

Submission
No 529

INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

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Date received: 26/02/2010

**Submission to Inquiry into the provision of education to
students with disability or special needs**

**Submitted by
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25 February 2010

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The Director,

General Purpose Standing Committee No.2

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS
WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

Introduction

The Specific Learning Difficulties Association of NSW Inc. (SPELD) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs attending primary or secondary schools. SPELD is a Public Benevolent Institution founded in 1968 whose mission is to provide advice and services to children and adults with specific learning difficulties and those who teach, work with and care for them.

In making this submission SPELD is cognisant of the fact that the Committee is seeking views on specific items considered to be of importance to government policy formulation and planning. At International, Federal and State levels a lot of independent research has been undertaken, policies developed and legislation enacted to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to receive an effective education to enable them to achieve a fulfilling role in life. SPELD therefore applauds the Committee's effort to establish evidence-based best practice.

SPELD is concerned with the needs of students with Specific Learning Difficulties. This term (referred to hereinafter as SLD) equates to the recently

legislated term “significant learning difficulties”, in the amended NSW Education Act (NSW Education Act 1990 as amended January 2010). These are learning difficulties (such as the learning disability dyslexia) that do not encompass all areas of learning but affect specific areas of learning for that individual. Most commonly, SLD affect reading and spelling, but they may affect other language areas or numeracy. Dyslexia is a Specific Learning Difficulty. SLDs are intrinsic to the individual, and not caused by insufficient or ineffective instruction, emotional disturbance, cultural or language difference or other extrinsic factors.

This submission will address the needs of students of all ages with SLD.

Early identification and assessment of children with SLD is essential to the achievement of positive academic and daily life outcomes. If SLD persists, remediation becomes increasingly problematic and expensive. It is thus imperative that SLDs are identified, with appropriate assessment and intervention in primary and secondary stages of education.

It can also be argued that the pre-school stage of learning plays a foundational role in learning, having a positive or negative impact on the kindergarten stage of education depending on the learning environment and the appropriateness of the literacy and numeracy strategies used by parents and/or pre-schools. We therefore will monitor with interest decisions resulting from the shift of responsibility for pre-school education from the NSW Department of Community Services, to the NSW Department of Education and Training, and their response to curriculum guidelines set out in the Commonwealth’s Early Years Learning Framework, which developed from national and international best evidence research and practice.

We discuss issues considered to be significant in **Item 8. Any other related matters.**

Submission Summary

SPELD welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee. This is a significant issue in education and much needs to be done to ensure that students with learning disabilities are given equal opportunity to receive an effective education to enable them to achieve a fulfilling role in life. SPELD believes that the following points need emphasis and action to achieve significant improvement in the provision of support to students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) and their parents:

- There is an obligation under disability legislation for all education and training providers to ensure that students with disabilities are able to realise their full potential.
- It is imperative that SLDs are identified early, with appropriate assessment and intervention developed and implemented in primary and secondary stages of education. It can be argued that the pre-school stage of learning also plays a foundational role in learning and can have positive or negative impacts on the kindergarten stage.

1. Funding

- Has to be allocated to providing support services, including diagnosis, assessment, treatment and teaching and learning support, as well as accurate and comprehensive information to parents.
- Should be adequate to allow for a multi-disciplinary range of educational and health professionals to be involved.
- Must provide for education professionals to engage in ongoing professional development.
- Must provide *ongoing* support students with SLD and needs to be transferrable when students change location.

There is a long term and high community cost associated with SLDs both financial and emotional costs to parents, workplace cohesion and productivity, difficulties in gaining employment. Loss of work and social opportunities by learning disabled people. In addition a high proportion of young offenders in the Juvenile Justice system have suffered from learning disabilities.

2. Allocation of funds (functioning capacity V disability)

- Education is to prepare students to play an effective role in life. If education is to be inclusive and non-discriminatory, then all students need equal opportunity to achieve their potential. Thus it can be argued that functioning should be the focus of funding allocation. SPELD is concerned about the DET proposal to change the allocation of funds in the

existing Learning Assistance Program to one based upon incidence in the general population.

