

Background

I have responded to Productivity Commission Draft Report as I believe that this is an important report which will affect how teachers work in schools in the future. I used to be a teacher and care passionately about the teaching profession; which is very demanding, emotionally exhausting but ultimately very satisfying.

As a teacher of Maths, Physics and Computers, over a period of 30 years, I have had the privilege of teaching many children. I have taught in three countries, the UK, Australia and Samoa: In different systems, both State and Private; both day and boarding schools. I have also had the privilege of teaching many different types of children. My experience includes teaching in an all girls school, an all boys school and in mixed schools.

In various positions of responsibility as a Head of Department, Head of Faculty and Year level Co-ordinator I was responsible for the leadership, mentoring care and support of teachers and children with diverse abilities including learning disabilities (LDs).

Learning disabilities have unique characteristics from other disorders or learning issues and require a keen understanding of these differences to provide students with what they need to be successful in school. The best way to help a child with a learning disability (or a child who shows serious signs of struggle to learn) is to have a strong foundation in what learning disabilities are and how to choose appropriate interventions based on this

foundation of knowledge (ldresources.org 2011). The need for mandatory training of pre-service teachers in learning disabilities is evident from this quotation.

Teacher training would potentially be hugely effective within a matter of a few years because of the breadth of teachers who could be trained, and in terms of the sheer number of people with LDs (so with a little output in the initial training phase the effect would last the lifetime of the teacher and potentially impact on every child in Australia), Stuart (cited in Hammond 2002, p. 32). Customized training is a highly effective way to ameliorate disadvantage.

What is a learning disability (LD?)

A learning disability, sometimes also known as a specific learning disability or learning difficulty, is of neurological origin, is genetic and, if not detected early can contribute to detrimental educational, social and health issues for individuals and the communities in which they reside (Hammond 2002, p. 63).

There is also a large co-morbidity (co-occurrence) between LDs. The main LDs are:

*Dyslexia, which is a difficulty with literacy and has a co-morbidity with dyscalculia of roughly 50% (Wilson & Waldie 2010).

*Dyscalculia, which is a difficulty with number.

*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which is a difficulty with communication.

*Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), difficulties with attention, concentration and behavioural control. This has a co-morbidity of roughly 40% with dyscalculia.

*Central Auditory Processing Difficulty (CAPD), difficulty with high level processing of auditory information, (no known co-morbidity prevalence).

It is quite possible for a child to have two or more LDs, for example, dyslexia, dyscalculia and (CAPD). This can make the diagnosis of a particular LD very difficult as the presence of one LD may mask the presence of another.

Both dyslexia and dyscalculia have been called the hidden LDs because children do not usually exhibit early inappropriate or aberrant behaviour. In the case of ADHD and ASD however, early behaviour is often seen as 'different' and is the predominant concern for a parent or teacher. Hence they may not look further for the co-morbidity of other LDs.

Another possible factor affecting the identification of LDs is the co-morbidity of giftedness and LDs. These children are often called 'twice exceptional' (2E) children.

Children with an LD are in mainstream schools. They are not intellectually impaired. In fact a diagnosis can be made using a discrepancy model. That is when a child's achievement or ability in a particular area of the curriculum is significantly below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. In some cases, LDs are masked by another LD or giftedness. Such children can fail to achieve their potential even if they appear to be within the 'normal range'. The phenomenon of co-morbidity together with the poor training of teachers has led to a poor diagnosis of children with LDs

in Australia. The lack of awareness and poor diagnosis of LD children in Australia can be partly explained by history.

History of LDs in Australia

Children are not screened, assessed or given the remediation they need because of the poor recognition of LDs in Australia. This poor recognition flows from government, both State and Federal, through our Universities to teachers, parents and the community at large. This lack of recognition stems, historically from a decision made by the Federal Senate (1976), which concluded that LDs did not exist. At the same time in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada similar research concluded quite the opposite (Hammond 2002).

Now LDs are legally acknowledged in those countries while in Australia they are only legally acknowledged in NSW. This lack of recognition has many implications, one of which is the need for the mandatory pre-service training of all teachers in LDs as advocated by Tarica (2010), and Hammond (2002). Another consequence is the issue of equity.

Equity and social justice

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission has started

New research to look at the experiences of students with disability (including Learning Disability) in Victorian schools. This has arisen because of an increase in complaints to the Commission relating to disability discrimination in education, and

concerns raised by parents of children with disability, disability advocacy groups and members of the Commission's Disability Reference Group about the provision of education services to students with disability,

(The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission retrieved 21 January 2012).

