

## **INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS**

**Organisation:** Specific Learning Difficulties Association of (SPELD) NSW  
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**Submission to Inquiry into the provision of education to students  
with disability or special needs**

**Submitted by  
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The Director,

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

### **Introduction**

The Specific Learning Difficulties Association of NSW Inc. (SPELD NSW) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs, who are attending primary or secondary schools. SPELD NSW made a comprehensive submission to the previous inquiry held in 2010 (Submission 529). A number of the issues raised have been included in the committee report and government response. This submission is primarily intended to discuss further significant, but more systemic or holistic issues impacting on the education of students with special needs.

SPELD NSW acknowledges the significant role of the previous Minister (Adrian Piccoli) in understanding education issues. He supported the Gonski review recommendations for providing better support of disabled and disadvantaged students. His support for the use of teaching and learning methods that are evidence based is also appreciated.

Acknowledgement is also made of the efforts of DoE staff and teachers in advancing the effectiveness of education within NSW. Within the context of this inquiry, this particularly applies to initiatives such as the 2010 trial School Learning Support Program in the Illawarra and SE Region, supporting students with additional learning needs and their class teachers.

There is a stated belief by many educators that statements made about standards of teaching and the need for educational change are disguised criticisms of their professionalism and personal performance. This is a mistaken belief and this submission has the intent of addressing some of the significant systemic issues impacting on the effectiveness of education in general and of those students with Specific Learning Difficulties in particular.

It is held by some researchers that there is a gap between academic research methodology, which seeks truth through knowledge on the one hand, and the needs, beliefs and experience of education professionals who seek improvement in their education practice on the other (Pring, 2000). This gap has to be acknowledged and resolved, as it is critical that students are given the most effective and relevant opportunity to learn the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to achieve a successful, rewarding and satisfying life. Our minds have to be open to acknowledging and applying new validated ideas that are shown to be effective.

SPELD NSW 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 particular SPELD NSW provides a telephone advice and referral service, conducts information and training sessions for parents and education professionals and is an accredited teacher training organisation. SPELD NSW also monitors developments in education research and provides relevant information articles for both education and allied health professionals and parents on its website and during information sessions.

SPELD NSW is concerned with the educational needs of students with Specific Learning Difficulties. This term (referred to hereinafter as SLDs) covers those 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. For instance, dyslexia affects reading and

spelling, dyscalculia affects maths, AD/HD affects memory and attention; dyspraxia affects fine and/or gross motor skills and speech and language disorders affect acquisition of oral language and speech. SLDs are not caused by insufficient or ineffective instruction, emotional disturbance, cultural or language difference or lack of intelligence. It is estimated that 10-20% of students have SLDs and 5% of those have serious LDs (Hempenstall, 2016).

In the process of providing support to people requesting advice and assistance, SPELD NSW maintains a record of the nature of the inquiries received and of the recommended referral, assessment and remedial action. During 2016, 1224 referral calls were processed and 332 Self Assessments were completed on the website.

In making this submission SPELD NSW 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 much independent education research have been undertaken, policies developed and legislation enacted to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to receive an effective education. SPELD NSW therefore applauds the Committee's effort to identify issues that have an influence on best practice and in making recommendations for their adoption.

SPELD NSW does not intend to repeat the comments and recommendations made in the 2010 submission, apart from drawing attention to those matters that continue to need to be addressed or have been of concern in the intervening period. The aim is to highlight those important systemic or holistic issues that have an impact on education in general, but also have a significant impact on the education of disadvantaged students. The education of indigenous children, children located in remote areas and those young people imprisoned in Youth Detention Centres has to be a part of the examination of the overall effectiveness of the education of disadvantaged youth.

This submission therefore specifically addresses item “(e) any other related matters”.