- By acknowledging SLDs and addressing the causes and best ways of treating such disabilities, long term cost savings should be achieved. This will require co-ordinated multi-disciplinary empirical research effort. Thus there is a need for funds to be allocated on the basis of both functioning capacity and disability.

3. Current special education places

- Many parents, adults with learning difficulties and education and health professionals who contact SPELD indicate that they have great difficulty in finding trained and experienced special education professionals. Parents have to engage private specialists outside the school system to ensure that their child is not left behind.
- Special education assistance has to be available to students from rural and regional areas who have been identified with SLD.
- SPELD contends that there is a need for special classes in some schools or areas for some students when their processing skills are so much behind the peer age and stage of learning. Such provision will also help to reduce the number of behaviour problems.

4. Adequacy of support services in classrooms

- Screening for children at risk of learning disabilities must include speech and language processing skills such as phonemic awareness. The newly

introduced kindergarten Best Start Kindergarten Assessment is helpful in screening beginning students but does not include motor skills.

- Other education departments, particularly the UK, USA and Hong Kong have placed a lot of emphasis on the “Whole school Approach” (WSA). This is a systemic approach wherein all involved with the education of students work collaboratively in a co-ordinated way. There is a need for a close relationship between teacher, student, parent, other subject teachers, principals, school counsellors, special support teachers and if required medical professionals. In NSW an example is the Learning Assistance Support Team. However, anecdotally it seems that some schools have such a team in name only, and that there may be some schools without such a team.

5. Curriculum

- SPELD provides advice on SLDs and does not engage with the needs of intellectually disabled students. However students with SLD are prone to develop behaviour problems or become conduct disordered students. Behaviour therapy alone will not solve their problem. This is where a WSA to learning and behaviour is critical and under the WSA there may be occasions where revised or additional curriculum items may be needed to address the cognitive needs of conduct disordered students.

6. Access to professional support and services

- There is a need for better communication of the nature of learning disabilities and of the availability of assistance from qualified and

experienced professionals. Support includes engaging professionals in agencies outside the education sector, professionals such as speech pathologists, occupational therapists, optometrists and paediatricians and dieticians.

- Screening of those children who evidence difficulties in the first weeks or months of school is important. The whole matter of early intervention, while logically desirable, is fraught with difficulties because children develop skills and understandings at such different rates in early years.
- Speech Pathologists are trained specialists in assessing, diagnosing and treating language problems. In NSW there is no funding for Speech Pathologists to work in the school system, with the result that support for speech and language disorders is inadequate. There are greater difficulties for people needing assistance in rural areas.

7. Teacher training

- In most universities special education for beginning teachers involves one core subject of 30 (or fewer) hours face to face plus some practical involvement during a practicum.
- There is also the matter of literacy training for teachers. There needs to be a requirement for DET to stipulate that beginning teachers of early childhood and primary-aged children can demonstrate competence in teaching sounds of letters and how to blend and manipulate them to form words. Phonics needs to be taught to mastery.

- There is also a critical need for Classroom teachers to be given support for engaging in continuing professional development (CPD). Such training is needed now in the systematic teaching of phonics and also to enable them to identify and support students with SLD. SPELD recommends that the possibility of academic recognition for engagement in CPD should be examined to give recognition and reward their involvement and professional competence. Teachers also need to be encouraged and supported in engaging in action research into matters that they believe will improve teaching and learning outcomes

8. Other related matters

SPELD believes that the following points are relevant in providing a context and real and effective change in the provision of appropriate education for students with SLD:

- A significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy.
- There is also a significant minority of students suffering from a range of learning and behavioural disabilities. The size, significance and characteristics of learning difficulty and behavioural problems are not exposed and therefore appropriate action is not necessarily taken. Many young people are being left behind.
- Co-ordinated multi-disciplinary research into the causes and detection of learning and behaviour disabilities is important.

- Some students are ‘instructional casualties’ through poor curriculum or classroom practice and are not learning disabled. Students need to be given guidance in ‘learning to learn’.
- Parents who become aware that their child has a learning disability can become alarmed. It is important that assessment looks at learning and behavioural disorders of childhood in their reality as symptoms rather than as diseases.
- The ‘My school’ website can become a valuable research data base of learning disability by the addition of data related to students diagnosed with SLD and incorporated within the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage.

