process to guarantee anonymity and that the two appraisers (the teacher and the supervisor) would not need to see each other's responses. Thirdly, because there was only one special education teacher involved for each supervisor, it was decided that rather than have a teacher entirely self-select (this teacher would probably be the most confident and therefore possibly the most able teacher) the supervisors were asked to give the Teacher Questionnaire to the teacher whose surname was closest to the beginning of the alphabet of those who were willing to participate. It is impossible to make an informed judgement about the effectiveness of these attempts. It can only be assumed that the respondents do represent a cross-sample of special education teachers in terms of their professional performance. This representation is discussed in Chapter 5, Data Analysis: Description of Stage 1 Participants.

This study examined only some of the aspects that can be regarded as associated with the professional development of special educators. They are the aspects that the participants themselves individually generated, or which are traditionally associated with professional development and thus were generated by this writer. This latter largely includes teacher training and other forms of training and teaching experience. It does not include the context of the actual school in which the teacher is working. This would necessitate an examination such as the one carried out by Retallick and his colleagues (NBEET, 1994), of the culture, organisation and other aspects of each school.

### **Background of the writer**

The writer's professional experience in special education has both prompted this study and provided it with a base of knowledge. Her experience in special education spans a period of more than twenty years, in two different state systems and with various levels of responsibility in each. Thus she has both a special education classroom understanding as well as a system perspective. She is particularly familiar with NSW DSE special education provisions and teacher training activities.

### **Assumptions**

This research study required the appraisal of a large number of special educators so that those who were excellent in this cohort could be identified. This identification was a prerequisite for the investigation of how these teachers became excellent. Two assumptions were made in this process of identification. The first concerned the instrument to be used whilst the second concerned the users of this instrument.

As noted above, it was assumed that the NSW draft discussion paper of competencies "Critical Attributes for Beginning Special Education Teachers" (NSW DSE, 1994) was a valid statement or list of competencies and encapsulated the attributes, that is, the skills, knowledge and attitudes that were needed by special educators. Whilst it was developed in NSW for NSW special education teachers, its application could be more far-reaching than this. The list is one of the many developed throughout the world during the last three decades. In broad terms there are many

similarities between most of the lists in relation to content although not necessarily in the way the content is arranged. Detailed discussion concerning competencies statements is included in the Review of the Literature chapter. It was assumed that the NSW competency statement was a valid and appropriate statement to use in this NSW research. An explanation of the design process as well as its contents, is included in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature.

Having chosen the instrument to use in the appraisal activity, it was then assumed that the most effective means, and that which was most acceptable to the teachers being invited to participate, was to use the instrument as a means of self appraisal (by the special education teachers) and peer appraisal (by their special education supervisors). It was unlikely that any other appraisal method would have both given credibility to this process and been acceptable to the teachers involved (Cavenagh, 1994). Appraisal methods are also discussed in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature. The reasons for the selection of this particular methodology are further discussed in Chapter 3.

In using the above appraisal procedure, it was assumed that both the teachers and the supervisors using the appraisal instrument would be able to appraise performance accurately. Because widespread appraisal procedures were not usual in NSW DSE schools in 1994, formal self appraisal would not have been a familiar activity for most of the teachers. Likewise, the nature and extent of the teacher appraisal would not have been a familiar activity for most of the supervisors. For this reason a pilot process was undertaken (see Chapter 3 for elaboration).

The survey instruments used focussed to a considerable extent on teacher training both formal at the tertiary level and through inservice courses. The quality of the various courses was not judged or compared. It was assumed that all university postgraduate courses formed an homogeneous group and that the same applied to inservice courses. Because the respondents came from all areas of NSW they would, as a group, have been exposed to a whole range of courses run by different people and institutions. It was reasonable to expect that some of these would have been good and some not so good but that the size and geographical spread of the sample would ensure a balanced representation.

Finally, the broad research question implied the assumption that there **are** identifiable factors associated with excellence in special education. The factors researched demonstrate, through the content of the questionnaires, some assumptions about these, particularly as they relate to training and experience. However, the content of the questions was based on a thorough search of the relevant literature as outlined in the next chapter.

### **Concepts, definitions and abbreviations used in this thesis**

The concepts and terms used in this thesis to describe aspects of special education are those commonly used in the NSW government school system. Most of these are also common to other Australian states. Some, however, are different from those used further afield and thus need clarification. The abbreviations are idiosyncratic to NSW DSE.

Special education in NSW includes all the educational provisions designed to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties, intellectual and physical disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders and hearing and vision impairments. Learning difficulties are defined as those difficulties experienced by some students who are within the normal ability range or higher but have difficulties in learning in one or more specific areas, most commonly reading, spelling, mathematics.

It should be noted that educational provisions for gifted and talented students, as well as those for students for whom English is not the home language, are not included in the special education system in NSW unless these students also have a learning difficulty or disability.

By far the largest provider of special education services in NSW is the State government. The majority of schools within the private education sector either provide no services to students other than perhaps to a few experiencing some relatively low level learning difficulties, or endeavour to accommodate students with disabilities within the regular classroom but without specialist intervention. There are a very few outstanding private schools which provide for students with a particular disability such as autism, hearing and vision impairment. As these numbers are very small and as the State system provides the very large majority of special education services in NSW, only teachers within this system were invited to participate in this research. All references to *schools* are to



schools within the NSW State system. The term *generalist* has been explained earlier in this chapter.

This research is about special educators. To avoid unnecessary repetition many references to special education teachers will be to them simply as *teachers*. The same will apply to the term *supervisors*. Likewise references to *teacher training* will mean, unless stated otherwise, teacher training in special education. References to other than special education will use the terms *mainstream education*, *mainstream teacher*, *mainstream teacher training*. The term *mainstream* is deliberately used in preference to *regular* which has the connotation that not-regular is *irregular*: special education is not this.

References in this study to postgraduate courses are to those special education programs offered by universities for teachers who are already qualified to teach in preschools, primary or secondary schools, that is, they have a preservice qualification. These teachers may be either experienced or inexperienced teachers, the important characteristic being that they are already qualified mainstream teachers. The postgraduate qualification received is usually a Graduate Diploma (Special Education), a Bachelor of Education (Special Education), a Master of Special Education or has some other similar title. The very large majority of teachers who are trained special educators have completed such courses. A few teachers have completed a full undergraduate course in special education. This has led to a special education qualification recognised by Departments of Education for employment as a special educator, or a combined primary and special education qualification thus giving the recipient a dual qualification. Undergraduate qualifications in special education are very rare. The large majority of teachers recognised by NSW DSE as being qualified special educators have a postgraduate qualification. This study will use the term *postgraduate* to denote all who are formally qualified in special education.

Several other terms and abbreviations, which need explanation, are used in this thesis. Most were used in the questionnaires and are well-known to teachers within NSW DSE. Definitions and abbreviations used are as follows.

Types of special educators:

- class teachers - special educators who have their own class of students;
- support teachers - special educators who work with a number of mainstream educators in a collaborative, consultative or team teaching role.

Class or support categories:

- LD - learning difficulties (in NSW within the normal range of intellectual ability but having a specific difficulty with one or more learning areas)
- IM - mild intellectual disability
- IO - moderate intellectual disability
- IS - severe intellectual disability
- BD - behaviour disorder (Note that in the analysis this included ED - emotional disorder.)
- V - vision impairment
- H - hearing impairment
- P - physical disability
- L - language disability
- IR - intensive reading
- ESS - early school support (5-8 years)
- EC - early childhood
- CD - conduct disorders

Inservice courses, as described in this study:

- major inservice - a DSE course of at least eight weeks of part-time study;
- short inservice - less than the above, usually from one hour duration to one or two days.

Terms and abbreviations used in Chapter 7, Data Analysis: Qualitative Analysis of the Case Studies:

- childhood (any event in childhood that contributed to learning);
- intrinsic (innate or personal characteristics or attributes);
- undergraduate training (original training as a mainstream teacher including the practicum component of such a course), abbreviation - ug;
- mainstream teaching (teaching experience in mainstream education), abbreviation - m exp;
- postgraduate training (formal university training in special education regarded by NSW DSE as full professional training in special education including the practicum component of such a course), abbreviation - pg;
- special education experience (teaching experience in special education), abbreviation - se exp;
- peers in school (learning from teachers and special education aides within the teacher's school);
- outside peers (learning from any professional colleague, including therapists, not in the teacher's school);
- inservice (all inservice courses, seminars, conferences held by NSW DSE);
- DSE documents (any policy, curriculum or other NSW DSE document);
- own reading (all reading that has not been "set" by another, for example, during a DSE or university course), abbreviation - own read;
- formal associations (membership of any formal professional association);

- conferences (all conferences not held by NSW DSE);
- competency (one of the 22 professional competencies listed by NSW DSE), abbreviation - comp.

Miscellaneous:

- generalist - a teacher who has been trained and/or teaches in any area of special education other than sensory impairment and early childhood;
- postgraduate training - in this study this refers to any university special education training that qualifies teachers as special educators in NSW;
- teachers - to save continual repetition of "special education" prior to "teacher", teachers in this area are often referred to simply as "teachers". Teachers, in this study, are those in non-promotional positions;
- supervisors - in this study, refers to special educators who are in promotional positions and have supervisory responsibilities in relation to the teachers;
- mainstream - school education other than special education. Often the term used in the literature is "regular" education. The writer's preference for "mainstream" has been previously explained;
- CBTE - competency based teacher education, that is teacher education which aims at the development of specified competencies, these usually being stated in behaviouristic terms;
- IEP - individual education plan (sometimes also referred to as individual education program). Special education is committed to the notion that each child must have his/her own unique plan for learning.

## Structure of the thesis

This research report is structured in such a way that the reader is taken step-by-step from conceptualisation and context to conclusion. This chapter has explained the conceptualisation and context of the study. Chapter 2 is concerned with a review of the literature. Chapters 3 and 4 present and discuss the research design and methodologies. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the findings. Chapter 8 is concerned with the convergence and discussion of these. Chapter 9 presents a summary statement of the findings, discusses their implications and suggests areas for future research.

The large majority of tables and figures are included throughout the body of this document so that they can be referred to with ease. Thus appendices have been kept to a minimum. Definitions of special education terms and abbreviations have been stated in this present chapter. A number of non-special education terms are used in a special way, for example, *factor*. These are explained at their first usage.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is two-fold. Firstly, the writer has sought to provide a background summary of the research and other literature relating to the various aspects of this study. Secondly, the writer has sought to show the way in which the several major decisions made in the formulation of this study are based on, or arise from, the literature. These two endeavours are not separated in the following discussion.

