

Productivity Commission

Schools Workforce study

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Disclaimer: The response is personal and should not be attributed to Deakin University.

I am currently studying for a Masters of Education at Deakin University. I taught Maths over a period of 30 years and my research interest is dyscalculia. Dyscalculia is a specific learning disability (SLD) which affects how children learn to count and hence how they learn arithmetic.

I knew that specific learning disabilities (SLDs) are poorly recognized in Australia before I started studying (unlike the US, UK and Canada) but I realize now that the whole issue of SLDs is even worse than I thought. **This could be rectified if it were mandatory that all pre-service teachers have some knowledge of SLDs.** This poor recognition is reflected in the 42 submissions currently on your website. The word 'disabilities' has only a handful of hits mainly in relation to physical or intellectual disabilities not with regard to learning disabilities.

As submission 42, from the Department of Education Employment

and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) states

'Students with Disabilities- It is estimated that school students with disabilities, including learning difficulties total between 15-20 per cent of the school population in Australia, with 89 per cent of these students attending mainstream schools. As a result, most teachers will have at least one student with disabilities in their classroom every school year.'

On international statistics about 6% of children in Australia will have dyslexia and 6% will have dyscalculia. About 50% of dyslexics are also dyscalculic. This translates to between 1 and 3 children in every classroom in Australia. Children with SLDs are in mainstream schools and are being taught by mainstream teachers. Nevertheless, in Australia, SLDs are regarded as a specialist area of teaching to be confined to electives mainly of interest to special education teachers. Furthermore the poor recognition of SLDs in Australia is reinforced by the fact that pre-service teachers are not taught to identify SLDs in the classroom.

It should be mandatory that all pre-service teachers have some knowledge of SLDs as they are likely to be teaching children with SLDs in mainstream classrooms.

Also from the DEEWR submission 'As well as supporting the capacity of the existing workforce to support students with disabilities, the Government is also focused on making sure that teachers receive appropriate training prior to entering the workforce. Pre-service training in teaching students with disabilities has not previously been a required component of current teaching qualifications in all jurisdictions.

There is also a widespread shortage of teachers with post graduate special education qualifications and research has found that only 10 per cent of teachers have received training in teaching methodologies for students with disabilities or learning difficulties.'

Furthermore 'The More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative' will also provide \$200 million in funding to government and non-government education authorities for the 2012 and 2013 schools years.' Unfortunately this initiative does not include children with SLDs.

Another example of this poor recognition is the recent Victorian State Education Department initiative offering a two year part time mental health graduate diploma. This initiative recognizes that in schools 'there are growing instances of kids with depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders who need to be dealt with' (Teaching Profession Minister Peter Hall, *The Age*, October 2, 2011). But according to Prof. Snow (who runs the course) this diploma does not have a module that covers SLDs. Yet research has shown that people with an SLD are over represented amongst the prison population, the unemployed and mental health statistics (Watson & Boman 2005). Juvenile delinquents have significant number (76%) of SLDs and students with SLDs experience emotional difficulties. Because of the lack of recognition of dyscalculia/SLDs in Australia, teachers are ill equipped to help and support any children with these issues.

If it was mandatory that all pre-service teachers are taught to identify SLDs it would help teachers give their students the help they so desperately need.