

Introduction

I belong to a self-help/parent support group for parents of children who have learning disabilities like dyslexia. One of our members has asked me to send her submission for her. She is only making this submission on the grounds of strict anonymity, as she does not want her daughter to be identified. So, although my name is on the cover sheet, it is her submission, her story.

My story:

The school system has failed in its main responsibility to my child - it has failed to teach my child to read, write and spell, to any level that would be called literate. My child is nearly 13 years old, has dyslexia (a language based learning disability), and is beginning secondary school this year.

I have contacted numerous secondary schools, and explained that my child is unable to read any of the books on the year 7 school booklist. I asked how the teachers would help my child 'access the academic program.' Not one single secondary school gave me a direct answer to this question. Most couldn't even give me a rough outline. Staff readily stated that my child would have the same experiences as her peers, but couldn't describe how that would happen. I suspect 'access to the academic program' won't happen because I now know that teachers are not trained to help children with dyslexia. And only a few teachers have attended relevant courses or have post graduate training in learning difficulties or learning disabilities.

My understanding of the Disability Standards for Education are that children with disabilities (including learning disabilities such as dyslexia) should be helped to 'access the academic program' on the same basis as students without a disability. How are teachers meant to help students with dyslexia 'access the academic program' when the teachers don't have the relevant training? Are teachers discriminating against dyslexic students on a daily basis because they don't have the relevant training?

Not one secondary school I contacted had any 'specific program' that would help my child further her literacy skills. All schools acknowledged that their teachers were not specifically trained in helping dyslexic students. Most schools said their teachers were specialists in their subject area. How is my child, whose literacy is at a low primary school level, going to be taught how to read, write, and spell, by a 'subject specialist' high school teacher?

Most secondary schools offer a one hour literacy session, in a small group, once a week with a literacy specialist teacher. Is this ludicrously small amount of help meant to help bridge the gap between my child, who's reading at the level of an 8 year old, and her peers who can read?

My child did not receive the help she desperately needed in primary school. My child was only diagnosed with dyslexia last year - in the final year of primary

school. Those crucial junior years, where much learning takes place, have gone for my child. We cannot reclaim them. My child's junior years have been 'wasted' by an education system that has refused to properly educate their teachers in diagnosing and helping children with dyslexia.

My child could not recognize all the letters of the alphabet at the end of the first year of primary school, and reading was non-existent. I was told by both the class teacher, and the vice principal, that many children did not start to read until they were 8 years old, so my daughter was within the 'normal range'. During the second year of school my child was given Reading Recovery and I was told that she was now reading at the expected class level. The Reading Recovery teacher said that by the time my child got to grade 6 there would be no difference between her and her peers, who had not needed Reading Recovery. I unfortunately believed and trusted in what this teacher told me. Who wouldn't? Teachers are trained professionals aren't they? But, not trained in recognizing dyslexia - although I didn't know that at this stage.

My child completed her third and fourth years of primary school, and I often expressed my concerns to teachers that I had seen no further improvement, since Reading Recovery. The teachers said;

- all children progress at different levels, your child will soon have a steep learning curve and catch up, no extra help is needed
- there's nothing wrong with your child, if your child attended a lower socio economic school or perhaps an outlying or rural school your child would be right in the middle, it's only that the standard is so high at this school that it appears to you that your child is at the low end.
- it's been shown that children who struggle with reading haven't been exposed regularly to books at home, all you need to do is read every night with your child. (This was actually the most commonly 'trotted out excuse' by teachers as to why my child had failed to advance in her reading, and I usually replied that both myself and my husband had university degrees and were indeed reading regularly with our child, but the teachers did not seem to acknowledge this.)
- NAPLAN is only a snapshot of a day and it doesn't necessarily give an accurate picture of where your child's achievements lie. I was told this in response to the grade 3 NAPLAN result which showed my child was far behind in all subjects.

At what point in my child's education were these teachers going to acknowledge that my child needed help? Was it that if the teachers denied there was a problem then they need do nothing? Alternatively, did the teachers genuinely not realize that my child was struggling? Who knows, I'm not a mind reader, but I certainly

believe that if these teachers had specific training in dyslexia/learning disabilities that I would not have been 'fed' such throw away lines.

Over the years my daughter has had tutoring and speech therapy, which I have paid for privately. However, as my daughter spends more than 6 hours a day at school - shouldn't the school be doing the majority of the educating? After all, what is the main purpose of attending school? Surely it's to teach the three R's (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic). Mainstream classroom teachers have failed to teach the three RRR's to my dyslexic child, because they do not have the necessary training to teach children with dyslexia/learning disabilities.

In the upper primary years when my child's peers were reading fluently and independently the school decided that my child should have half an hour a week with the Reading Recovery teacher. I asked for more than this, and I was bombarded with comments about lack of funding. I was told that I should just accept that's the way it is.

The exam results of some subjects for my child's grade 5 NAPLAN could not be communicated to me on the NAPLAN report sheet. In a number of subjects my child's achievement was lower than any anticipated level, and thus there was no section to actually place my child's results on the graph. No teacher approached me or made any comment about this alarming NAPLAN result. But, the school decided that my child could now see the Reading Recovery teacher twice a week. However, my child's Individual Education Plan was not changed, so the 'educational program' remained the same. No teacher ever seemed to consider that the NAPLAN result was an indication that the 'educational plan/program' was not working. I now know that dyslexic children learn in a different way to non-dyslexic children, but the teachers did not have the relevant training to implement dyslexia/learning disability programs and change the 'educational program'.

In her sixth year of schooling my child was given an Educational Assessment by the Education Department Psychologist, which showed that my child had made hardly any progress since attending the original Reading Recovery program 4 years previously. Suddenly I was given a diagnosis, my child had a learning difficulty. Big deal -- I'd been saying for years my child was having difficulty learning.

I took my child for an independent assessment, and dyslexia was immediately diagnosed. Extensive recommendations were made. The school says they don't have the funding to put them in place.

Why didn't the Education Departments Psychologist diagnose dyslexia? Why did the psychologist think that recommendations, such as, making a spelling list and sitting at the front of the classroom were adequate for a child who was four years behind her peers in reading? I now know that the Education Departments Psychologists don't have the relevant training either.

My child's future is tenuous. I don't believe my child will stay at school for very many years of secondary school. We have social and confidence issues to deal with now.

I hope 'my story' communicates to everyone whose responsibility it is to bring about policy changes as a result of the schools workforce productivity commission that **all education department psychologists and pre-registration teachers URGENTLY need to be trained in recognizing, and implementing specific programs for children with dyslexia, learning difficulties and learning disabilities.** To fail to do so is to relegate another generation of children with learning disabilities/dyslexia to spending years in a school system that is not helping them realize their potential. And an adult life that likely includes limited opportunities for employment, with the associated roll on effects of financial, social and psychological problems.