This study asks the question "What are the factors associated with excellence in special education teaching?" The two key words, in terms of this review, are *factors* and *excellence*. The term *factors* has a broad connotation in this study. It includes anything which contributes to the personal professional expertise of the special education teacher. It does not include factors external to the teacher such as smaller classes, a more supportive administration, more generous resourcing. Nor does it specifically examine the context of the workplace.

*Excellence*, as used in this study encompasses, or is related to, the same concepts as those contained in the terms *quality*, *competence*, *effective teaching* and *best practice(s)*. These latter terms will at times be used, not as synonyms for *excellence*, but because they convey the same broad underlying meaning, are all related to maximising student learning and are variously associated with particular educational movements, ideals or issues. Thus the *quality* debate, a topic of current interest in Australia, is about ensuring an excellent or competent teaching force which will, in turn, ensure maximum student learning.

In order to determine the association of the *factors* and *excellence* it was necessary to identify a group of excellent special educators and then

examine the factors that contributed to their professional development. This identification required teacher appraisal. Thus teacher appraisal methods are also reviewed in this chapter. Not reviewed here is the literature concerning the actual design and methodologies employed in this study. These are explained in Chapters 3 and 4.

Thus this review examines the literature concerning the following three areas:

- the meaning of excellence in teaching including special education teaching;
- the factors stated to be associated with the development of professional excellence in teaching including in special education teaching;
- ways of appraising teachers including special educators.

They are reviewed in the above order.

This study is about special educators and so this will be the focus of this review. However, at times there will be considerable reference to mainstream teachers and teaching. This will be done to highlight or contrast a special education practice, to show an historical development from mainstream education to special education, to discuss issues which are equally relevant to both mainstream and special education or because there is a paucity of relevant research directly relating to special education. This last point is particularly relevant to special education in Australia. The focus will usually be on the generalist special educator who is able to teach across categories of disability rather than the special educator who is trained and teaches in one particular disability area only. In Australia most special educators are generalist special educators.

The discussion of each of the above three topic areas will initially take a broad international perspective with emphasis, because of the comparative amount of research, on that of the United States. This broad perspective will then narrow to Australia, firstly concerning mainstream education and then narrow further to special education. The literature concerning the above three areas will now be discussed and this discussion will conclude with a summary statement that synthesises the

research in the three areas in terms of its influence in directing this research study.

## **The meaning of excellence in teaching and in special education teaching**

### **Introduction**

Concern about effective teaching and its relationship to the quality of student learning has permeated the research and literature in education for many decades. The following historical background concentrates on recent decades, namely the 1950s to the 1990s. Over this period the issue has received major attention which has had ramifications in attempts to review and improve classroom practice, school offerings and organisation and teacher education programs. Some understanding of this historical background is relevant to this study which uses an Australian competency statement. The current concepts concerning effective or competent teaching and the contributors to this have their roots in earlier movements.

### **An historical perspective of the effective teacher**

Prior to the 1960s the prevailing concern was that the teacher, as well as having demonstrable teaching skills, be a worthy person living a moral life. The philosophy and ideas expressed by Dewey (1938, 1966) in relation to the education of the whole child, found a ready audience. This was particularly the case in the United States. Hamachek in 1969 (p.343) expressed the pre-behaviourist perspective when, in his interpretation of the research, he stated "A good teacher is a good person." and "A good teacher rather likes life, is reasonably at peace with himself, has a sense of humour and enjoys other people."

He discussed other specific attributes associated with being a good teacher these including, honour and a democratic, positive, empathic approach to life. "People grow, flourish and develop much more easily when in relationship with someone who projects an inherent trust and



belief in their capacity to become what they have the potential to become” (p.345).

Hamachek (1969) referred to the work of other notable humanist writers such as Bass in 1929, Bousfield in 1940, Cogan in 1958 and Combs in 1965, all of whom expressed similar ideas. These ideas had a minor resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s with the promotion of the conviction that a good teacher must necessarily strive for his/her own personal growth (Doyle, 1990).

The middle of the century saw the beginnings of a marked philosophical change in the United States. The work of Skinner (1953), followed by such behaviourism advocates as Becker, Engelmann and Carnine, was influential in changing the personal attributes emphasis concerning what constitutes a good teacher, the focus becoming what a teacher *does* rather than what a teacher *is*. This has had a continuing impact on special education which, in the United States and to varying extents in the states of Australia, has linked teacher effectiveness with skills-based student outcomes. The United States competency-based teacher education (CBTE) movement of the 1970s developed rapidly as an offshoot of this. Bowden and Masters (1993) pointed out that in 1971 there were 22 CBTE courses but that within five years this number had grown to over 6,000. Despite this growth, there was mixed reception of CBTE. It did, however, have a marked impact on the development, within the United States, of special education teacher competency lists. The term *lists* is used here because the majority were written in this format and with a checklist appearance. An examination of those since the 1970s will demonstrate this emphasis (in the United States) on precisely-stated workplace behaviours (Cullinan, Epstein and Schultz, 1986; Fink and Janssen, 1993; Graves, Landers, Lokerson, Luchow and Horvath, 1993; DeFur and Taymans, 1995).

This behaviourist approach has, in general, dominated the previously-discussed humanist approach. For more than three decades there has been much less emphasis on the personal qualities and beliefs of teachers and much more on actual instructional performance within the classroom. It is important to note, however, that during the last decade there has been some growing uneasiness, particularly in regular education, about skills-based direct instruction methodologies. This is now finding some resolution in the current Australian approach to the development of

teacher competency standards (National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, 1996a). This will be discussed further. Because the United States was the leader in the skills-based approach, the following research references and comments, both from opponents and proponents, have emanated from that country.

Coker's (1976, p.54) statement that "teacher effectiveness must be measured in terms of changes in pupils that are attributable to the teacher's help" has been the assumption underlying the teacher effectiveness research. Effective or competent teachers are those who demonstrate a number of teaching characteristics that correlate with student success. It is seldom acknowledged that the relationships identified are correlational, not necessarily causal.

A number of authors have questioned the methodologies and empirical validity of much of the effective teacher and best practice research. Coker (1976, p.55), in writing of the research on teacher effectiveness, claimed that "despite hundreds of references to the problem in the literature only a few teacher characteristics have ever been shown to relate to teacher effectiveness."

Lists of effective teaching practices have been devised in one of two ways: based on the advice of experts; based on the observation, documentation and examination of teacher behaviours in classrooms in which students are perceived to be making good skills gains. Both approaches can be challenged.

Blanton and Fimian (1986) criticised the approach of basing lists of effective practices on what is considered to be expert opinion. The expert opinion commonly came from those removed from the actual classroom teaching situation such as teacher educators, curriculum developers, psychologists. Perhaps, as Coker argued (1976), the best people to devise such lists are the classroom teachers themselves. Similarly, the observation/documentation method can be criticised. It can show correlations only, is very restricted in the student skills measured and is open to observer discrepancies.

The most commonly cited characteristics of effective teaching practice associated with high student outcomes in both regular and special

education are positive expectations of students (Bickel and Bickel, 1986), good organisation (Stevens and Rosenshine, 1981), the assumption of a direct and active teaching role (Good, 1979; Stallings, 1980; Rosenshine, 1981), guided practice (Berliner, 1984), frequent and rapid questioning (Sindelar, Espin, Smith and Harriman, 1990), maintenance of a high level of academic learning time (Berliner, 1984; Sindelar et al., 1990), attention to pacing and incremental steps (Berliner, 1984) and teaching for success (Stevens and Rosenshine, 1981; Berliner, 1984). These practices are characteristic of direct instruction and mastery learning methodologies. They are closely associated with skills acquisition, both academic and functional.

At times, however, results of this type of research are in conflict. Stallings (1980) found that time spent on silent reading was negatively associated with achievement gains: Leinhardt, Zigmond and Cooley (1981) found the opposite. Berliner (1984) found benefit in waiting for students to answer questions: Sindelar et al. (1990) found the requirement of short prompt answers to be more beneficial. Some of the above-listed best practices serve to develop lower order thinking, are relevant to rote learning, do not generalise readily and do not promote the higher cognitive skills associated with problem solving. This is of concern to many special educators, especially those with students who have learning difficulties and mild intellectual disability. Such concern is evidenced by the increasing attention being paid to research in cognition and metacognition (Cole and Chan, 1990).

Despite the above concern, the belief that an effective teacher is one who can demonstrate certain skills continues to influence concepts of quality teaching, particularly quality special education teaching, and is closely connected with the current competency movement in education. The competency movement is not new. In fact, as early as 1957 the United States Commission on Teacher Education developed an inventory of 148 competencies (King, 1994). From that time such inventories have proliferated in both regular and special education. Their development and use, however, are currently at a level not previously experienced. In 1993, Collins wrote "Competencies are the focal concept in the world of education and training in Australia at this moment ..." (p.3). This statement remains relevant in 1996. In 1996, professional competencies in

education are also a major focus, although perhaps not the prime one, in Britain, some European countries and in the United States.

The issue of quality in education is receiving more attention than ever before (Ramsey and Algozinne, 1991; Field and Field, 1994). This has resulted in widespread reforms and restructuring both within Australia, for example, in the 1988 NSW DSE "Schools Renewal" and their 1995 reorganisation, and overseas, for example, in New Zealand, the 1988 "Tomorrows' Schools" reforms and the 1989 "Education Act". In Great Britain there has been "The Education Reform Act" of 1988 and there is now the "Improving School Initiative". These reforms should be viewed in the global context of economic, social and political ambition, unrest and dissatisfaction. This has resulted in both community and government questioning of the value of existing structures and services. Walker and his colleagues (Walker, Hughes, Mitchell and Traill, 1995, p.13), in discussing Australia's and other countries' preoccupation in the 1980s with the quality of teaching, wrote "Education was seen as an essential ingredient in improving a nation's economic competitiveness, and the quality of teaching was seen as fundamental to the quality of education."

The quality debate in education, both in Australia (Schools Council, 1989) and overseas (Field and Field, 1994) is largely a debate about **teacher** quality. Within this there has been a particular focus on teacher education. Long established practices and content of courses are being questioned. General opinion is that if teachers are better prepared their students will make greater gains in learning basic skills and therefore will be better able to enter the workforce. On the international scene there has been a proliferation of major changes in initial teacher education within the last decade.

Britain has expressed its dissatisfaction with traditional tertiary teacher preparation by introducing a school-based mentor system which, to some small extent, is reminiscent of the apprenticeship system of the early years of this century (Harvard and Dunn, 1992). Begun in 1992, it implies, through its requirement of 66% of teacher preparation time being in schools, that an effective teacher is largely the product of hands-on skills training (Field and Field, 1994). This concern about the relative weighting of school-based experience and theoretical knowledge acquisition in teacher preparation courses is not confined to Britain. In Australia,

Turney and his colleagues (Turney, Eltis, Toyles and Wright, 1986, p.vii) stated:

Today the professional preparation of teachers has two significant distinctions: the gap between the theoretical knowledge taught in teacher education programs and the experiences of student teachers in the practicum : and the gap between both the theoretical and practical learning of student teachers and the real world of work to be undertaken by teachers in today's schools and those of the future.

