

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

Organisation: Learning Difficulties Australia

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Submission to the NSW Legislative Council

Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs

Submitted on behalf of *Learning Difficulties Australia*

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Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) is an association of educators and other professionals dedicated to improving the performance of underachieving students through the utilisation of effective teaching practices based on scientific research. LDA promotes the use of evidence-based practices both in inclusive classrooms and in individualised instructional settings.

Even though they have normal intelligence and no known physiological or psychological problems, as many as 10% of Australian children struggle to learn their native language adequately (Specific Language Impairment) or to learn to read and write (Developmental Dyslexia). These are children who fail to learn at a level commensurate with their peers according to age and stage of learning, despite receiving appropriate teaching in school. These children have special needs.

We have known for a long time that poor oral language skills and/or reading and writing skills lead to long-term academic failure (e.g. Prior, 1996). Nonetheless, we are only just beginning to understand the severe impact that reading failure can have on a person's mental and social health. In 2006, Daniel and her colleagues reported that adolescents with poor and inadequate reading skills are six times more likely to drop out of school, three times more likely to consider suicide, and twice as likely to have depression, conduct disorder, or drug problems than teenagers with normal reading skills. It is therefore not surprising that adults in prison are three times more likely than the average person to have significant reading difficulties or dyslexia (Rack, 2005).

Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) are also more likely to experience poor academic achievement, social-emotional and behavioural difficulties and mental health problems than their typically-developing same age peers (Im-Bolter & Cohen, 2007). Approximately 50% of children with SLI also have poor reading accuracy (Eisenmajer, Ross, & Pratt, 2005; McArthur, Hogben, Edwards, Heath, & Mengler, 2000). The combination of poor communication skills, social and emotional vulnerability, and poor academic achievement hampers the individual's employment opportunities, resulting in low income, high rates of unemployment and increased risk of incarceration (Ruben, 2000). Thus, communication impairment has significant social and economic implications for individuals and for communities.

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and Developmental Dyslexia (DD) result in a disability. Children with these conditions have special needs that should be addressed as early as possible in educational settings.

Given the prevalence of SLI and DD within the general population, it is not surprising that there is a literacy problem in Australia. In a report, *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development: Baseline performance report for 2008*, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) noted that:

- Relatively high proportions of working-age Australians have literacy and numeracy skills below the minimum level considered necessary to meet the complex demands of work and life in modern economies — 43.5% for literacy and 49.8% for numeracy.
- The proportion of working-age Australians with low levels of literacy and numeracy decreases as socio-economic status improves. Across the nation, 60.0% of working-age people in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas have low literacy skills while in the least disadvantaged areas, only 29.3% have low literacy skills. The figures for low numeracy skills for the same socio-economic areas are 66.2% and 35.3% respectively. The pattern is similar across all States and Territories.

The long-term costs of not providing children with language and reading/writing impairments with adequate intervention and support are enormous.

LDA believes that current provisions for the assessment, identification, and support of children with special learning needs in the educational system are inadequate.

For example,

- School P&Cs are raising funds to supplement DET funding so that additional learning support can be provided in schools;
- Parents who can afford to do so are seeking additional learning support from private tutors, allied professionals such as speech pathologists, and special programmes such as MULTILIT to ensure that the special educational needs of their children are met;
- The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) is proposing changes to the existing Learning Assistance Program, which reportedly will eliminate the direct individualised teaching function of Support Teachers Learning Assistance (STLA).

In December 2008, the NSW legislature unanimously passed an act, *Education Amendment Educational Support for Children with Significant Learning Difficulties*, "to ensure that children with *significant learning difficulties* be included in the NSW Government's Special Education Initiative for students with special needs". The Act defines identification of these children, noting that "a child has a significant learning difficulty if a qualified teacher or other qualified education professional is of the opinion that the child is not, regardless of the cause, performing in the basic educational areas of reading, writing, spelling and mathematics in accordance with the child's peer age group and stage of learning".

This definition is non-categorical and does not include a consideration of potential ability. Accordingly, all students (even those with high levels of aptitude) who are experiencing difficulties in learning and are presenting with significant underachievement should be receiving additional support. A focus on providing additional support aiming merely to get students "over the line" (for example, by targeting those in the bottom band of NAPLAN) is inappropriate.

Under the Act, it is the responsibility of the Minister of Education to ensure the provision of special or additional assistance for "government school children with special needs, namely, children with significant learning difficulties". In reality, to date, changes to neither funding nor practice have been implemented as a result of this Act. Thus, all those children whose significant learning difficulties are, or ought to be, identified are not receiving the additional learning support they need to achieve the best of their potential.

Many teachers have not received adequate training in the teaching of reading.

In 2005, the *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* found that 50% of the 34 teacher training programs in Australia devoted less than 5% of the curriculum to teaching about reading. As a result, it is not surprising that the majority of beginning teachers reported that they did not feel confident about their ability to teach reading.

These beginning teachers, and others who have not learned about the basic foundation skills and processes involved in reading, will be unable to teach their students using current evidence-based methods. These teachers will also be ill-equipped to detect students' difficulties at an early stage and provide the necessary educational interventions and support. Accordingly, there is an urgent need for change within teacher training programs (pre-service training) as well as for the provision of more high quality professional development opportunities for qualified teachers (in-service training).

Summary

- Up to 10% of children have a disability as a result of problems with language and/or literacy.
- These children have special educational needs and require specialised, individualised help.
- The economic costs of not providing these children with appropriate support are enormous.
- Current levels of intervention and educational support are inadequate.
- The *Education Amendment Educational Support for Children with Significant Learning Difficulties* cat defines a learning difficulty non-categorically; thus, a 'minimal standard' model of support is inconsistent with the act.
- Teacher training (pre-service and in-service) in the teaching of reading is often inadequate.

We urge the committee to recommend that the Minister of Education establish and fund an equitable framework of education service provision in support of:

- access to appropriate assessment and learning assistance support for students with special learning needs at all levels of education regardless of cause and potential for achievement;
- appropriate initial training and ongoing professional development for their teachers;
- access to evidence-based resources for these students and for their teachers;
- access to other relevant professional support for the students (e.g. Speech Pathologists and Educational Psychologists).

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