



# The Specialist Service Standards

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## ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education (MOE) funds a range of specialist education services for children and young people with special education needs. To ensure consistent quality service provision, generic Specialist Service Standards have been developed through a collaborative process involving representatives from the broad range of special education stakeholders. The standards are built around the GSE Service Pathway and reflect the valued practices identified in the collaborative process.

The purpose of this article is to share with the wider education community information about the Specialist Service Standards and what they will mean for specialist service provision.

## Practice paper

### KEYWORDS:

Professional standards, professional practice, collaborative consultation, service quality.

## BACKGROUND

The MOE mission is to raise achievement and reduce disparity. In support of this, the MOE funds a range of specialist education services for children and young people with special education needs. These services are provided through a number of Specialist Service Providers, including GSE and other school sector<sup>1</sup> and early intervention<sup>2</sup> providers.

Until now the Specialist Service Providers, and the specialists<sup>3</sup> they employ, have worked to differing sets of standards. This multiplicity of standards contributed to a lack of consistency in service provision.

In some instances specialists were required to work to different standards depending on the specific service being provided and the sector it was being provided in. For example, GSE specialists worked to different standards depending on whether they were providing early intervention, behaviour or communication services. GSE communication specialists also worked to different standards depending on whether they were providing the service in early intervention or the school sector. The absence of a generic set of standards complicated service provision both for the specialists providing the services and for those responsible for monitoring them.

The purpose of the Specialist Service Standards project was to develop generic, quality service standards that would apply to all MOE funded specialist services. The intended outcome

was that children and young people receiving specialist education services would have the benefit of consistent quality service regardless of location and/or provider.

Part of the task was to develop recommended monitoring processes that would apply across all providers and services, enabling improved monitoring of consistency and quality. The aim of a monitoring system was both to provide better accountability for public expenditure and to inform ongoing service improvement.

Project planning took into account that a generic set of Specialist Service Standards might not be adequate to cover the quality measures required for all of the specific services funded by the MOE, for example GSE already had service specific behaviour standards. Where additional service specific standards were identified, those standards were to form a sub set of the generic standards as shown in Figure 1. Apart from the GSE Behaviour Standards, no specific standards have been developed. Should any be identified at a future date, the planned review process will enable them to be added to the Specialist Service Standards document.

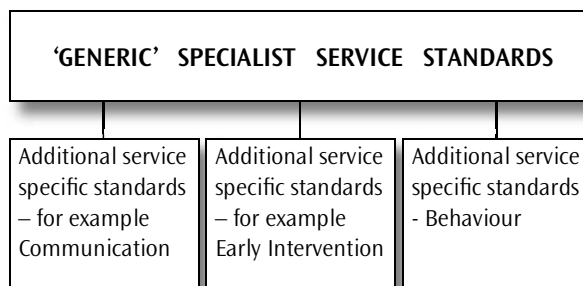


Figure 1. The relationship between the generic specialist service standards and the service specific standards.

<sup>1</sup> School sector Specialist Service Providers have previously been known as Fundholder Schools and as Special Education Service Providers.

<sup>2</sup> Early intervention Specialist Service Providers have previously been known as Accredited Service Providers – Early Intervention

<sup>3</sup> Specialists employed to provide specialist education services include: speech-language therapists, early intervention teachers, psychologists, special education advisors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, advisers on deaf children, conductive education conductors, sign interpreters, orientation and mobility specialists, behaviour support specialists, registered music therapists, Māori advisors, and Pasifika advisors.

## THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Specialist Service Standards were developed through a collaborative process involving representatives from the broad range of special education stakeholders.

All stakeholders were invited to nominate people for the project. While not all nominations were able to be accepted, care was taken to ensure a balanced representation across the various stakeholder groups including parents, parent and disability advocacy and support groups, specialist providers, and specialist disciplines. Where gaps in representation were identified, steps were taken to recruit appropriate representatives, or to provide an alternative forum for contribution.

The only stipulation made by the MOE prior to the project beginning was that the standards be built around the GSE Service Pathway<sup>4</sup>. The Service Pathway identifies steps in the specialist services for children and young people. The steps are those of access, engagement, assessment, analysis, programme planning, implementation, review, closure and follow-up and reflection.