The United States National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, established in 1987 (King, 1994), is currently moving towards a national teacher accreditation system for beginning teachers which requires the satisfactory completion of post-university or college pre-employment written tests, these including sections relating to basic skills acquisition by the prospective teacher. This is part of the education reform movement which was prompted by the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education report, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" and strengthened by the 1986 publication by the Holmes Group, "Tomorrow's Teachers" (Roth and Popho, 1990). Such competency testing is designed to ensure the maintenance of standards for entry into the profession of teaching and to expedite the transportability of teacher qualifications from state to state. Already in special education, 48 of the 50 American states have teacher competency testing prior to appointment. This testing is discussed further in the third section of this literature review, that is, the section on teacher appraisal.

In special education the quality debate is made even more imperative because of the strong emergence over the last two decades of the human rights movement. This has strengthened the call for the provision of quality for all including those marginalised by learning and other disabilities. The call has been heeded to the extent that in some countries the educational rights of children have been enshrined in legislation, notably in the United States with Public Law (PL) 94-142, "The Education For All Handicapped Children Act" and its amendments PL 101-476, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act"; in Britain "The Education Act" of 1981 influenced by the Warnock Report of 1978, "Special Education Needs: The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People" (Ashman and Elkins, 1994); in New Zealand "The Human Rights Act" of 1993 (Mitchell,

1994). Whilst most other countries do not have comparable legislation, a significant number do have policy statements, many of which are seen as inviolable. All Australian states have such statements. In NSW there is the "Special Education Policy" (DSE, 1993, p.4) which "acknowledges that every child with a disability, learning difficulty or behaviour disorder has the right to attend the regular neighbourhood school where this is possible and practicable and in the best interests of the child."

At the international level the "Statement on Principles, Policy, and Practice in Special Needs Education", together with the "Draft Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994), has the potential to be far-reaching. It clearly expounds to the world community the rights of all children to a quality education that responds to their individual needs. Quality teacher education is one of the prerequisites, many would argue the major prerequisite, of quality education.

### **The international professional competency movement in education**

It is useful to consider this competency movement in the context of the broader international workplace competency movement. There has been a growing intent in many developed countries to define more accurately workplace standards, both vocational and professional. In the United States these are often referred to as "workplace know-how", in the United Kingdom they are called "core skills" and in New Zealand they are known as "essential skills" (Borthwick, 1993, p.30). The United States also uses the term *competency* (or *competencies*) in education, particularly special education. Although the term has been used there for at least four decades (King, 1994), in recent years it has gained more attention. It has, in fact, largely replaced the term *effective teaching*. It is accepted that a competent teacher is an effective teacher and a competent, or quality, teaching profession will ensure that students achieve maximum positive learning outcomes.

The term *competency* (or its synonyms) has been variously defined according to the prevailing social and cultural context as well as the particular philosophical perspective of the definer. It is a "social construct developed by particular people at a particular time" (Preston and

Kennedy, 1995, p.30). Thus it is very much both person and situation related. All definitions concern those attributes (or other term depending on the user's perspective) which are seen as essential to effectiveness as a worker. It is usual that these be in the context of the worker entering a trade or profession and so are stated as essential beginning competencies. The large majority variously include one or more of the following: skills, knowledge, attitudes, understandings, capacities, capabilities. Those individuals and committees which believe competencies must be observable and *checkable* will inevitably devise a definition which is largely skills-based. This is often translated into a list of skill behaviours. Those who believe that competencies include other attributes as well as skills, will describe aspects which are less easy to demonstrate and to some may be seen as esoteric. There is thus a difference in competency statements formulated by those who are predominantly concerned with what teachers *do* (behaviourists), those who are most concerned with what teachers *think* (cognitivists) and those who emphasise what teachers *are* (humanists). The issues of definition are crucial to the formulation of special educator competencies and hence will be more fully addressed below, particularly as they relate to special education.

### **The international special education competency movement**

Lists of professional competencies for special educators, as for educators in general, have usually been drawn up in one of four ways (Fields, 1987): compilation based on a review of good teaching practices; amalgamation or modification of existing lists; surveys using a particular interest group; procedures using a group of experts generally with different perspectives. Lists may then be validated, or field-tested, using opinion from a further group such as classroom practitioners (Zane, Sulzer-Azaroff, Handen and Fox, 1982; Swan and Sirvis, 1992; NSW DSE, 1994). Whitten and Westling (1985) and Blanton (1992) found expert opinion followed by professional validation to be the most productive way of developing sets of competencies.

This expert opinion/professional validation process is likely to be lengthy because it is a multi-stage technique. Whilst the large majority of competency lists have been developed in this way, it is unusual for the developmental process then to include the type of psychometrical

procedures used by Blanton and Fimian (1986) to determine the internal consistency of items.

Arguably the most important list for special educators is that developed by the United States-based Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), "What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Certification of Special Education Teachers" (CEC, 1995). This Council "is the largest professional organisation internationally committed to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities" (CEC, 1995, inside cover). Currently, this is the major list worldwide because of the extent of its development and validation process, its intention to be applicable internationally and the fact that it is both generic and specific. The 1995 publication includes the previously developed individual statements, that is, the non-categorical or generalist statement, "Common Core of Knowledge and Skills Essential for all Beginning Special Education Teachers" (Swan and Sirvis, 1992) and the additional lists concerning specific specialisations, for example, "The Development of Knowledge and Skill Statements for Teachers of Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing" (Easterbrooks and Radaszewski-Byrne, 1995). The development and validation process of the former involved over 2000 CEC members and took three years to complete. Development of the eight specialist competency statements followed a similarly rigorous process. The brief of the nine committees referred to a set of "Knowledge and Skills". All items are listed under these two headings, their actual wording not, however, being entirely restricted to this nor as restricted to demonstrable behaviours as with some previous lists.

Whilst the development of the CEC (1995) list is an international landmark in special education, and whilst it is probable that many Australian special educators would regard it highly (as does this writer), it does not, in either its format or contents, accord with Australian thinking about teacher competencies (as this has been expressed in relation to education in general). The contents and structure of competency lists cannot be generalised from one country to another. The CEC list is valuable but it is a starting point only. Its contents must be examined in relation to the uniqueness of each particular setting. Its emphasis on skills in its 107 generalist competencies and its restricted style of formatting is at



variance with both the earlier 1990s Australian statements and particularly with the 1996 statements of the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL, 1996a).

The inclusions in the various United States special education competency statements have a considerable degree of similarity. Most lists contain a small number of broad domains, the majority of these falling within the three (Blanton, 1992) to 13 (Graves, 1993) range. Hudson, Morsink, Branscum and Boone (1987) reviewed 57 citations, written over a 20 year period, which they then reduced to 16 broad competencies arranged within five domains, these being general/specific knowledge, planning/evaluation, curriculum content, clinical teaching strategies, behaviour management.

Nine years later, with the increasing emphasis in special education on consultancy and collaboration, it is likely that such a list would include this as a sixth domain. In fact these two areas are included in several recent lists such as those developed by Glomb (1991), the NSW DSE (1994) and the CEC (1995). Hornby, Wickham and Zielinski (1991) in their review of the British literature identified a list of 46 competencies which they then placed into seven domains, one of which was Counselling and Consultation. Whilst domains are variously categorised and their contents differently ascribed, in general, they include, expressed in one way or another, most of the following broad areas:

- philosophical/political/ethical/legal/historical/advocacy issues;
- characteristics of the learners;
- assessment and evaluation of learning;
- learning theories, teaching methodologies and strategies;
- program development, design and implementation;
- behaviour/classroom management;
- resource management;
- collaboration/consultation/working in teams including with parents.

A number of competencies statements exist in Great Britain. In 1990 the National Association for Special Education Needs (NASEN) developed their "Guidelines to the Content of Teachers' Courses in Special Education Needs" (Mittler, 1993). Three years later Mittler (1993) updated his 1987 list, "Initial List of Training Areas for Staff in Special Schools and Units", publishing this under the auspices of NASEN. This is a simple list of broad content areas to be covered in special education courses and is not a list of competencies as would be envisaged by either the United States or Australia. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA), appointed by the Secretary of State, is currently developing standards for newly-qualified teachers (as well as three other teacher groups). Within this, the Special Education Needs Consortium is preparing a report which will include a list of "Competencies of Teachers in Special Educational Needs" (Lawlor, 1996). Concern has been expressed "that standards (are) more explicit without resorting to a narrow competency-based approach" (Lawlor, 1996).

This concern has been felt by many within Britain and elsewhere. Both Hamachek (1969) and Bruininks (1977) in the United States were early advocates that competency statements should not depict teachers as technicians who merely implement prescribed practices but rather as professionals with essential personal characteristics. Helldin (1993), writing of Norway and Sweden, described the effective special educator as an inspired human being. In Britain, Barton, Barrett, Whitty, Miles and Furlong (1994, p.538) cautioned that "specifying particular competencies (will) encourage restricted rather than extended notions of professionalism and professionalism."

Other concerns about the possible use, or misuse, of sets of competencies have been expressed by many educators. This is particularly so at the tertiary teacher education level, where there has been a long history of CBTE (Gable et al., 1992). Blanton (1992, p.91), also in the United States, stated:

Although the development of competencies does not promote a technological orientation in and of itself, the persistent use of competency lists can create a number of problems if there is an absence of discussion or debate regarding how competencies are translated into teacher education programs.

Early special education lists in the United States were mostly designed to describe the competencies required by teachers of students with a particular disability. More recently a view has emerged which favours a generic perspective. This arises from the belief that what is sound teaching practice in one area of special education, or in education generally, is sound teaching practice in most other areas (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1977; Lilly, 1977; Reynolds, 1979). Thus there has been a gradual increase in the number of states which have non-categorical special education certification. This is particularly so concerning mild disabilities (Reynolds, 1990; Elliott, Cobb, Powers and Voltz, 1991). Perhaps the move reflects the preferred non-categorical approach to the teaching of students in special education. The trend is not without opposition for there are some advocacy groups, particularly in the area of learning difficulties, which believe that students' interests are best served by teachers specialising in one special education category (Cobb, Elliott, Powers and Voltz, 1989). The underlying concept of the CEC (1995) list is that all special educators need a foundation of certain skills and knowledge and that this should be augmented with skills and knowledge relevant to the specific disability teaching area.

In practical terms generalist certification in special education has the advantage of allowing more flexible teacher employment placements in response to students' needs. This is particularly applicable to Australia with its areas of sparse population. Thus in NSW, and indeed throughout Australia, the very large majority of post-graduate courses in special education are generalist with the exception only of courses in visual and hearing impairment and early childhood special education, these being by their nature areas of intense and unique specialisation.