These complaints have arisen due to the complex way in which funding and responsibility for education is divided between Federal and State governments. Federal and State governments have the responsibility for formulating the policy of inclusive education, while University Schools of Education are responsible for training teachers and implementing that policy. Hodkinson (2009, p. 277) thinks that the UK government should

Re-think radically its policy of inclusion to ensure that a coherent plan is formulated which enables higher education institutions' initial teacher training programs to train students who are competent and confident in their abilities to work with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

While the Federal government

Is responsible for the funding and oversight of universities which provide pre-service education of teachers and much of their formal in-service opportunities, State Education Departments' responsibilities include policy setting and evaluation.

Accountability includes the extent of adherence to policies, which are designed to achieve equitable outcomes, and schools are

demonstrating new concern for the needs of students with learning difficulties who in earlier decades were often regarded as a nuisance (Louden 2000, p. 30).

The Federal Government delegates some of its responsibilities for universities to the State Government. In turn, in Victoria the Minister for Higher Education and Skills and Minister responsible for the Teaching Profession delegates some of his responsibilities to the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The VIT is responsible for the accreditation of pre-service education courses until the end of 2012 when it will be the responsibility of The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). The accreditation process is required every 5 years and is carried out by an Accreditation Committee.

Teacher regulatory bodies such as the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) state that 'This supports equity in education for all students.' (Productivity Commission submission 36, page 9). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (submission 39) also pays lip service to children with LDs.

Standards 1.5 and 1.6 (Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning 2011, p. 9)

specifically require teachers to demonstrate their ability to differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities, as well as demonstrating knowledge of strategies to support full participation of students with disability. (Letter from John Baker, Inclusive Education and Engagement Branch, Department of

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 8 November 2011),

While governments have policies of inclusivity, equity and social justice the implementation of these policies is a problem, which has caused the large number of complaints to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. If there were wider recognition and awareness of LDs in Australia the Accreditation Committee would ensure that University Schools of Education would have mandatory training of pre-service teachers in learning disabilities.

Falling through the cracks

Children with a LD represent 10% of the population (Goswami 2008; Hammond 2002; Shalev & Von Aster 2008). These children attend mainstream schools. This translates to between 1 and 3 children in every classroom in Australia. Not all courses for mainstream teachers offer training in LDs. Rohl and Greaves (2005, p. 3) found that there 'was no structural uniformity in pre-service courses across Australia and no guarantee that all pre-service teachers have a minimum level of knowledge or preparation to teach diverse learners'. Some University Schools of Education offer 'teacher education courses specializing in special needs students, these courses are resource intensive and generally appear to attract relatively few enrolments' (Productivity Commission 2011, p. 169). Also many of these special needs courses do not offer training in LDs because children with LDs are not intellectually impaired and are not included in the criteria for special needs. Thus training for children with LDs

has 'fallen through the cracks'.

Teachers are also aware of and concerned about the deficiencies of their training (Louden 2006). SPELD Victoria is an organization, which offers help and support in dyslexia and other learning disabilities. They offer a 4 day (full time) or 10 week (part time) Professional Development course for teachers, which is always well subscribed. Similar types of successful interventions in America by the National Institute of Child Health Development (NICHD) and in the UK are described by Hammond 2002, pp. 26,57)

However, pre-service teachers can only be as good as their training. If they are not trained to recognize or help children with LDs, how can they be held responsible? Teachers bear the burden of this lack of training, which goes to the heart of teacher retention.

Teacher retention

Teacher retention is a major problem for all State governments as expensively trained new teachers regularly leave the teaching profession. It is also a problem for the Federal government as 50% of the first year intake of the 'Teaching for Australia' program are no longer teaching.

One of the issues that all teachers, including new teachers, face is behaviour management. Ryan (Monday, November 28, 2011) quotes Young 'We know that the kids who muck up the most have literacy and numeracy problems and poor skills'. While it can not be suggested that all kids who 'muck up' have LDs, a large percentage of them do. Watson & Boman (2005) mention 76% of juvenile delinquents as having LDs, while people with LDs are over

represented in the statistics for mental health unemployment and the prison population. In addition, Goswami (2008) mentions that 40% of dyscalculics suffer from depression.