SPELD is prepared to provide advice, where that will be helpful and to support the implementation of its recommendations.

Terms of Reference

- 1. The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability.**

Commonwealth and NSW disability discrimination legislation, including the *Disability Standards for Education*, enacted as subordinate legislation under the *Commonwealth DDA 1992*, and amended changes to the Commonwealth disability legislation, clarify the obligations of education and training providers

to ensure that students with disabilities are able to realise their potential through access and participation in education with comparable opportunities and choices *on the same basis* as students without a disability. We therefore think this legislation obliges the NSW government to provide funding in relation to the matters discussed in this submission.

As with other government-provided services there is always an apparent lack of adequate resources; the provision of assistance to parents and students with learning disabilities and other professionals engaged with them is no exception. Based upon empirical research into learning disabilities, funding has to be allocated to providing support services required for the education of children, including diagnostic, assessment, treatment and learning and teaching support, as well as accurate and comprehensive information to parents. Funding should be adequate to allow for the multi-disciplinary range of education professionals involved, including education psychologists and speech pathologists. It is important that funding is also made available for ongoing planned professional development opportunities to enable them to understand and effectively engage students with specific learning difficulties/disabilities in their education. Funding is also required for the initial training and professional development of the proposed School Learning Support Teachers who will support the classroom teacher. Funds will also be required for the services of health care professionals who provide advice and assistance to parents, students and the education providers.

Funding to support students with SLD needs to be ongoing. In most cases some level of support will be required for two or more years, depending on when the need of the individual is identified. Funding also needs to be transferrable in the event of the student changing location.

However, there is a long term and high community cost associated with Specific/Significant Learning Difficulties (SLD), a cost that should be regarded as an addition to budget expenditures. There is a financial and emotional cost to parents and families, to workplace cohesion and productivity, difficulty in gaining employment, loss of work and social opportunities by learning disabled people. In addition it has to be appreciated that a high proportion of young offenders in Juvenile Justice custody (as high as 30% for ADHD alone) (NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, 2003) have suffered from SLD. The proportion of young offenders with SLD does not include the proportion of affected inmates in the adult Corrective Services establishments nor does it include the 61% of juvenile offenders suffering from conduct disorder and 17% suffering from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. A follow up study (Kenny, 2006) found that 38% of offenders had received special education. Despite that, the numeracy levels of 64% were equivalent to scores of comparable subjects with an intellectual disability (21% for reading and 21% for spelling). Significant budget outlays are required for these offenders – expenditures that could have been more productively used in preventing

and treating SLD. With appropriate professional support most people suffering from SLD can be enabled to play a productive role in society leading to a more satisfying life outcomes and social contributions.

- 2. Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether allocation should be focussed on a student's functioning capacity rather than their disability.**

The question of whether to focus on a student's level of functioning rather than their disability raises some interesting issues. The aim of our education system is to prepare students to play an effective role in life based on relevant knowledge, skills and social values. If education is to be inclusive and non-discriminatory then all students need equal opportunity to achieve their potential in the context of their communities. Thus it can be argued that the student's levels of functioning, perhaps as defined in the NSW Education Act, should be the determining factor in funding allocation. We are concerned, for example, that NSW DET proposes funding changes to the existing Learning Assistance Program (which is currently funded on need without reference to cause), and to allocate funding based upon incidence in the general population.

In the case of SLD, the causes are several and the interventions required differ according to those individual underlying factors. It is important that teachers and administrators take account of multi-disciplinary empirical research into the causes, identification, assessment, treatment, curriculum and learning and teaching methods needed to reduce the impact of SLD on students and the community. It should be apparent that a better understanding of SLD, will allow the teacher to improve the student's functioning more effectively. Again by acknowledging specific disabilities such as dyslexia, and addressing the causes and best ways of treating such disabilities, long term cost savings should be achieved.

3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.