### **Important systemic considerations**

SPELD NSW wishes to emphasise that discussion of issues relating to evidence based research, teacher continuing professional development and the need for influential collaborative leadership are strongly emphasised by the ACER, “A professional community is a way of life, not an add-on program. It is about the ways teachers work together. Traditional top down models of bureaucratic accountability are replaced by horizontal forms of professional accountability and shared responsibility for student learning and well-being”...“Professional communities build in time and opportunities for peer review based on evidence about teaching practices, opportunities for students to learn and learning outcomes. What defines a professional community is a shared commitment to work together to create an effective learning environment. Professional communities are strongly linked in to wider professional networks and associations, from which they also learn.” (ACER, 2016.p.3.). These characteristics refer to education in general, but are very relevant to the education of SLDs students and working collaboratively with their parents.

### **Student characteristics**

It is acknowledged that disadvantaged students come from a wide range of backgrounds; be they NESB, low SES, have neurological, physical and cognitive learning disabilities or difficulties, or are located in remote locations. Approximately 10% of all students have learning difficulties associated with Dyslexia alone. It needs to be said that SLDs also have an influence on student behaviour and can also equally affect gifted students with higher IQs. In the period following the last review there has been much discussion about the education of indigenous students and young offenders in Youth Justice Facilities. As previously stated

education plays a critical role in enabling people to achieve a rewarding and enjoyable life. If this holds true, then society has neglected these young people. The responsible authorities have an obligation to ensure that those in their care achieve a sustainable and worthwhile education and are given the opportunity to contribute productively to their communities. Our previous submission referred to the need for a ‘Whole School Approach’ (WSA) to contribute to student learning. In indigenous communities this becomes difficult because of the lack of suitable school facilities, trained teachers, community role models of learning and lack of education possessed by both their parents and many of the tribal leaders. Aboriginal people in previous generations were denied education, e.g. those forced into reserves, and this has created inter-generational literacy problems that have yet to be rectified. It is encouraging to note that the Australian Government has provided support for explicit direct instruction to improve the literacy skills of school students. It is relevant to note that indigenous adults in Western NSW are also participating in a system of basic education, originally developed in Cuba and called “Yes I can!”. This program is run by the National Aborigine Adult Literacy Commission and has the support of the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, University of New England and the Commonwealth Government, as well as support from the Wilcannia Central School (Adult Learning Australia, 2015); SPELD NSW understands that the program is also operating in other townships in Western NSW. This initiative is of significance to this inquiry because of the essential role of parents and communities in providing support and role models for all students under the intent of the WSA to education. Parents and other members in indigenous communities need appropriate support to enable them to better play a role in their children’s education achievements. It has been found that approximately 30% of indigenous youth have SLDs and there is much illiteracy amongst Aboriginal students who do not have learning difficulty per se. Explicit instruction in letter sounds (synthetic phonics) has not only been found to be successful for

adults, but also for school students (e.g. at Cape York Academy). SPELD NSW believes that these methods should be used to teach Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children to read in kindergarten and prep. We believe that children taught to read with the most effective methods in Tier 1 of Response To Intervention (RTI) are much less likely to become reliant on learning and support and other intervention later in their school career.

Some Youth Detention Centres have achieved significant media attention in recent months. It is imperative that young people are given appropriate and relevant education and outdoor training activities to reduce the incidence of recidivism or repeat offending and that they are encouraged to gain desired and necessary work skills, together with an awareness of what are acceptable behaviours in their communities. Again 40% of youth in detention centres require special education; the majority are indigenous (Juvenile Justice, 2016).

### **Education research**

SPELD NSW acknowledges the importance of the collection and implementation of best evidence based research to inform and validate teaching and learning practice. The development of best practice in the education of students with SLDs remains an important yet contested area of debate between academic researchers on the one hand and policy makers, education bureaucrats, teachers and union officials on the other. Of particular relevance to this inquiry, is a clear conflict between the various views held on how to best teach speech, reading, and writing and comprehension skills to SLD students. There is also a requirement for a better understanding of the difficult and inappropriate behaviour that can be associated with SLDs and in particular, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (AD/HD) and behaviour developed as a result of other students engaging in bullying of SLDs students. This behaviour has an adverse impact upon the learning of all students, as well as, making the teacher's role significantly more stressful and difficult.



