

Years ago I heard Ken Johnston, the now retired Cromehurst Principal say: “I’m angry! I’m angry for the kids!” and me too!!! I’m angry about what happened to me and my family, and I certainly am angry that young families continue to suffer in a time when we all should know better; especially the professionals who get paid each week to teach our kids, ALL OUR KIDS, not just the two thirds who can handle traditional teaching methods.

Where is the curiosity, the burning desire to improve Australian education for that vast number of children who have inherited learning disabilities or attention problems? The current teacher training seems to hand out a certificate with one hand and wipe out common sense with the other; then our state education system has failed and perhaps a federal system may in deed be better – it certainly cannot be worse.

How many marriages fail with the added stress of trying to battle the education system on behalf of their LD /ADHD children? Families fall apart, lives are shattered, all because of a reluctance to acknowledge what is staring in the face of teachers everywhere, teacher trainers, and education departments – the necessity to train all teachers about LD / ADHD issues. Honest statistics reveal the percentage of our population who need help; twisted results of basic skills tests etc disguise the truth. How many teen suicides are related to school failure?

--It is time we had a Support Teacher LD / ADHD in every school. (Hours like ½ day per week are an insult to everyone’s intelligence! What can the poor teacher be expected to do?)

--Teacher training courses should include a mandatory core module on Learning Disabilities – and the classroom teacher **ENCOURAGED** to ring the alarm bells if they see unusual symptoms.

--Support teachers should be trained to offer LD/ADHD screening to all students in the early years of school – prep and grade one and two.

As it is now conscientious teachers attend conferences and special ed training courses at their own expense. At least they wisely choose to make their daily lives more bearable.

My kids (now 34 and 32) are a bit like twins born 2 years apart, but their brains are wired the same way. Genetics is everything when it comes to learning. Both my children are dyslexic and ADHD, but I / we did not know that then. It would be a long road to understanding, without any sensible comments from the professionals in our lives. Our understanding came because of “bottom up learning” – because of mothers who would not give up on their children and imported and extracted information from the four corners of the globe to make our mysterious nightmare dissipate.

We had a lovely traditional tutor, who built up my kids in their spelling and a little in their reading; only to have it all disappear in a 2 week holiday break. And when she died from cancer it would be a long time till we joined that tutoring merry-go-round again. Clearly the traditional strategies did not work in a lasting way. And my beautiful, bright enough, compliant, co-operative children were left floundering.

--Teachers said: "We can deal with everything in the classroom!"

--Doctors said: "There is no such thing as dyslexia, you don't know what you are talking about!"

--The School Secretary gave me a dressing down: "After all there are some children who might NEVER learn to read and write, you should count your blessings, yours are probably the nicest kids in this school!" Now that really blew me away!

--I couldn't even make my husband understand my concern.

It must be my imagination, the kids were just fine! In the family I was considered: obsessed, fixated, ridiculous, making a spectacle, pushy, wanted them to come top of the class, wanted them to go to university! All because I wanted them to be able to read and write reasonably well by the end of primary school.

I was fragile. The marriage was fragile. Family relationships were extremely fragile.

We moved to Mona Vale Public School. A 900 pupil school which was very structured and as helpful as any school could be at that stage. With a support teacher who could de-stigmatise the learning disabilities but who had no NO FORMAL special education training – so very few did in those days and even now those with training are scarce on the ground. But Mr Sun had an instinct for lifting self esteem. The kids adored him, other teachers respected him, me too! A life line at last. And a Principal who personally heard every student read twice each year, and insisted on monthly class literacy tests and reports returned to him for filing! At any moment Richard Hoskins could tell how the student was doing in class, in the school, and in the state! A zero tolerance for bullying, all the teachers understood what was expected of them, and all the kids felt confident in their care.

By 1989 our kids were 11 and 13 when we met a Lindamood tutor, Shanagh Sangster, and began with two weeks of daily joint lessons – 1 hour with the tutor, and 1 hour each evening with Mum. Dropping them back then to 1 hour individual lessons per week with Shanagh, but without fail 7 nights per week lessons of 30 minutes each with Mum. The kids set the timer on the stove for 30 minutes. It was tough, no memorising, just direct instruction and sequential training. The kids were about 3 years behind in their reading and spelling – in 5 weeks they had gained about 2 years in ability! "How come I can do this now?" and we all cried.

The improvement had begun in night 6 for our son and night 10 for our daughter. About 1 year to consolidate and make more gains, anchoring sound/symbol recognition. They had inherited auditory discrimination dysfunction the most common reason for reading and spelling problems. Lindamood is a very peculiar non-traditional labour intensive course devised in 1973, but oh so well worth the effort. I know that it does not suit every child with reading difficulties BUT if the strategies taught within it were introduced into every infants school room EVERY child would improve, not just the LD kids but the children without reading issues would grasp the concepts more securely.

Current media misinformation works against our nation. By setting up a smokescreen of highly sensationalised examples of dysfunctional families and children out of control they deprive the average family who face these issues, of sensible information

for whatever reason the reporters still prefer to peddle their extravagant claims and never research the subject in depth.

Because my two did not have behaviour issues, we only saw the dyslexia. An inherited dysfunction with words! Eventually we could see that trait in my husband's family, that brought more understanding. But we failed to notice the ADHD component completely for many years. A component from my side of the family: workaholics, over active, obsessive, non stop people. We had to come to grips with food intolerances in my son especially which produced frequent migraines. Out went MSG, orange juice, overdoses of dairy products – salicylates and vaso amines! His 11 year old friend put us on that path. Out of the mouth of babes! Now in her thirties my daughter faces issues with food intolerances.

As children they would link arms, look at us and say: “Bad breeding stock!” with a strong emphasis on the sheep like baaaaad! And they are quite right.

They have been always employed and dutifully paid their taxes. Now married and producing children of their own, we will at least know what to do should those dyslexic / ADHD qualities be passed on. But it is knowledge purchased with great pain. We walked that painful pathway together as a family and remain intact, oh so many do not survive. Pain that should not have been necessary if the professionals in our lives had been properly trained, or at least opened their eyes to the abundant research, and felt secure enough with their colleagues to open their mouths and make enquiries.

We need to stop wasting government money by producing teachers who have one eye closed and one hand tied behind their backs, who eventually leave the system stressed and broken.

If we aim to have all of our population gainfully employed and paying taxes, then we do need to shake up the education system.