Many of the parents, adults with learning difficulties and education and health professionals who contact SPELD for advice and assistance indicate that they have great difficulty in finding trained and experienced special education professionals. They also express frustration in getting special education places even in schools that cater for students with special needs. A significant number of parents have to engage private language (speech, +reading, spelling and writing) specialists and tutors outside the school system to ensure that their child is not left behind. The proposed closure of Dalwood Assessment Centre and Palm Avenue

School, a facility providing special education places for children with identified SLD from rural areas, without an adequate alternative special education replacement, signals a lessening of commitment to the provision of special education places for needy students.

Very commonly, a parent of a child with an identified SLD will be told by the Principal, “there will never be support for your child in this school, because there are so many others with greater needs.” Worse, some parents are now being told, “in this school, we now concentrate on gifted and talented. Students with SLD have had their turn of funding over the past several years”- or words to that effect. This being so, funding needs to be tied to both disability and functioning capacity.

SPELD contends that there is a need for special classes in some schools or areas (such as Dalwood and Palm Avenue School), for children who have specific learning difficulties, especially when their processing skills are so much behind the peer age and stage of learning. These children benefit from being in a class that progresses at a slower pace in relevant subject areas, where alternative communication means are employed, and where appropriate teaching practices are used. In such classes, students are enabled to achieve to their capacity in subjects that do not directly require high level reading skills (for example). Where such teaching practices are used, students will often perform at a high level in subjects such as science

or mathematics, even though they have a SLD in say, reading and spelling. Such provision ensures greater success in basic areas, success in other areas of the curriculum, and in consequence boosts self-esteem and enables them to move back into the mainstream sooner. Such provision would also help reduce the number of behaviour problems as the children discover that they have a chance of being at the top of the group at some time and feel more at ease when working in the group. Evidence of the success of such provision comes from the UK in schools such as Mark College, a “Beacon” school for dyslexic boys. There, “All lessons in all subjects are geared to the needs of the student so that problems such as short term memory, writing speed, reading difficulties and organisation are addressed consistently and continuously.”

(<http://www.markcollege.org.uk/middle.htm>)

The current NSW DET proposal to revise the existing Learning Assistance Program for supporting students with additional needs in learning and their teachers is clear recognition of the need to better service learning disabled students, their parents and school staff; particularly the classroom teacher, who carries prime responsibility for achieving successful learning outcomes for every student.

4. **The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms.**

Screening for children at risk of learning disabilities must include speech and language, but especially auditory processing skills such as phonemic awareness. It also must include screening for visual processing (Irlen Syndrome - teachers can easily be trained to do a preliminary screening), as well as the usual hearing and eyesight tests. It would also be helpful if teachers used a preliminary screening/activity program such as *The Learning Place* used in screening in the early months of kindergarten. The program includes important basic motor skills and can be done with the whole class involved in useful activity. It is acknowledged that as of the 2010 school year a mandatory kindergarten screening (Best Start Kindergarten Assessment) is in place – although it does not include motor skills.

Education Departments, particularly in the UK, USA and Hong Kong place a lot of emphasis on the “Whole school approach” (WSA) to education matters. This is a systemic approach wherein all involved with the education of students work collaboratively in a co-ordinated way to ensure that successful educational outcomes are achieved efficiently and effectively and that no student is ignored, disadvantaged or left behind. The emphasis has to be upon supporting the classroom teacher and assisting them in ensuring that their students achieve results commensurate with their potential. In particular there is a need for a close relationship to be developed between teacher, student, parent, other

subject teachers, principals, school counsellors, special support teachers and if required, medical professionals. All players have to demonstrate a willingness to assist students and work in a systemic and integrated way. An example of the development and use WSA in schools is Yuen and Westwood (2001) in the Hong Kong context. Other countries such as the UK, USA, and Canada as well as Hong Kong use the WSA to provide support for both learning and behaviour difficulties. In our State school systems an examination of departmental web sites indicates that the States have also engaged in WSA for various purposes. The Australian Government has used the expression “family-school partnership” to describe a similar collaborative process (DEEWR, 2008).