### **The Australian competency movement**

Australia, in comparison particularly with the United States, did not enter the competency movement until the late 1980s (Preston and Kennedy, 1995) but can now be regarded as a world leader. The movement has achieved prominence and is characterised by unusual levels of cooperation between the tripartite players: unions, employers and governments, both State and Commonwealth. The movement had its origins in a number of workplace needs and ambitions which had

emerged concurrently, some being related and some not. All these have required a more precise definition of the work that trade and professional workers do.

The Australian impetus in the development of competency statements has been part political, part economic and part industrial. The national political ambition has increasingly been to be a competitive player in the world economic market and a respected member of the scientific/technological revolution. This has necessitated labour force award restructuring. Thus the Commonwealth's emphasis and, as a flow-on, the States' emphasis since the late 1980s has been on financial and micro-economic reform. "Education was seen as an essential ingredient in improving a nation's economic competitiveness, and the quality of teaching was seen as fundamental to the quality of education " (Walker et al., 1995, p.13).

At the same time human rights and labour force needs have coincided in their call for the establishment of standards concerning the overseas qualifications of new members of the Australian community. Employers and unions have been working together in their endeavours to formulate processes and standards, largely as entry criteria into a trade or profession but also for promotion within that trade or profession. Performance appraisal measured against agreed statements of competencies is an outcome of this. There is a danger, however, in thinking that the formulation of competency standards will, in itself, ensure an increase in workforce quality. Preston and Kennedy (1995, p.29) warned that "competency standards are no panacea" but must be viewed simply as a tool to be used in the continuing efforts to improve the quality of teaching.

More and more training institutions, particularly Technical and Further Education institutions (TAFEs) and universities are feeling pressure from employer groups to produce graduates with specific work-related skills. The National Training Board (NTB), established in 1989 by the Commonwealth Government, has developed national training standards of competencies for trades and the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR), also established in 1989, is doing likewise in relation to the professions. These two organisations have agreed on the use of a particular structure of formatting competency statements (Preston

and Kennedy, 1995). Heywood, Gonczi and Hager (1992, p.31) have described this structure in some detail.

To describe the Competency of a profession in a way that will be useful to recognise and assess the competence of individuals (e.g. for registration or career progression) by way of Competency Standards, it is necessary to subdivide the overall Competency of the profession into manageable and meaningful components that will be observable in the performance of individuals in the workplace.

The style of subdivision is now well-accepted within the non-professional areas of the Australian workforce and, until 1992, there was also general acceptance within the professions. The format, or *template* (a term used by Loudon, 1993) includes Units which are the major segments and relate to broad areas or domains of work. There are relatively few of these. Units are divided into Elements, which state in more detail the several aspects of the Unit. The final division concerns Performance Criteria which "describe the overall evidence from which competence ... is inferred" (Heywood et al., 1992, p. 35).

Whilst the idea of subdivisions is still accepted (although with some modifications and changes in terminology), since 1992 there has been a decrease in emphasis on what is *observable* and an increase in the emphasis on what can be *inferred*. Thus, it may be *inferred* from an observed behaviour that a person has certain knowledge and attitudes. This is particularly relevant to the teaching profession.

As early as 1992 there was, however, the beginning of a mounting concern that the NTB's emphasis on precisely-stated competencies (Masters, 1992) was inappropriate for the teaching profession. Loudon (1993) argued that the framework could not portray the richness and complexity of teachers' work without there being several modifications.

Standards of entry competencies have already been set for over 20 professions including nursing, veterinary science and engineering although there is no requirement that the individual professions do this. Although there have been expressions of concern, there now appears to be general acceptance by those involved (employers, employees and unions) that the teaching profession should be part of the competency movement.

The national and state union organisations have been active partners with employers in the setting of competency standards including those for teachers. In Australia, a major innovation such as the introduction of workplace competency standards could not be accepted and implemented without the support and cooperation of the relevant unions. Thus the Working Party of the NSW Ministerial Advisory Council on Teacher Education and the Quality of Teaching (MACTEQT) has had as one of its seven members the Vice-President of the NSW Teachers Federation (Deer, 1993). The cooperation may be partly because teachers are familiar with such concepts as competencies, outcomes and performance appraisal (although more as they apply to their students than to themselves).

Both the NTB and NOOSR, in their focus on the *performance* of occupational standards, appear to have accepted a behaviour/skills perspective. The 1991 NTB definition of competencies as "... the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the standard expected in employment" is one that is more readily applied to non-professional occupations, where *doing* (or *performing*) may be more relevant than to professional occupations where *thinking*, such as problem solving, is a major aspect of the work situation. This *doing* perspective is particularly evident in the first two of the following three major national reports: the Finn Report (Finn, 1991); the Carmichael Report (Carmichael, 1992); the Mayer Committee Report (Mayer, 1992), the most influential and embracing of the three reports. This last report recommended a set of seven key competencies to be achieved by all young Australians and described these in terms of "capacities" (p.3) and "mindful, thoughtful capabilities" (p.4). The Mayer Committee Report moved away from the previous narrower definitions which defined competencies solely as skills. Its recommendations have done much to influence the current discussions concerning the national school curriculum, outcome statements and the proposed (but not yet implemented in NSW) assessment and reporting of student progress through the use of student profiles.

Heywood et al. (1992), in the Research Paper, "A Guide to Development of Competency Standards for Professions", commissioned by NOOSR, made several key points. They acknowledged that professional work is characterised by complexities that do not exist to the same extent in the non-professional work sector but state that competency statements can

take this into account. The authors also stressed that professional competency standards can “make no claim to exhaust all facets of a profession” (p.16). They were in accord with the statements made by Beare (1992), Pope (1993) and Richards (1993) that it is essential that, if they are to have any value, competency standards must be developed by the members of the individual professions. The research paper was written in 1992 when the emphasis on *skills* was being questioned and the preferred term *attributes* was coming into use. Hence this latter term was the one generally used in the research paper (Heywood et al., 1992).

### **The Australian competency movement and the teaching profession**

All of the earlier-discussed economic and other reasons for the establishment of standards for the Australian workforce apply, in general, to the teaching profession. Two additional reasons are unique to this profession. As stated previously there is a popular belief that the basic problem in education is the incompetence of teachers. Despite evidence to the contrary the public, and especially employers of school graduates, are convinced that there has been a sharp decline in the basic skills acquisition of school students and that this is related to poor teaching practices. Long-established methods, including those used by teacher education institutions, are being questioned (Walker, Hughes, Mitchell and Traill, 1995, p.13). In response, a large number of teacher education institutions are currently reviewing their undergraduate courses. There is an increasing trend towards lengthening undergraduate teacher education courses. In 1996, the Queensland Department of Education notified teacher education institutions that, from the commencement of 1999, no new graduates will be employed with less than a four year qualification (currently three years). In addition there has been mounting pressure from all involved for between-state agreement concerning the recognition of teaching qualifications in order to ensure portability throughout Australia (Peacock, 1993). These two reasons (standards and portability), additional to those for the professions generally, have strengthened the case for a national statement of teacher competencies.

In NSW, the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs has required the establishment of a generic competency framework for beginning teachers (MACTEQT, 1994). This has now been completed. Some states, for

example, South Australia (Eltis, 1993), have done likewise. At both national and state levels some school subject and learning area committees, for example, secondary science in New South Wales (Eltis, 1993), have developed sets of specialist competencies.

In the relatively brief period since the early 1990s there has been in Australia a major development in the conceptualisation of competencies as they apply to the teaching profession. From the early focus on skills, influenced by behaviouristic beliefs as demonstrated in the approach taken by those involved with vocational training (Finn, 1991; Carmichael, 1992), there has been a move towards an increased emphasis on *attributes*. This movement continues so that currently there is emerging a more holistic approach, which Preston and Kennedy (1995) refer to as the *integrated* approach. In 1991, Hughes graphically demonstrated an appreciation of this perspective about the teaching profession when he described three unforgettable teachers in terms of both their human qualities and their skills.

The skills-to-integrated conceptual shift has continued. In 1987, the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, concerned about the quality of teaching in Australian schools, established The National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL). This Project, in turn, formed a Working Party on Professional Preparation and Career Development. The Working Party was charged with providing advice on three fundamental questions (as they applied to school education generally):

- a) Can the work of teaching be captured in a framework of national competency standards?
- b) If so, what should such competencies look like?
- c) What are their purposes and benefits?

(NPQTL, 1992, p.1)

Three consultancy groups were commissioned to consider the above and report back to the NPQTL. Louden from Western Australia led one group, Eltis and Turney from NSW led another and Hughes from Tasmania directed the third. Each consultancy was given a different task



to pursue (Peacock, 1993), these later playing an important role in maturing the conceptualisation of the competency framework. All stated their concern that competency statements should not be expressed in narrow behavioural terms. Louden's report (NPQTL, 1992) is of particular interest for it included illustrative case studies. These are referred to below. Walker (NPQTL, 1992, p. 1-2, section 5), in expressing the then emerging focus on attributes, defined competencies as:

The attributes (knowledge, skills attitudes) which enable an individual or group to perform a role or set of tasks to an appropriate level or grade of quality or achievement (i.e. an appropriate standard) and thus make the individual or group 'competent' in that role.

Collins (1993, p.4) also felt strong concern about the dangers of allowing the behaviourist perspective, implicit in a skill-based emphasis, to dominate the education arena.

A major issue for educators is whether, from such a starting point, we can invent a way of envisaging and then defining competence which is of value for more holistic, less material, more human relational, more open-ended human performance capabilities.

One of the very real challenges of the competency movement in Australia is to remain aware that it is very easy, despite intentions otherwise, to concentrate on readily observed and demonstrated competencies, that is, specific teaching skills. That this danger is recognised is evidenced in the rather frequent warnings against allowing undue behaviourist influence (Hughes in NPQTL, 1992; Eltis, 1993; Collins, 1993; Preston and Walker, 1993). This could allow statements of competencies to be reduced to a list of good teaching practices, similar to those of the United States 1960s process-product perspective.

During 1992-1994, Australian momentum gathered concerning the emerging, more integrated approach to professional competency standards in education. A period of field-testing followed the 1992 submission to NPQTL of the three reports. This led to the 1994 NPQTL Draft National Competency Framework for Beginning Teachers. This document has now been finalised and in 1996 was published by the Australian Teaching Council (ATC) for the NPQTL as the "National

Competency Framework for the Beginning Teacher". It is known simply as the "Framework".