The people requesting advice and assistance from SPELD NSW are in the main, concerned with how to improve the literacy skills of students with Dyslexia or the behavioural influences of AD/HD. It is clear that there are some literacy teaching methods in use that are not supported by research and are being promoted by some departments of education, teacher training faculties, schools, teachers and unions and by those with vested commercial interests. There is a significant body of validated research that supports direct instruction in explicit phonics to address literacy deficiencies. We need to monitor and evaluate learning outcomes against teaching method used. Early identification of potential problems is essential. Preschools should be involved in the identification and assessment of SLDs. The recent policy requiring the use of explicit phonics and teacher use of a simple, inexpensive assessment tool for potential learning difficulties at Year 1 level requires further consideration. In reality the identification of students with SLDs should be accepted as being a continuous normal part of the teaching process and is essential for the effectiveness of a RTI methodology. NAPLAN and PISA results have an important role in monitoring educational progress and can contribute to an understanding of the effectiveness of educational change overtime. The results have shown that Australian students have not progressed in the world rankings. It is important that NAPLAN is not seen as just a test of student's learning or school comparison but also providing relevant statistics related to the learning outcomes of socially and economically deprived students, as well as, those with SLDs.

There has been extensive international and domestic criticism of the effectiveness of Reading Recovery (RR) in teaching literacy skills. This whole word literacy learning program has been criticised by academic education researchers worldwide and in New Zealand, the country where it was developed. It is of interest that the NSW report from the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2015) found that RR produced short term gains for *some*

children, but that they washed out completely by Year 3. As an indication of an unclear approach to the acceptance of evidence based research, the NSW DoE last year, called for expressions of interest for an RR trainer to undertake RR training in New Zealand for 12 months, and then be under contract to train new NSW RR teachers over a period of two years. Is this the result of a policy decision to *ignore* evidence based research or just mistaken belief in the effectiveness of the teaching methodology itself? It is understood that many programmes/courses of therapy with no strong evidence base, but claiming to benefit children with SLDs, force parents to sign a non-disclosure statement. This prevents these parents from writing negative reviews on the inefficacy or cost of them.

A significant development in the promotion of evidence based research into the achievement of student early reading success was the launch of The Centre for Independent Studies Literacy Project “Five From Five”. The aim of this project is to reduce the gap between evidence based research and classroom practice. Emphasis is placed on the need for explicit instruction in “...five essential components of reading – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension – from the age of five.”

Classroom teachers in particular, need an understanding of the sources, characteristics and use of evidence based research in their teaching practice. It is suggested that teachers, particularly those engaged in early teacher training, receive some instruction in formal research; its role, methodology, interpretation and use in achieving quality evidence based education outcomes. This understanding of research methodology may lead to a lessening of the gap between academic research and classroom practice and in the longer term contribute to more relevant policy initiatives.

SPELD NSW would like to draw attention to three recent publications that are considered to be of value in assisting both parents and teachers; AUSPELD’s publication “Understanding

learning difficulties. A practical guide for teachers”. This is being developed as a four module online course later in the year by Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation WA. “Understanding learning difficulties. A guide for parents” is now online at <http://uldforparents.com//> and together with The Centre for Independent Studies “Read About It: Scientific Evidence for Effective Teaching of Reading” (Hempenstall, 2016) will make a significant contribution to a more informed understanding of learning difficulties and how best to achieve effective and rewarding learning outcomes.