There are two types of Specialist Service Standards.

1. **Professional Practice Standards.** These describe the components of quality practice and are the standards that all specialists will work to.
2. **Management and Organisational Standards.** These comprise the policies and procedures management need to have in place to support the Professional Practice Standards.



Figure 2. Specialist Service Standards

Development of the Specialist Service Standards was undertaken in two phases. Phase I, from February to June 2005, developed the Professional Practice Standards. Phase II, from July to December 2005, developed the Management and Organisational Standards. Phase II also undertook the task of developing recommendations for a monitoring and review process and a recommended implementation plan.

## THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

A small project team which included a manager from an Early Intervention Service (EI), a special school principal, a GSE District Manager, a GSE Practice Advisor – Māori and the project co-leaders who were both GSE staff members, planned and managed each phase of the project under

<sup>4</sup> See *National Service Description, A National Service description for Special Education Services* (Ministry of Education, Special Education, 2005) for more details about the Service Pathway.

the oversight of an advisory group. The role of the advisory group was to oversee the development process and the project outcomes.

Regional focus groups developed the Professional Practice Standards supported by members of the project team. The use of focus groups allowed the project to tap into the rich diversity of knowledge, experience, skills and perspectives of special education stakeholders. Focus groups were made up of parents, specialists, management, Māori, parent advocacy group representatives, disability group representatives, principals, teachers and teacher aides.

The project team collated the standards identified by each of the focus groups. The collated standards were then fed back to the focus group members as draft Professional Practice Standards. Focus group members consulted with their various communities of interest. The feedback from these consultations was used to inform the final draft of the Professional Practice Standards. The consultation process is shown in Figure 3.

During the focus group meetings it became evident that parents and people from the different Pacific Island groups were under represented in the collaborative process. To address this issue, two parent-only focus groups and a meeting for people from Pacific Islands was organised.

The project team also invited feedback on the draft Professional Practice Standards from a range of educators in mainstream schools including principals, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), teachers, specialist teachers and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb). In addition, a small sample of students was surveyed to find out what they valued in specialist services.

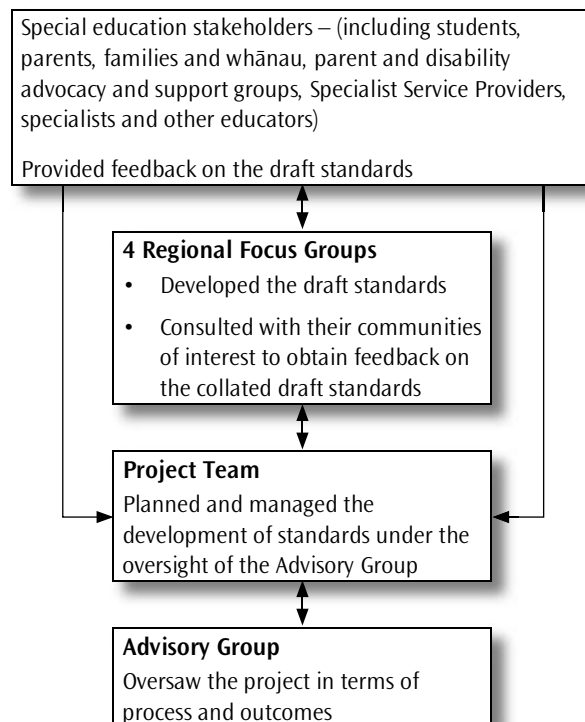


Figure 3. The consultation process for the Specialist Service Standards.

## DEVELOPING THE STANDARDS

The Specialist Service Standards are value based. Focus group members, who included both recipients and providers of specialist services, identified what they valued as quality practice for specialist service provision. A sample of the valued qualities identified by participants is included in Table 1.

TABLE 1

*Sample service qualities valued by focus group members*

### Focus group members value services that:

- are child and family-centred, inclusive, strength-based and ecological
- recognise parents, families and whānau expertise and knowledge about their children and young people
- are culturally appropriate
- are evidence based, collaborative and empowering
- value all children and young people and provide them with opportunities to participate in society and access the curriculum.

### Focus group members value specialists who are:

- open, honest, trustworthy, respectful and responsive
- sensitive, empathic, respectful and responsive
- reflective and accountable
- able to communicate well and share their knowledge with all participants.