Whilst it is clear that this latter document owes much to the endeavours of the early 1990s, there is also much to distinguish it from those more behaviourist beginnings. In broadening the earlier NTC conceptualisation of competencies, it has more accurately and sensitively portrayed an holistic understanding of teachers' work. Preston and Kennedy have defined "attributes" as "statements of propositional knowledge" (1995, p.32). The NPQTL (1996a, p.11) further clarified the use of the term, *competency*.

The Framework integrates performance and attributes. It is not 'behaviourist' in the sense of being only concerned with performance (behaviour). It is not 'attribute-based' in the sense of being only concerned with the knowledge, values and dispositions that are the individual personal attributes that underpin successful professional practice. Rather, 'competency' is the ability to combine and apply relevant attributes to particular tasks in particular contexts.

The national professional competency movement in teaching in Australia has shown a remarkably swiftly maturing process. This has been largely due to the vision of the leaders in this movement. Prominent amongst these have been Deer, Eltis, P. Hughes, Loudon, Preston, Turney and Walker. All have refused to view the work of teachers in a mechanistic way and have insisted that the richness and complexity of teachers' work be fully respected. A less behaviouristic, and so more acceptable definition of competencies has been reached and agreed on. All those concerned, the teachers, the teacher educators, the employers, the government bodies and the unions have been represented in the decision-making processes. There is now a national framework for beginning teachers which is applicable to all areas of school education. Although some uses of this Framework have been suggested within the document, the next stages concerning widespread acceptance and implementation are the post-1996 challenge. It also seems advisable that those statements of competency standards, written prior to the publication of the Framework, be now reconsidered with the view of updating their conceptual framework so that it is in accord with the national statement.

The various Australian states have either not yet started to develop special education competencies statements or are in the early stages of doing so.

In NSW the DSE developed the draft discussion paper "Critical Attributes for Beginning Special Education Teachers" (1994). The development process was multi-stage, initially involving *experts* from within DSE as well as the university sector. A validation procedure involving teachers in the field further refined the competency statement. This document was developed (and used in the current study) at a time, 1993-1994, when the term *attributes* was favoured and the NTC template of units, elements and performance criteria was still being used in relation to competency standards for teachers. There was then still some strong behaviourist influence and not yet an agreed way of proceeding beyond this. The draft does not therefore fully reflect today's conceptualisation of teacher competencies nor the current approach to the writing of these. That the DSE chose in 1994 not to remove the draft status from this document indicates a wise wait-and-see attitude. It is not clear at this stage, with the recently published Framework, if there will be developed national and/or individual state documents of competency standards for special educators which accord with, and supplement, the generic Framework document.

The Australian Association of Special Education at its 1995 National Council Meeting in Darwin referred to their future development of a statement of special educator competencies. To date only three Australian researchers appear to have been involved in the development of special education competency statements. These are Westwood and Palmer (1993), who have concluded a joint research study, and Clayton (1992) who, whilst based in the United States, developed a statement of competencies for beginning special educators as part of his doctoral studies.

The former two researchers were motivated by their commitment to ensuring the quality and relevance of tertiary courses for special educators. They refer to "knowledge" and "skills". This reflects the United States conceptualisation of competencies as well as that in Australia at the time of the study (1991). Clayton (1992) was concerned with identifying those competencies essential for beginning special educators of students with mild disabilities and, separately, with severe disabilities. Like Westwood and Palmer, he was motivated to ensure that the content of teacher training courses reflected what educators in the field considered essential. Whilst Clayton directed participants "to focus specifically upon

the teacher characteristics, qualities, skills and attributes perceived to be required by beginning teachers..." (1992, p.151), his thesis report most frequently uses the word *skills* in relation to competencies.

This discussion concerning the Australian development of competency standards from the late 1980s to 1996, has proceeded beyond the development of the 1994 draft special education competency document "Critical attributes for beginning special education teachers" (NSW DSE, 1994) used in this present study and so beyond what is applicable to this study. The purpose of this was to place the document within an historical movement which is rapidly evolving and doing so in ways that contrast with the United States competency movement. Less behaviouristic than many statements from that country, the draft document is nevertheless more behaviouristic than the 1996 Australian Framework statement. The Australian teaching community would find the wording, formatting and philosophical underpinnings of such documents as the CEC (1995) statement not fully compatible with the emerging Australian approach. It is doubtful if they would be accepted by the union movement or by those active in the teacher competency movement generally. It is probable, however, that the Australian special education community would have less difficulty with the underlying intent of the CEC for internationally there appears to be general agreement concerning much of the work of a special educator (Westwood and Palmer, 1993).

This does not mean that overseas documents, especially the CEC document ( developed in the United States for international use), will not make an important contribution to the development of a statement, or statements, of Australian special education standards. It does mean, however, that the developers of any Australian statement of competency standards for special educators would be well-advised to fully reflect the current state of the Australian professional competency movement in education. The NSW DSE 1994 statement reflected this at the time of its development. Whatever the country any statement of competency standards to have meaning, acceptance and application must accord with the reality of that country's educational culture, beliefs, standards and practices. Helldin (1992, p.461) took this one step further. In writing of the Swedish development of professional competency standards in special education, he asserted that it is necessary to move beyond the education

perspective to a broader arena. "All teacher competencies are in some way or other related to social intercourse and thus far also inseparable from social and political values. "

Having traced the developing understanding of what a competent teacher is, the writer will now examine the literature concerning how this competence is best attained.

### **The factors stated to be associated with the development of professional excellence in teaching including in special education teaching**

#### **The development of professional competencies**

It is evident from the above discussion that today there is widespread agreement that an effective special educator must have certain professional competencies. Whilst there is a plethora of statements concerning what these competency standards are, there are comparatively few research studies which focus on how these competencies are attained. The knowledge of *how* a teacher best achieves competence is as important as the description of *what* constitutes competence. Resolution of the issue of quality in teaching must find answers to both questions.

In 1990, the then Australian Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Right Honourable John Dawkins, claimed that "as a nation we have made little headway in improving the quality of teaching in our schools" (Dawkins, p.1). Some would say that a similar sentiment might well be expressed today and by Dawkins' counterparts in several other countries. The development of the Framework (NPQTL, 1996a) is expected to play a large part in correcting the situation. It states (p.14) that:

The Framework can be used for many different purposes in relation to teacher education and professional development. These include the overall goals of a course (or activity), its structure, content, pedagogy, collaborative relationships, and research to inform the knowledge base of teacher education and professional development.

There appears to be an assumption that now that it is known what teacher competencies are needed, it is a relatively simple matter to ensure that they are developed. Unfortunately the path, or paths, to their development is not clear.

This section of the review of the literature will firstly examine why there has been comparatively little research concerning the factors contributing to the development of professional competence. It will then proceed to review the literature which links certain contributors with competence, discussing these in the order of their significance as indicated by the amount of research. The discussion will focus on the three broad areas identified by the Australian team led by Retallick (NBEET, 1994), that is: formal training; workplace learning; personal characteristics. Because of the nature of this present study the majority of references will be to special education. Most references will be to the development of generalist special educator competencies, this being more relevant to the Australian special education situation, and thus to this study, than are competencies relevant to specific areas of disability.

### **Assumptions concerning the development of special education competencies**

There are several assumptions about how competencies are best developed in special education teaching. The major ones concern specialist training and teaching experience prior to this. Because these assumptions have been so readily accepted there has not been seen the need for research verification. It is assumed that because they make good sense they must be correct. This type of thinking has been noted by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1993, p.303) in relation to special education. "It might be argued that the importance of prior field experience is so obvious that it need not be evaluated." The following representative quotations are based on assumptions and not on research. They are:

- the Salamanca Statement (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994, p.8, item 43), "Specialized training in special needs education leading to additional qualifications should normally be integrated with or preceded by training and experience as a regular education teacher ...";

- the statement from the major international special education association, CEC (1995, p.11), "The Standards require that a person seeking certification must have no less than a bachelor's degree which encompasses the knowledge and skills consistent with entry level into special education teaching";
- the Commonwealth Government of Australia statement (Schools Council, 1989, p.49);

The training of specialist teachers to work with students with more severe disabilities and to provide advice and support to regular classroom teachers will be best achieved through the provision of post-graduate award courses following regular teacher training and experience.

- and the statement of the NSW chapter (undated but known by the writer to be about 1988) of AASE concerning "the minimum qualification for special education teachers are regular teacher training qualifications; minimum two years teaching experience; minimum one-year full-time (or part-time equivalent) postgraduate course in special education". The Association supports this statement and attributes its origin to the then DSE Director of the Student Support Services Directorate (this was the late 1980s name for what is now called the Special Education Directorate).

Note: The above was stated by NSW AASE as their preferred option. Their fourth option involved "end-on" training with no prior teaching experience.

Statements similar to the above have been made by many governments and associations throughout the world. The assumptions relate to specialist training and prior teaching experience. There has been a limited amount of research concerning these and other aspects of teacher development in special education (Reynolds, 1990). The findings, in the main, are inconclusive and even contradictory. This study examines the above assumptions as well as other factors identified in the literature as being associated with excellence in teaching. These factors are teacher's age, professional development courses (known in Australia as inservice courses), mentoring and personal attributes. These will now be discussed in turn. Where there is little written in relation to special education there

will be a heavy reliance on the literature concerning mainstream education.

### **Formal training in special education**

In Australia and most developed countries specialist tertiary training is now normally regarded as essential for special education teacher certification. The need for specialist qualifications was not generally considered essential prior to the 1960s (in Australia, the 1970s) and the advent of the behaviouristic process-product movement with its emphasis on the development of teacher skills, particularly in the area of instructional technology. There is general agreement that one of the benefits of dual (mainstream plus special education) qualifications is that teachers are then able to move between the two types of teaching (Reynolds, 1990; World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994). In 1993 such dual qualifications were required by 20 states in the United States (Putnam and Habanek, 1993).

Despite the general recognition that specialist qualifications are essential and, in fact, usually a requirement for full certification as a special educator, there is a considerable shortage worldwide of trained special educators. King (1994), in writing of the United States situation, claimed that only 53% of special educators are fully qualified. This need for an increased supply of trained special educators is also felt in Britain (Miller and Porter, 1994). Australia is experiencing the same difficulties and some states have at times resorted to short-course alternatives. Special education teaching preparation other than through completion of a full tertiary course is regarded in Australia as a stop-gap, crisis management alternative. This is further discussed in the later section on "Professional development short courses".

The majority of research in this area has come from the United States. Blackwell (1972), an early researcher in the area of the contributors to professional effectiveness as they apply to teachers of students labelled trainable mentally retarded (a term now replaced by severe intellectual disability), found that the type of teacher training, including no training in special education, is not a predictor of effectiveness. Bruininks (1977), concerned about the emphasis on CBTE programs, suggested that what is



needed is not more specialist training but different training, that is, one that is more holistic. This is the same notion that King (1994) is currently expressing in his urging of a more humanistic emphasis in special education teacher training courses.