### **Teacher initial training and continuous professional development**

The Australian and State Governments have recently strengthened the selection of potential candidates for teacher training. Importantly they have also placed more emphasis on special education and literacy skills and the adoption of the findings of validated evidence based research, such as explicit phonics; these changes are encouraging. Literacy skills have to be taught to mastery. University theory content has to be supplemented during practicums by more practical in school training and guidance by skilled classroom mentors. However, it has to be understood that some experienced class teachers may not have been given comprehensive initial training or have not been encouraged to keep up to date with more recent research and policy directives.

Upon appointment to a school, continuous formal and informal Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) has to commence. It is important that it be recognised as continuous learning and be acknowledged for career progression.

All people working in contemporary organisations experience ever accelerating multi-dimensional change. Individual mindsets and organisational procedures have to be adjusted to achieve an appropriate response. As some educators and policy makers may not monitor needed change and new developments, it may become difficult for both them and

departmental systems and procedures to adjust to necessary and beneficial change. Teachers updating their skills and knowledge should have opportunities for teacher professional learning delivered by scientifically trained professionals or multi-disciplinary teams that can update them on the newest discoveries in educational psychology and neuroscience, and how findings can inform pedagogy

### **The critical influence of Leadership**

The exercise of ethical and informed leadership can have profound influence on the output and effectiveness of the DoE, through the development and engagement of its people.

Complex education departments are systems that involve a wide range of functions and people possessing a variety of skills. Effective managerial and educational leadership at the political, policy, administrative, technical, change and community levels is required. This involves developing and engaging “Followers” in setting the vision, sharing of ideas and experiences and developing team and work processes that are based on ethics and the satisfaction of human needs.

All educational leaders, particularly those at the school level, have an obligation to create a culture and climate supportive of the learning of all staff and students, this obligation particularly applies to meeting the needs of those students who are disadvantaged or have learning or behaviour difficulties and those teachers who are new to the teaching profession. School leadership teams have to support the WSA in their engagement with the whole school community.

SPELD NSW is mindful of the DoE’s engagement of community organisations in the development and implementation of the special learning trial in the Illawarra and SE region during 2010. This action reflected a visionary and participative leadership style and awareness of the need for community engagement. The representatives of the community

organisations were given the opportunity to engage in suggesting ideas, based upon community experience, needs and expectations and to make suggestions for change in the implementation process based upon their varied experiences. Regrettably the intention to maintain community organisation consultation was not sustained.

The standard of leadership at the school level is critical. The leadership team needs to have a good understanding of the functions of leadership and of its critical role in guiding and supporting classroom teachers in their essential role in the education of students. Importantly they have to meet the developmental needs of each staff member. School leadership teams have dual responsibilities for instructional leadership and managerial leadership. In the context of this submission it has to be said that the leadership involvement in ensuring that students with SLDs are given creditable best evidence based teaching methods and learning opportunities is essential and required by legislation.

Under a WSA, it is important that the office staff be included in development opportunities. They are frequently the initial contact for parents seeking advice on matters related to SLDs.

The effectiveness of school instructional and administrative leadership should be subject to periodic review.

## **Summary**

Visionary, transformational and ethical school leadership is essential to an understanding of and meeting the needs of students with SLDs their parents and class teachers. Educating students with SLDs requires the DoE and in particular school staff, to understand student personal needs and the nature of their SLDs. The application of teaching methods that are creditable and based upon evidence based research should be required. In addition, teachers

should understand scientific research methods and collaborate on the implementation of effective pedagogy into the classroom.

Consideration should be given to creating a community consultative committee, involving representatives from organisations involved with SLDs, to act as a sounding board for the sharing of ideas and experiences and the implementation of new processes.

It is important that beginning teachers during their initial practicum training, experience practical teaching activities with guidance from experienced mentors with current or recent special education experience. Upon appointment to a teaching position, the teacher commences engagement in teacher professional learning, which includes matters related to SLD students. Leadership engagement at the DoE and school levels is essential.

Many of these recommendations support Jensen's findings in The Grattan Institute Report (2014-1).

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