SPELD acknowledges that the WSA, in its various forms does exist. It is suggested that with strong cultural change, the approach can be made more collaborative and involving all school staff, parents and the community. Enlightened and motivated political, departmental, regional, school and parent leadership will be needed to create and maintain this cultural change.

As an important part of the WSA, it is considered that there may be an important role for peer assistance groups to be established in schools. Here selected senior students can provide assistance to other students with

learning and behaviour problems. These senior students become mentors and role models of effective learning and appropriate behaviour.

In NSW the DET has mandated that schools have a Learning Support Team whose role is to ensure that appropriately integrated services are supplied where there are learning difficulties. However, anecdotally it seems that some schools have such a team in name only, and that there may be some schools without such a team

5. The provision of a suitable curriculum for intellectually disabled and conduct disordered students.

Because SPELD provides advice and services to children with Specific Learning Difficulties, it is usually engaged with people who have average or above average general ability. We therefore do not intend to comment on this item.

6. Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors.

The availability of support from a range of professionals is of considerable significance to all people who believe that their students have or may have SLD. A significant number of parents or carers of children and others engaged with students are able to detect possible learning difficulties, but often have problems in finding, communicating with and seeking the involvement of trained professionals.

During the 2009 year SPELD received 340 calls for assistance, an average of 28 calls per month. During the January-February period 100 calls were received. These figures do not include 125 email requests (average 10 a month) or 90 calls requesting contact details of available tutors. So far this year there has been a significant increase in the number of calls.

There is a need for better communication of the nature of SLD and of the availability of assistance from qualified and experienced professionals.

Under a 'Whole School Approach', all people involved with students have a joint and essential role in providing guidance and support to all students and their parents. Support includes engaging professionals in agencies outside the education sector, professionals such as speech pathologists,

occupational therapists, optometrists, paediatricians and dieticians. Open and ongoing communication is essential and when necessary shared professional development sessions, where issues of mutual interest are discussed can make a significant contribution to both knowledge and team work. The DET proposed scheme for the creation of School Learning Support Teachers can play a significant role in giving students, parents and classroom teachers access to professional support and services.

Early intervention is economically best for preventing ongoing speech, language and literacy problems. Ideally, there should be a screening process conducted by Speech Pathologists before children enter school to identify those at risk of communication impairment and therefore learning disability. We also know that children with persisting language disorders go on to experience learning disorders. They can also experience behavioral problems, social/emotional and mental health problems as a result of speech and/or language disorder.

While it is desirable that all children be screened for learning difficulties before school entry, this is probably not going to happen. However screening of those children who evidence difficulties in the first weeks or months of school, and certainly by the end of the first year of school is important and practical. The whole matter of early intervention, while logically desirable, is fraught with difficulties because children develop skills and understandings at such different rates in the early years. We know for example from the *Australian Temperament Study* that of the

children who seem to be failing reading at the end of Kindergarten, one third will recover by the end of year 1 and be reading the same as their peers without any special intervention. This has significant implications for high-cost interventions such as *Reading Recovery* which typically, does not meet the long term learning needs of children with SLD and research has demonstrated is unnecessary for a significant proportion of those who were initially identified as being at risk (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007).

Speech Pathologists are trained specialists in assessing; diagnosing and treating language problems, they should be readily available to the school system providing these services without extra cost to parents. This is even more relevant for NSW as there is no funding for Speech Pathologists to work in the school system. Further, most government funded/community health services in NSW no longer see school aged children as they focus on early intervention (0-5yrs). Thus speech pathology services (to identify and remediate speech and language disorders) available to school age children living in NSW are inadequate and inconsistent. In addition service availability differs significantly across the state and may be dependent on the age of the child, the health service area in which the child resides and the school the child attends. The engagement of education and health specialists should be non discriminatory, thus there needs to be adequate and timely advice and support given to students and parents in rural areas.

7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training.

Internationally and nationally there is evidence that at the university undergraduate teacher training course level there has been a reduction in the emphasis placed on special education. In most universities special education is covered by one core subject of 30 hours face to face lecture, plus some practical involvement during the practicum. There are thus a growing number of teachers who do not have the knowledge and experience to enable them to provide timely and effective assistance and advice to those teachers and parents who are struggling to meet their student's special needs.