Whilst all states in the United States have their own criteria for the certification of special educators, there seems to be inconsistency in language and terminology as well as levels and criteria for certification (Putnam and Habanek, 1993). This would seem to indicate that there is not national agreement concerning professional entry prerequisites in terms of training.

The literature concerning entry requirements to special education teacher training programs is inconclusive. Both mainstream and special education graduates' perceptions of the value of their training programs were investigated by Lyon, Vaasen and Toomey in 1989. These graduates were drawn from three different geographic areas. The teachers in both groups considered that their training was ineffective and that their present expertise was a result of their teaching experiences. Similarly negative conclusions concerning the value of training courses were expressed by McLaughlin, Valdviess, Spence and Fuller (1988) in their synthesis of four national studies conducted by the University of Maryland. Again it was concluded that there was little match between the realities of teaching in special education and the content of training courses. There is the suggestion in these findings of the possibility that it is not training per se that is unproductive but that the courses themselves are inadequate.

Despite the fact that there is little evidence of the value of formal training, completion of this level of training continues to be regarded as the most desirable employment entry requirement for special educators. This study sought to contribute evidence on the relationship between the nature of training and excellence in special education teaching. Concern has been expressed about specific facets of training programs, particularly field experiences such as practicums and internships (Buck, Morsink, Griffen, Hines and Lenk, 1992; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1993). The belief in the need for a changed ratio of field experiences and theoretical learning has radically altered teacher education in Britain where the majority of the mainstream training period is now school-based (Field and Field, 1994).

## Teaching experience

The second assumption, that it is preferable that there be three sequential steps in the preparation to become a special educator (mainstream teacher training, mainstream teaching experience and then special education teacher training) is without a clear research base. It was the writer's intention to contribute towards addressing this. In times of teacher shortage mainstream teaching experience has not been as strongly defended as has the specialist training factor discussed in the preceding section. With the current emphasis on obtaining qualified special educators and increasing the workforce ratio of qualified to unqualified special educators, there has been a general reduction and then removal altogether by tertiary institutions in Australia of the teaching experience criteria for entry to post-graduate courses.

The NSW DSE, however, still demonstrates its commitment to the preference for teaching experience prior to specialist training. As noted in Chapter 1, the DSE annually spends \$4.6m (McRae, 1996) on the provision of sponsorships (known as cadetships) for teachers with two or more years of experience, so that they can complete a university special education postgraduate course.

In the United States, Meisgeier (1965) found that prior general education teaching experience was not related to effective teaching in special education. Blackwell (1972) and Sindelar (1993) reached the same conclusion. The study conducted by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1993), with students enrolled in special education courses, concluded that prior experience is of benefit to students on these students. The study did not investigate the long term benefit of this. Their study, as does that of Buck et al. (1992), raises further questions. These concern the nature, type and length of prior experience. With regard to length, Helldin (1994), in writing of Norway and Sweden, considered that five years experience in mainstream education prior to specialist training is desirable. With regard to the type of prior teaching experience, Westling, Koorland and Rose (1992), however, found that the majority of superior teachers in their study had had considerable prior experience in special education. In terms of financial accountability it is necessary to know at what stage of teaching following graduation prior experience no longer differentiates

between effective and less effective special educators (if indeed it ever does).

Irrespective of training there is general acceptance that teaching experience over time enhances teacher competence. Teachers learn from their repeated experiences (Carter, 1992). Field (1979) identified three stages of teacher development: Stage 1 was characterised by the need to survive on a day-to-day basis; Stage 2 was a time of increasing self-confidence; Stage 3 was a time of feeling relaxed, self-confident and able to relate to students as people, not just students. This type of development with experience was confirmed by Westling et al. (1981) who also found significant differences between beginning and experienced special educators.

There is clearly need for systematic research studies on the question of the relationship of teaching experience with excellence in special education teaching.

### **Age**

As outlined below there are claims as well as conflicting evidence regarding age as a factor related to excellence. For this reason age was included as a factor to be investigated in the present study. Several United States studies have addressed the issue of life experiences and maturity as contributors to professional excellence. Helldin (1994, p.461) considered that "teacher education (in special education) should build on, enrich, and widen this experience and that special educators need experiences of life" (p.457). The value of life experiences as a contributor to teaching effectiveness has also been expressed by Watson (1988), Westling et al. (1992), Fink and Janssen (1993) and Retallick (1993). That studies support this is not surprising for it is widely acknowledged that "experience is the richest source of adult learning" (Stallings and Kowalski, 1990, p.315). It would seem that age could be broadly equated with rich life experiences. Nevertheless, some researchers have found that age is not necessarily associated with increased competence (Blackwell, 1972; Sindelar, 1993).

### **Professional development short courses**

In Australia these courses are run by the State Departments of Education and are known as inservice courses. As already noted, short courses in special education teaching have tended to become, in some countries, a stop-gap measure in times of qualified special educator shortage. Yet it is conceivable that they contribute just as effectively to excellence in special education teaching as do full postgraduate courses. With widespread use of short courses it is worthwhile investigating their contribution in this present study.

In the United States, the National Centre for Educational Statistics calculated that in 1991 new special education graduates would be able to meet only 55.2% of the employment vacancies (Sindelar and Marks, 1993). There is no comparable national register in Australia but informal surveys in New South Wales have suggested a similar, or lower, figure of trained special educators in special education school positions. Concern has also been expressed in Britain particularly in relation to low prevalence disabilities (Miller and Porter, 1994). In that country there is currently a concerted endeavour to improve the quality of all its teachers.

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in Britain has reviewed the inservice training needs for teachers, has provided the Secretary of State with a draft report (Lawlor, July 1996) in which certain priority areas were identified, and is currently occupied with the further development of plans prior to implementation in 1997-1998. The plan will focus, amongst its several areas, on the professional development through inservicing of the Special Education Needs Coordinators, who will then have a responsibility for the inservicing of classroom special educators. It remains to be seen if the concern expressed by Miller and Porter (1994) about the TTA and the future of training in special education is justified. The type of large-scale nationally-organised professional development program envisaged by the TTA has not been seen in either Australia or the United States. A promising innovation in the latter country has been the introduction (Stallings and Kowalski, 1990), since 1988, of professional development schools for teachers run by school/college partnerships.

Because of the demand/supply imbalance in Australia and the United States, various education systems have developed short courses, both

generic and categorical. These courses have received mixed reactions. Opposition is strongest from teacher unions and teacher education institutions both of which argue that such abbreviated courses denigrate teacher preparation and weaken the profession (Sindelar and Marks, 1993). The actual effect of these courses on the quality of teaching is not known. In a systematic review of the relevant literature, Sindelar and Marks (1993) located fifteen data-based studies, only one of which related to special education. All of the studies were seen as not providing clear or soundly-based findings and the value of these courses remains in doubt. It is estimated (Sindelar and Marks, 1993) that a typical short course in the United States would occupy about 26% of the course time allocation of traditional tertiary courses. Some such special education courses in New South Wales are receiving university credit of one-third to one-sixth of a one-year full time graduate fourth year study program.

Major special education courses have been run in NSW by the Department of School Education since the early 1980s but it was not until 1989, following the introduction of the first NSW DSE Special Education Plan, 1988-1992, that financial allocation allowed the current more extensive and systematic, centrally-based approach. Initially courses were category-based (Learning Difficulties, Severe Intellectual Disability, Behaviour Disorders) but in 1993 with the introduction of the "School Based Training Course in Special Education" there appears to be a move to generalist special education short courses. That this training is recognised as only partial is evidenced by the DSE's efforts to obtain university accreditation and thereby to encourage students to complete full training.

### **Mentoring**

Because of the current changes in basic teacher training in Britain (Field and Field, 1994) the use and value of mentoring is gaining renewed attention. This in itself made mentoring a factor worth investigating in this present study. The term, however, is variously defined according to the work situation in which it is being applied (Turner, 1993). Mentoring can be seen as an interactive relationship between mentor and mentee, going beyond simple *how to* advice (Shaddock, Osbourne, Wood, Brodie and Sheehan, 1996).

The concept is not new in education, having its origins in the teacher apprenticeship schemes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with its underlying premise that observation, modelling and on-the-job experience are the best ways of learning the craft of teaching. The mentor may be required to be adviser, exemplar, senior or peer supervisor, helper, supporter and fellow team member. The role may evolve informally with the mentor not being officially identified and, as such, not receiving in-service preparation for the task (Shaddock et al., 1996). In contrast, as is the case in Britain, the position of mentor, known as teacher-tutor, may be an official appointment requiring training, and an integral part of an undergraduate education program with clearly defined responsibilities, directions and processes (Harvard and Dunne, 1992).

It would appear from an examination of the special education and mentoring literature that formalised mentoring is not occurring to any great extent in special education in Australia. Mentoring appears to be largely confined to undergraduate teacher preparation programs resulting from government initiatives (Britain) or in education districts as a result of local school or university initiatives (United States). The purpose of these is to support beginning teachers in mainstream education. This latter type of mentoring was the subject of an investigation (Chapman and Green, 1986) which showed evidence that new teachers' experiences during their first year of teaching are crucial in terms of their retention. Mentoring was found to have a positive effect on this. Much is expected of new graduates including that they will exhibit a high degree of professional expertise immediately on graduation (Kueker and Haensly, 1991). Mentoring may be of particular benefit in special education where beginning teachers often find themselves in ill-equipped classrooms with limited resources and can be overwhelmed by all the demands (Weiskopf, 1980).

There is increasing evidence that the professional and emotional support characteristic of mentoring plays an important role. Odell and Ferraro (1992, p.201) conducted a study in which mentors were selected, received training and,

used a variety of support strategies, such as peer coaching, shared teaching, and questioning that guided and encouraged the beginning teachers to identify what they were thinking and what they were

focusing on in their teaching. Mentees rated highly the emotional support they received.

In Australia, in both mainstream and special education, mentoring appears to have been little used in any organised way. Each newly appointed teacher has a supervisor, as do all teachers, but the large majority of these would not typify the role of mentor. The overseas and Australian literature has not provided evidence of the effects of mentoring during the early teaching years of trained or untrained special educators and hence whether this can be seen as an alternative or an adjunct to special education tertiary preparation is not known. There is, however, evidence that the supportive role of the mentor has a positive effect on the retention of the mentee (Chapman and Green, 1986; Odell and Ferraro, 1992).

Desirable characteristics of a mentoring program as well as of the mentor/mentee relationship have been identified by several researchers, such as Gray and Gray (1985), Wildman, Magliaro, Niles and Niles (1992) and Vonk (1993). There appears to be an adequate theoretical base for education systems within Australia to develop and implement a mentoring program for both new graduates in special education and, particularly, for the many special education teachers who are appointed without benefit of such specialist preparation. Shaddock and his colleagues (1996) have developed a mentoring model with a view to its application to special education by NSW DSE.