This situation is exacerbated in disadvantaged schools in which 'students are more likely to have learning problems' (Considine and Watson 2003) cited in (Productivity Commission 2011, p. 171). If teachers were taught how to teach children with LDs many behaviour management issues would be alleviated. There have been a number of government reports with recommendations to this end.

Government and Churchill Trust reports

The Shorten Report (2010), recommendations 5 and 7 both address the issue of pre-service and in-service training of teachers and the importance of training in LDs, as does the Churchill Report by Hammond (Hammond 2002). The Rose Report (2009) also has similar recommendations ie recommendation 4 page 23, recommendation 6, page 24 and in review

The DCSF should ask the Training Development Agency for Schools and the initial teacher training sector to continue building on initiatives for strengthening coverage of special educational needs and disability (including dyslexia) in initial teacher training courses and through continuing professional development. For example, by capitalising on the Leading Literacy Schools programme so it includes opportunities for trainee teachers to work with experienced teachers who are successfully tackling children's literacy difficulties (page 83)

The elephant in the room

In Victoria the department of education (DEECD) has recently published a resource for teachers called 'Reading Difficulties and Dyslexia Resources' (DEECD 2011). This purports to help teachers both recognize and teach the children in their classrooms who have dyslexia. This is not an appropriate platform to give an analysis or critique of this document. Suffice it to say that if pre-service teacher training in LDs were mandatory this manual would become unnecessary. As then all teachers would be able to recognize and help children with LDs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems to me that pre-service teachers are ill served by the current arrangements in their training. This is evidenced by the problem of teacher retention.

At the human rights level there is also evidence of a failure to implement an, 'equal' education system.

These issues have historical origins but are exacerbated by our complex education systems.

A start could be made by implementation of a mandatory policy of pre-service training in LDs. This does not need to be a burden of additional training but a pruning of existing theoretical training by a more practical approach.

References

Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning 2011, *National Professional Standards for Teachers*, Australian Government, Canberra.

Deecd 2011, *Reading Difficulties and Dyslexia*, Melbourne.

Federal Senate, SCOSLD 1976, *Learning difficulties in children and adults*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

TGO of Science 2008, *Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project. Learning Difficulties: Future challenges*, by Goswami, U, The Government Office for Science, London.

Hammond, L 2002, *Churchill Trust Report :To investigate best practice educational programs and professional services provided to support individuals with Dyslexia, their families and teachers by nonprofit organisations in the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom, for an Australian context.*

Hodkinson, A 2009, 'Pre-service teacher training and special educational needs in England 1970–2008: is government learning the lessons of the past or is it experiencing a groundhog day?', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, vol. 24, no. 3.

Ldresources.Org 2011, '<http://www.ldresources.org/2011/11/understanding-profiles-of-students-with->'.

Louden, WC, L. K. S.; Elkins, J.; Greaves, D.; House, H.; Milton, M.; Nichols, S.; Rivalland, J.; Rohl, M.; Van Kraayenoord, C. 2000, 'Mapping the territory : primary students with learning difficulties: literacy and numeracy. Volume 1 : overview. ', *Canberra: Australia. Dept of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).*

Louden, WR, M.; Gore, J.; Greaves, D.; McIntosh, A.; Wright, R.; Siemon, D.; House, H. 2006, 'Prepared to teach : an investigation into the preparation of teachers to teach literacy and numeracy. ', *Mount Lawley WA: Edith Cowan University.*

Productivity Commission 2011, *Schools' Workforce*, Canberra.

Rohl, MG, D. 2005, 'How are pre-service teachers in Australia being prepared for teaching literacy and numeracy to a diverse range of students?', *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*; v.10 n.1 p.3-8; March 2005.

DfE U.K. 2009, *Identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties*, by Rose, J, Department for Education U.K.

Ryan, D Monday, November 28, 2011, 'A new take on kids behaving badly', *The Age*.

Shalev, RS & Von Aster, MG 2008, 'Identification, classification, and prevalence of developmental dyscalculia', *Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network*.

Shorten, W 2010, *Helping people with dyslexia: A national action agenda*, Canberra.

Tarica, E 2010, 'Seeking a new deal on dyslexia', *The Age*.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission retrieved 21 January 2012, 'Research into experiences of students with disability in Victorian schools'.

Watson, J & Boman, P 2005, 'Mainstreamed students with learning difficulties: Failing and underachieving in the secondary school', *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 43-9.

Wilson, A & Waldie, K 2010, 'Untangling the "dys" from dyslexia and dyscalculia', University of Auckland.