In addition to the requirement for special education awareness training for beginning teachers there is the matter of literacy training of teachers. The 2005 Nelson inquiry into the Teaching of Reading (DEST, 2005) found that 50% of the 34 teacher training programs in Australia devoted less than 5% of the curriculum to teaching about reading and that 60 % of senior teachers considered the majority of beginning teachers were not equipped to teach children to read.

In 2009 the chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) indicated that the National Curriculum would

emphasise the teaching of phonological awareness, phonics and the alphabet in Kindergarten and Grade 1. State Departments of Education are also beginning to take actions to improve the standard of literacy teaching. In NSW the Department of education has produced a series of evidence-based guides for the effective teaching of literacy skills. These guides are for the teaching of literacy in the general school environment; more has to be done to address the effective teaching of students with learning disabilities (Coltheart report, 2009).

The NSW DET has mandated that children from the first year of school be explicitly taught the sounds of letters and how to blend and manipulate them to form words in 10-20 minutes sessions each day. They set out the key principles for teachers to follow in reading instruction, stipulating that phonics needs to be taught to mastery. This is a very helpful provision for students with a language-based or auditory processing SLD but the difficulty is that many teachers are not trained in how to do such instruction. Few universities teach this in teacher-preparation courses, and many academics in the area claim “not to believe in” such instruction. Of course, we should be dealing with evidence-based practice, not philosophy or belief, but such unfortunately is the current situation. It will therefore be necessary for DET to indicate to universities that employment for new teachers of early childhood and primary-aged children will be contingent on their demonstrating competence in this type of instruction.

In addition to formal beginning teacher training courses it is important to address the critical need for classroom teachers to be given support for engaging in continuing professional in-service training. Such training is needed now in the systematic teaching of phonics and also to enable them to identify and support students with SLD. As mentioned previously these in-service courses should also enable and encourage classroom teachers to engage in action research to produce evidence-based effective diagnostic and learning strategies to better meet the individualised needs of all students.

It has been suggested that academic recognition be awarded for teacher engagement in continuing professional training. SPELD believes that this would give recognition and reward to teachers and warrants further consideration.

8. Any other related matters.

SPELD believes that the matters being addressed in the Inquiry need some context and that a systemic examination is required to achieve outcomes that create real and effective change in the provision of appropriate education for students with SLD. The following points are thus considered to be of relevance to the effectiveness of the inquiry outcomes:

1. A significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy and

numeracy (Nelson report, 2005). This situation is also reflected in an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report in 2006. “The ABS report noted that 52% of Australians aged 15-19 had a literacy level that “was insufficient to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work” (Coltheart report, 2009). There is also a significant number of students suffering from a range of learning and behavioural disabilities such as: Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. In addition some children suffer from disorders that affect learning but have a more behavioural and medical basis such as Asperger’s Syndrome, and Autism. Because some of these learning disabilities are invisible they are frequently overlooked or placed under the general label of Dyslexia. Thus the size, significance and characteristics of learning difficulty and behavioural problems are not exposed and therefore appropriate action is not necessarily taken. It is estimated that “In the UK, nearly one in five children experiences some sort of learning difficulty or behavioural problem.” (Pauc, 2006, p.4). Many young people are being left behind. Unfortunately they have to fail before help is made available. Some published reports, both in Australia and internationally, have indicated that up to 10% of young people suffer from Dyslexia and that Dyslexia affects 75-80% of people with SLDs. The situation is further complicated in that “...research has shown that 40 per cent of children with Dyslexia also have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD).” (Pauc, 2006, p.15). Further in a

recent health research report it is indicated that approximately 8% of Australian children under 18 years, meet the diagnostic requirements for ADHD and that “ADHD is currently the most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorder in children.” (Raine report, 2010, p.9). There is thus a need for a more evidence based approach to the range of disabilities and an awareness that ineffective treatment and teaching and learning strategies can lead to associated behaviour difficulties.