### **Personal attributes**

This topic has already been discussed under the heading "An historical perspective of effective teaching" and the point has been made that since the advent of the behaviourist process-product movement with its focus on good teaching practices scant attention has been given to the personal characteristics of teachers. This applies to both mainstream and special education. Prior to the 1970s there were several studies but, in general, the findings of these were not conclusive or were inconsistent (Lessen and Frankiewicz, 1992). The studies which did focus on special education were, for the large part, conducted in the 1950s and 1960s (Lessen and Frankiewicz, 1992). Most of these emanated from the United States. The early attempts will be briefly reviewed here. This will include both

mainstream and special education research. There was general agreement that those characteristics important to mainstream teachers were even more critical in the special education situation (Scheuer, 1971). There has, however, been little research to confirm this belief (Lessen and Frankiewicz, 1992, p.130). Whilst information concerning personal attributes was not directly sought in this present study, the opportunity was given to the study participants, through open-ended questions, to include personal characteristics or attributes if they considered these to be important contributors to excellence. It was expected that they would do so and therefore a brief review of the relevant literature is included here.

In the literature personal characteristics are seen as distinct from professional characteristics which are learnt through a variety of professional experiences, including training, and are used in the carrying out of professional duties but not in other areas of the teacher's life. The term's use in the literature also suggests that it means those characteristics which are commonly present at a young age and are regarded as usually intrinsic or innate. It is not, however, assumed that they cannot be developed through life experiences and normal maturation as well as through teacher education programs. In fact, the question whether desirable teacher characteristics can be developed and/or acquired has occupied the attention of several educators. It relates to the broader question: Are teachers born or made? Helldin (1992, p.452), writing from a Norwegian perspective, believed desirable characteristics could be acquired and quoted from a local area teacher education syllabus (Gothenburg):

During their education the students should be given opportunity to work on their attitudes and values and be stimulated to creative thinking as part of their personal development. Thereby they will acquire better qualifications for meeting the different demands of the future professional situation and an increased confidence in their own capacity to influence it.

Hamachek (1969, p.341) in his review of the major United States research studies of the personal characteristics of good teachers identified several personal characteristics necessary for effective teaching in special education. Effective teachers "... have a sense of humor, are fair, empathetic, more democratic than autocratic, and apparently are more



able to relate easily and naturally to students on either a one-to-one or group basis."

He believed teaching is more than the application of instructional procedures and that a good teacher is a "total teacher" (1969, p.344), that is, one who is skilled in instruction and also able to relate to students at the human level. Rosenshine and Furst (1977) found there to be strong evidence of a positive relationship between teacher enthusiasm and student learning. Several researchers (Cogan, 1958; Reed, 1962; Heil and Washburne, 1962) found a similar relationship between teacher warmth and student achievement. Some of the other teacher characteristics linked to student gains have been high frustration tolerance (Cruickshank, 1966), positive self-concept (Coombs, 1965) and authenticity (Moustakas, 1966).

These studies occurred at a time when Rogers was developing his concept of the *therapeutic relationship* and *unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1965; Rogers, 1969). Rogers, a United States psychotherapist who came to believe that his approach had an application to education, demonstrated that the quality of the teacher/student relationship influences the student's learning (Rogers, 1969). Prior to the behaviourist influence these notions received much support from educators and particularly special educators. Those concerned with the teaching of students with emotional disorders (Kirk, 1962; Pate, 1963; Morse, 1965) were particularly receptive to the Rogerian concepts. The area of emotional disorders has perhaps received the greatest attention in the context of the personal characteristics of teachers. Scheuer (1971, p.723) wrote that "the character traits of teachers in this area (emotional disorders) are the touchstones of success."

The period since the 1970s has seen a concentration on the process-product aspect of the effective teaching research with very little research in the area of the personal characteristics of teachers. Perhaps the major area of research has been the extent and nature of teachers' expectations. Several United States researchers found that when teachers' expectations of their students were high so were the students' achievements (Good, 1981; Clark and McCarthy, 1983; Gerber and Semmel, 1984). However, Gersten, Walker and Darch (1988, p.433) identified "a curious irony associated with this issue," that is, that mainstream teachers with high expectations and the associated high student performance, in fact, resist having students with problems and special needs in their classrooms.

Having been selective in the type of students they teach, they are more able to achieve high academic results. Thus what had come to be seen as a positive attribute in teachers had the potential to have negative repercussions for the students with special needs whose special education teachers considered that they were ready to move into mainstream education.

In their review of the research concerning the personal characteristics of special educators, Lessen and Frankiewicz (1992, p.129) identified the reason for the paucity of research in this area: it is too difficult.

Personal attributes, studied early in the history of research on teaching, fell out of favour because of inconsistent and unproductive results. Faced with the difficulty of identifying and operationally defining affective behaviors of teachers coupled with the pressure to produce empirical studies, researchers turned their attention to other more easily defined, instructionally-related teacher behaviors that could identify reliable relationships between teacher behaviors and student achievement.

## **Ways of appraising teachers including special educators**

### **Introduction**

The research questions asked in this study required the identification of the relationship between certain factors and excellence in special education teaching. As noted earlier this required the use of an appraisal instrument. Relevant perspectives, terms and practices as well as the application of appraisal methods will now be discussed.

Professional appraisal is not a new issue. Since formal teaching began parents, students, professional peers, supervisors and the teachers themselves have made judgments of worth using a range of criteria. These judgments take place in every school, every day and are prompted by a variety of motivations.

Because there is very little written about appraisal of special educators, this not generally being seen as distinct from that of mainstream educators, this examination will not distinguish for the large part between the two types of educators. As in Australia the very large majority of

special education services are provided by the states, there is no attempt here to examine appraisal within the private school system (the State Governments run the public school system whilst the private school system is run by religious and other organisations).

The term *appraisal* is used in preference to *evaluation* and *assessment*. This follows the practice of the Australian writers, Lokan and McKenzie (1989), who used the term *appraisal* in reference to the process of making judgments about the professional worth of individual teachers. It is also the term favoured by many British writers (Bollington, Hopkins and West, 1990). *Appraisal* is often used when there is an emphasis on the continuing development of teachers and so it is likely to occur at several stages of a teacher's professional life. The term *evaluation* is a more general term which can be applied to aspects of education other than teaching performance and is frequently part of a *review* process. In contrast, the term *assessment*, as with the term *testing*, is generally restricted to the notions of measurement and grading. It is, for example, the term applied to the use in the United States of the summative pre-certification check. The several terms have a similar broad connotation but their choice reflects the particular perspective and purpose of the user.

### **Focus on current international practices**

The increasing interest in teacher appraisal is linked to the quality debate discussed earlier. Both the general public and governments are demanding high performance standards whilst teachers themselves are concerned to raise their professional status and to position themselves well in terms of enterprise bargaining associated with salary improvements. Because of these differing motivations there are various approaches to appraisal. Beare (1989), in Australia, identified five reasons for appraisal, each of these influencing the choice of appraisal strategies. The choice by a system, state or nation, depends largely on the particular motivation but also on the particular education perspective embraced by that system, state or nation. Thus the appraisal movement has developed along distinctly different lines in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

In the United States, where teaching appears to be regarded more as a craft than an art, or even a profession, appraisal is very different from that within both Australia and the United Kingdom. The influence of the behaviourist movement and the effective teaching practices research continues. This is despite the fact that the National Board for Professional Standards (United States) refers to teaching as an "artistic craft requiring serious reflection" and advocates "... a more creative role for teachers" (King, 1994, p.97). The strong current impetus towards national certification through Teacher Competency Testing (TCT), using pen and paper testing prior to certification, seems to be based more on skills and knowledge than on creativity. This is the basis also for the majority of the United States teacher competency lists discussed earlier.

Whilst the above-mentioned Board describes a variety of appraisal procedures ranging from "multiple choice exams to portfolios, simulated performances, and observation" (King, 1994, p.101), it nevertheless appears that multiple choice examinations will continue to be used, at least for entry to the profession. The criticisms by (Soar, Medley and Coker, 1983), Pugach and Raths (1983) and Sikula (1985), concerning the nature of testing for the purpose of certification, are still relevant today. There remains an overemphasis on testing the teacher's or prospective teacher's mastery of basic skills (literacy and numeracy) and subject content (Sikula, 1985). "We believe that teachers should be evaluated as professionals, not as technicians, because teachers deal with complex problems" (Soar et al., 1983, p.240).

The United States traditionally has used and still uses a large number of standardised appraisal systems (Scheuer, 1971; Blackwell, 1972; Engelert, 1983; Agram, 1983; Morsink, Soar, Soar and Thomas, 1986; Nowacek, 1990; Katims and Henderson, 1990; Ramsey and Algozzine, 1991). Of these, however, the majority are pen-and-paper tests and are either state-prepared or a national commercial test (Roth and Piphon, 1990). Many have reservations about the use of such tests as a means of determining, or predicting teacher performance in the classroom. Katims and Henderson (1990), in their discussion of the Texas Teacher Appraisal System, one of the most widely used testing systems, reported teacher dissatisfaction concerning its design and the method of appraisal. More recently Larabee (1992) has expressed his concern that this approach will continue to

reinforce the view that teaching is a technical activity. In the United States teachers do not dispute the need for appraisal but rather its present form and emphasis.

Until recently the appraisal movement in the United Kingdom was prompted largely by the desire to increase accountability (Bollington et al., 1990). During the last few years there appears to have been a shift in perspective from accountability to the development of teaching quality. A national appraisal scheme was mandated and phased in over a period of four years, concluding in 1994 (McMahon, 1994). The scheme is in sharp contrast to those generally used in the United States in that there is no centralised testing but rather school-based appraisal conducted by either the head teacher or his/her nominee such as the particular teacher's immediate supervisor. The nominee can be a peer. Further, the process of appraising an individual teacher extends over a period of two years and features both observational sessions and interviews in order to "review the teacher's work, identify achievements and aspects in which further development would be desirable, identify training and development needs and set targets for action for the rest of the appraisal cycle" (McMahon, 1994, p.165).

Whilst the system has much merit and it appears that teachers are finding it acceptable (Nathan, 1993), McMahon (1994) felt it to be in jeopardy because of the current unrest within the education system as a result of increased pressures on schools. During the last two years, however, there has been increasing attention and commitment to the improvement of the quality of the teaching force. The TTA believes it "should have a fresh look at appraisal for staff development purposes" (July, 1995). The report is not yet available.