### Focus group members value learning environments that:

- are socially, emotionally and intellectually stimulating
- have high expectations of children and young people
- provide for choices
- welcome and accept children.

The standards developed for each step of the GSE Service Pathway reflect these valued, quality practices. The standards emphasise:

- the availability and sharing of relevant, up-to-date information in a culturally appropriate format
- clear referral criteria
- coordinated services
- a collaborative team approach in which families and whānau are empowered and have an important role
- ongoing, systematic assessment that provides a range of data to inform decision making
- current, documented individual programme plans which contain meaningful outcomes, promote achievement, and are implemented in the context of daily activities and regularly monitored
- closure processes that are positive for children and young people and their families and whānau
- carefully planned transitions

- the noting and celebration of successes
- the use of feedback and reflection to inform ongoing practice.

In developing the standards, attention was also given to the *New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference* (2001), the relevant codes of ethics and the requirements of the Health Practitioners Competency Assurance Act (2003) to ensure that the standards aligned with all relevant requirements. Some practitioners brought copies of such documents to meetings and referred to them during the development process. A brief literature search was also undertaken. Findings from the literature review were used to guide both the development of the standards and the implementation planning. Māori input was sought at all stages of the project to ensure the standards reflected the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and were appropriate to the culture and aspirations of tangata whenua.

Although value based, the development of the standards had clear links to the GSE model of evidence based practice that links the knowledge, experiences and skills of the family and whānau, the specialist practitioner, and the research literature.

Phase II of the project followed a similar process to Phase I. Focus groups developed draft Management and Organisational Standards. These were collated and used for consultation with the broader communities of interest. Feedback was used to develop the final draft of the Management and Organisational Standards.

The main differences in Phase II were the use of three rather than four regional focus groups, and a focus on management representation to reflect the task of developing Management and Organisational Standards.

The draft Specialist Service Standards have been peer reviewed by a variety of people with expertise in the field of special education. Feedback from those reviews indicates that the collaborative approach to developing the Specialist Service Standards has been successful from both process and outcome perspectives.

## WHAT WILL THE STANDARDS MEAN FOR SPECIALIST SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE PEOPLE THEY PROVIDE SERVICES TO?

All Specialist Service Providers, and the specialists they employ, will work to common, generic Specialist Service Standards<sup>5</sup>. The Specialist Service Standard will be monitored internally and externally. The monitoring will have a formative focus with the goal of ongoing quality improvement.

For recipients of specialist services, the Specialist Service Standards will mean more consistent service provision. Given that the standards have been built on quality criteria valued by families, whānau and educators, service provided under the Specialist Service Standards are expected to better reflect client expectations.

<sup>5</sup> Until the GSE Behaviour Service Standards are aligned with the Specialist Service Standards, GSE behaviour specialists will continue to work to the Behaviour Service Standards.

Focus group members involved in developing the Specialist Service Standards expressed:

- a strong belief in the potential of the standards to improve the quality of specialist services across all providers
- a high level of ownership of the standards
- a desire to continue to build on the positive partnerships that evolved during the collaboration process.

In support of these beliefs, they also expressed a desire to be involved in presenting the implementation training workshops for management and specialists so they have the opportunity to demonstrate their support for the standards.

The hope is that all Specialist Service Providers will recognise the potential of the Specialist Service Standards and work positively to bring this to fruition.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The Specialist Service Standards have been signed off by the GSE National Management Team. Locally based implementation training workshops for all Specialist Service Providers will commence in June 2006.

The challenge for Specialist Service Providers is to pick up on the standards developed through the collaborative process and to continue to build on the collegial relationships forged so that effective practice can be shared for the benefit of all children and young people with special education needs. The Specialist Service Standards provide a way forward for achieving this.

Ma te tauihu o tou waka  
E u te waiora  
Kia mahue atu  
Nga mea whakahirahira  
I roto i te koriporipo

May the prow of your canoe  
Cleave the waters of life  
And leave in its wake  
Mighty deeds

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### AUTHOR PROFILE

Sue Nikoia is a psychologist and registered teacher. She is currently working as a practice advisor for the Ministry of Education, Special Education. She is a member of the project team that were responsible for developing the Specialist Service Standards.

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