Inappropriate peer attitude towards students suffering from learning difficulties, as evidenced in activities such as name-calling, isolation, bullying etc., can play a significant part in the development of inappropriate behaviour. More empirical research effort into the causes, diagnosis, assessment, treatment, learning techniques and support for disabled learners needs to be encouraged and given real recognition and support. This research effort needs to be co-ordinated at the Federal level. In addition classroom teachers, should be encouraged and supported in engaging in action research, related to the learning difficulties experienced by their students. Action research can make a valuable contribution to knowledge about these disabilities. A variety of apparent causes, treatments and teaching and learning strategies has been espoused but not all have been empirically demonstrated to be effective.

2. Co-ordinated multi-disciplinary research projects into the causes and detection of learning and behaviour disabilities is particularly important. The saying “Prevention is better than the cure” certainly applies in this case. Continued empirical research into topics such as socio-economic environment, genetic factors, family and medical history, diet, essential fatty acids and supplements, food additives, drugs, aural and visual processing, brain functioning and development stages is important.

3. It is important to understand that not all learning difficulties are disability based. School methods of teaching literacy and numeracy skills may of themselves be ineffective and not evidence-based. In addition students with learning problems may also greatly benefit from guidance into the ways of ‘learning to learn’ (Olivier & Bowler, 1996). Some students are ‘instructional casualties’ through poor curriculum or classroom practice and are not ‘learning disabled’ because of intrinsic factors.

4. Parents who become aware that their child has a learning disability and when first confronted with labels such as ‘Dyslexia’, ‘Attention Deficit Disorder’, etc can become alarmed. It is important that assessment looks at “...learning and behavioural disorders of childhood in their reality as symptoms rather than as diseases” (Pauc, 2006,

p.viii). This will help to allay parent concern about their child being labelled as “disabled”.

5. SPELD with the support of the then Department of Education, Science and Technology (SPELD NSW, 2003) has developed an on-line Teachers Skills Package (TSP), aimed at developing understandings of SLDs, and skill in making appropriate classroom and curriculum modifications to assist students with SLD within the regular class. This resource is currently available to all teachers without cost. (www.auspeld.org.au/tsp)

6. Some educationalists and parents have commented on the recent release of the “My school” website containing data from the latest NAPLAN results and the use of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage ratings to provide a basis of comparison between like schools. It is not intended to enter this discussion, except to indicate that it would be valuable to add data on the number of students who have been diagnosed with SLD. This data would be valuable as a basis for research into SLDs and in gaining a better understanding of the quantitative nature of SLDs.

Conclusion

If the Australian and State governments do not develop and implement relevant policies and procedures for the identification, assessment, treatment of SLDs and also curriculum and teaching and learning methods, then students will have been denied the opportunity to achieve their full potential in education. A significant number will become behaviour casualties and be subject to the control of the Juvenile Justice system. They will become a liability and be a long-term drain on Australian and State financial resources.

Policies and procedures need to be evidence based, thus systemic multi-disciplinary consultation and research should be used in the formulation and implementation process. There should be no place for rhetoric; clear and necessary action is required. Many parents are needing advice and assistance and have difficulty in finding appropriate information and help.

The classroom teacher requires adequate initial training, learning support in the classroom and encouragement and support to engage in continuous learning. Here involvement in Continuous Professional Development activities is appropriate. To engage in continuous improvement of teaching and learning, teachers also need encouragement to engage in Action Research on perceived relevant and important issues.

The needs of children with SLD, their parents and school staff can best be met through a 'Whole School Approach'. This will require a culture of openness and collaboration and genuine desire to achieve desired learning and behaviour outcomes.

There is much to be done and all measures to overcome the deleterious effects of learning difficulties and often-associated behaviour problems require adequate funding. The social costs of doing nothing or, too little, too late, have to be given due consideration. Children with learning difficulties are often invisible and unheard. Thus their disability is often not physically obvious.

The DET proposal for a School Learning Support Program involving the appointment and specialist training of experienced teachers as School Learning support Teachers, when implemented with the active support and involvement of education and health professionals together with parents, can develop a collaborative environment in which many of the issues raised in this submission can be effectively addressed and solutions found.

SPELD is prepared to provide advice, where that will be helpful in the development of the committee's report and to support the implementation of its recommendations.

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