### **Focus on appraisal practices in Australia**

Appraisal practices in Australia also differ markedly from those in the United States particularly concerning the absence of government-run or government-sponsored certification testing. Students who satisfy the requirements of the various training institutions (courses having received State approval) are deemed to be employable as teachers. Australian practices are more closely related to those in Britain although they continue to be State organised, not Commonwealth controlled. Following

the demise in the 1970s and 1980s of the long-established inspectorial systems there has been, with the exceptions of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania, a slowness to replace those systems. Both the ACT and Tasmania have recently established mandatory appraisal systems and in so doing have obtained teacher union support, that is, the support of their state organisation of the Australian Teachers Federation (Richards, 1994; Billing, 1994). NSW DSE has developed, in collaboration with the union, a draft "Performance appraisal scheme for teachers and executive staff other than principals" (1994). It is unlikely that any State imposed system would be effectively implemented without the involvement and support of the powerful union movement. "Unlike their English counterpart the Australian teacher unions have played a more proactive and prominent role in the formulation, adoption and implementation of policies on teacher appraisal" (Ingvarson and Chadbourne, 1994, p.5).

In both the ACT and Tasmania, teacher appraisal contains a self appraisal component, is formative, takes place over an extended period of time and is designed to be non-threatening. The NSW draft scheme is very similar. It contains both self appraisal and peer appraisal within a collegial pairing relationship. The Report for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training prepared by Retallick and his colleagues (NBEET, 1994) stresses the necessity for teachers to believe that appraisal can make a valuable contribution to their professional development and hence to the quality of their teaching and their students' learning.

Teacher Review and Development (TRAD) was developed in the ACT in the early 1990s and appears to be a natural successor to the earlier peer appraisal used for promotion purposes (Beare, 1989). TRAD is based on self appraisal although it also requires information from colleagues. Its purpose is to develop:

a strong commitment by teachers to their own professional growth through critical self-reflection in order to keep themselves up to date with the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes which teachers need to develop high quality educational programs.

(Richards, 1994, p.176)

Each school is expected to develop its own particular style within given guidelines, these including written self appraisal and peer appraisal.

Whilst there were initial difficulties, particularly concerning the union's attempts to fully inform its membership, it now appears these are diminishing. "For many it was the first time they had been encouraged to stop, reflect on their own teaching and administrative work and share these with colleagues" (Richards, p.197).

As in the ACT, the recent attention to teacher appraisal in Tasmania has been characterised by strong teacher union involvement, particularly because of its relevance there to the industrial process (Billing, 1994). Following a shaky beginning with Teachers Federation/Department of Education disagreements, the policy document was finally released in 1992 with full implementation to be effected by the end of 1996 (Billing, 1994). It contains some similarities to the ACT system in that it is formative, its purpose is professional growth, the appraiser is a peer, in this case chosen by the teacher to be appraised, and it is responsive to individual classroom situations.

There are two basic types of teacher appraisal: formative and summative. Formative appraisal provides the teacher with information concerning professional growth and suggestions for self-improvement. It is usually conducted over an extended period of time and is not generally used for the purposes of promotion. An exception was the process of peer appraisal conducted in the ACT (Beare, 1989) and referred to previously. Summative appraisal is a one-off occurrence, frequently conducted by an external expert and is most commonly used for purposes of beginning teacher certification, employment placement, promotion or termination. Andrews and Barnes (1990) distinguish formative and summative appraisal as having, respectively, a process or product orientation. Australian teacher appraisal programs have in the past, under the inspectorial system, been summative but the current perspective is now firmly formative. Testing programs in the United States are summative in nature. The results of both types of appraisal can be used as a basis for the improvement of teacher training programs and for informing government departments and influencing policies.

Scriven (1994, p.70), who favours duties-based teacher appraisal, describes it as "simply the evaluation of teachers against the criteria specified in a comprehensive list of teacher duties, modified as appropriate to fit a

particular site or state." These duties go well beyond those contained in the usual teacher duty statements and represent "the minimum that can be demanded" (Scriven, 1994, p.79). The listing of duties, following advice from several thousand teachers and administrators, both in Australia and in the United States, does bear some similarity to the competency sets of the NPQTL (1993). There is less similarity with the holistic approach of the Framework statement (NPQTL, 1996a, 1996b). One of the major purposes of the development of any professional competency statement should be its use as a means of promoting the professional development of the individual teacher. The 1996 statement emphasises its applicability to both formative and summative appraisal and, further, that evidence of teaching competence should be "collected over a period of time" (NPQTL, 1996a, p.17). It should prove particularly useful as a means for the individual teacher to reflect on and monitor his/her own individual professional development stages and needs.

Portfolio appraisal is favoured in principle by the United States National Board of Professional Teaching (King, 1994), but not apparently in fact. This is evidenced by the Board's continuing emphasis on testing. Portfolio appraisal can involve a comprehensive examination, by the appraiser, of programming and teaching material and records as well as any other documentation regarded as desirable. This is usually combined with observation and interviews. Both the current ACT and Tasmanian systems have room to accommodate this type of appraisal.

Scriven (1994, p.71) has emphasised the importance of gaining insight and understanding of "the quality of the thought process the teacher goes through in order to identify and make tactical or strategic decisions about classroom activities." Interest in understanding teachers' thinking, an area receiving increasing research attention (Stallings and Kowalski, 1990), uses strategies common to ethnographic studies. Berliner (1976), Shalvelson, Webb and Burstein (1986), Shulman (1986) and Barnes (1989) have all argued for the need to focus on the teacher's thoughts, judgments and discussions rather than student outcomes and classroom processes only.

Haefele (1980), in the United States, outlined several methods of appraising teachers. These are: student testing and comparison with established norms; class testing at various times to map student progress;



informal observations and ratings by supervisors; systematic supervisor ratings using a rating form, this being usually based on competencies derived from the good teaching practices research; systematic observation and rating by peers; student ratings; state or national testing of teachers' knowledge; student testing following prescribed instruction; testing of attributes (other than knowledge); responses to videoed classroom critical incidences; and review of negotiated goals. All have their limitations and not all are relevant to special education. Appraisal on the basis of student knowledge, especially when compared with norms, is generally inappropriate in special education where each child presents with the complexity of his or her unique set of learning styles, learning rates and needs. Also inappropriate are student ratings of their teachers for many do not have the ability to make these independently and then to convey such opinions.

Four further approaches can be added to the above list, these largely having been developed since Haefele's (1980) review: peer appraisal (not using ratings); self appraisal; duties-based appraisal; portfolio appraisal. A combination of several approaches is now also used, particularly self appraisal combined with peer or expert peer appraisal. Peer appraisal and self appraisal (as in the ACT) appear to be the combination of methods most strongly favoured by the Australian teaching profession and the unions. This combination is less threatening than testing and other methods and is based on the assumptions that teachers are mature and responsible professionals and best know the complexities of their own particular teaching situation including student needs. Moreover this combination of methods has the potential to directly promote professional growth. In a lengthy discussion (1994) with the Vice-President of the NSW Teachers Federation, Mr. Ray Cavenagh, the union spokesperson on matters relating to teacher appraisal and teacher competencies, this writer was advised that the only method acceptable to that union would be a combination of self and peer appraisal. Consequently this approach became an integral part of the design of this present study (see Chapter 3).

### **Application of mainstream appraisal methods to special education**

All of the above discussion on appraisal has been in relation to mainstream education. There appears to be an assumption that appraisal

systems are applicable to all teachers and that in fact this must be so in the cause of equity (King, 1994). The Tasmanian and ACT systems and the more commonly used British systems are generic and without bias to any particular group of teachers.

Because of the United States' behaviouristic approach to appraisal and its move towards an increasingly centralised and standardised system, it is a challenge to find an appropriate system which will fully accommodate, without any add-on aspects, the range of distinctly different special education teaching situations. Putnam and Habanek (1993) have pointed out great inconsistencies in current state practices concerning special education certification for teachers of students with mild disabilities. It seems it would also be difficult to develop a just and meaningful standardised system for teachers of students with low prevalence disabilities. Records of students' achievement and student testing cannot be equitably used in special education because of the large range of student abilities and needs together with the pre-existing student difficulties and situations over which the special educator has no control (Soar et al., 1983).

In Australia, as already in Tasmania and the ACT, it seems probable that the most likely national system to emerge will feature self appraisal combined with peer, possibly expert peer, appraisal. It also seems probable that this will be linked in some way to the "National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching" (NPQTL, 1996a). It might also, in special education, be linked to a national statement of beginning special educator competencies, a statement yet to be developed. It is possible that the present study will contribute to this issue.

### **Conclusions arising from this review of the literature**

This review has examined the literature in three areas: teacher effectiveness or competence; contributors to or factors associated with competence; teacher appraisal. Both the overseas and Australian literature have been discussed and emphasis has been given to current Australian writings and movements. The following conclusions

concerning each of the three areas (competencies, contributors and appraisal) have been supported by the literature.

Australian special educators can learn from the experiences of other countries but statements of professional competencies cannot be simply a transplant of those made in other national settings. In terms of today's thinking, an excellent educator is one who is highly competent according to how competence is conceptualised within a particular locality and situation, and how this conceptualisation is translated into a statement of professional standards. Currently in Australia this is encapsulated in competency statements which owe much to the United States behaviourist movement but which are developing now along different lines. No national statement of special educator competencies has yet emerged but this seems a likely future occurrence.

There are several assumptions concerning the most productive ways of becoming a competent special educator. There is, however, little clear research evidence to support the several assumptions. These include the assumption that formal training in special education following mainstream teacher education and teaching experience is the most effective way of developing the competencies needed in special education. Other ways of professional development have been considered. These include mentoring and inservice courses. The extent to which these aid professional development is also not clearly known. There is some evidence that teaching experience as well as life experiences associated with ageing may contribute to increasing competency as a special educator. Very little recent research has been conducted in the area of special educator effectiveness and personal characteristics. It is vital that further research be conducted in all the above areas in order to clearly establish how special educators best develop professional competencies.

As with the formulation of statements of professional competencies, overseas methods of teacher appraisal cannot be simply transplanted to the Australian situation. Any appraisal method used in Australia must be sensitive to its education culture and be acceptable to all concerned, including the strong union movement. It would seem that the use of appraisal systems in special education particularly needs to be well-considered and that the system chosen must be characterised by the awareness and responsiveness of the appraiser as well as be adaptable to

all the varied special education situations. There is a basis for strong argument that any appraisal system used in special education be conducted only by those who have been able to collect information over an extended period of time. It should also be conducted only by those who are themselves special educators and who thus appreciate the nuances, challenges and difficulties of the teaching situation. The concept of self appraisal and appraisal by a knowledgeable peer is embodied in the ACT and Tasmanian appraisal systems. The combination of self and knowledgeable peer appraisal seems to be acceptable in Australia to all including the union movement.

All the issues discussed above are seen as relevant to this present study. They have served to influence its conceptualisation and its goals as well as its design and methodology and they have been reference points in the discussion of the findings and indications for future research.