

Comments on the Draft Report

Education and Training Workforce: Schools

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Report. I would like to urge the Productivity Commission to include the following recommendations in regard to building workforce knowledge in regard to **specific learning difficulties** (also known as learning disabilities). I write both as a teacher who works with students experiencing difficulties with literacy and as a mother of two children who have visual processing difficulties. I would like to see the following recommendations included:

1. Training in the teaching of Specific Learning Difficulties should be made a compulsory and significant part of all pre-service teacher training courses.
2. Similar training should be available to teachers already teaching in schools.
3. At least one teacher in each primary and secondary school should have specialist training in the field of specific learning difficulties.
4. School psychologists and speech therapists should also be trained in the detection of specific learning difficulties.
5. Funding should be provided for evidence-based programs within schools for students with specific learning difficulties.

In support of these suggestions, I would like to make the following comments:

1. As stated in a number of previous submissions, **there is likely to be one or more students with a specific learning difficulty in every classroom**. Estimates for the prevalence of learning difficulties range from around 8 to 15% of the population.
2. **Specific learning difficulties affect all sections of the population, including those groups who may be otherwise educationally disadvantaged**. This includes those groups identified within the draft report, such as students from a low socioeconomic background, students in rural and remote communities and indigenous students. For members of these groups who also have a learning difficulty, the challenges of learning are compounded. As a teacher of students learning English as a Second Language, for example, I teach some students who struggle with a learning disability in tandem with learning English. These students are doubly in need of ongoing specialist support.

3. **Most teachers currently have little or no knowledge of specific learning difficulties.** Few teachers I work with received any pre-service teacher training in specific learning difficulties. When I use terms such as dyslexia or auditory processing disorder, teachers ask me what they mean. The extent of the omission of specific learning difficulties from teaching courses, post-service professional development programs, disability funding programs and Education Department publications is comparable to a conspiracy of silence. Unfortunately, not talking about a problem does not mean that it does not exist. It just makes it invisible to the people who are in the best position to help – in this case, teachers.
4. **Because teachers are kept in ignorance of specific learning difficulties, students are under diagnosed and under supported.** Teachers are not able to recognise the signs which should lead to testing by a psychologist or specialist in specific learning difficulties. Furthermore, they often don't know who the student should be referred to.
5. **Because schools don't refer students for testing, parents face a circuitous and expensive route to diagnosis.** My 7-year-old son has recently undergone testing by four different professionals (paediatrician, psychologist, occupational therapist and behavioural optometrist) at a total cost of more than \$1300. He has begun educational programs which have so far cost another \$240 for four sessions. We are lucky that we can afford this. I don't feel comfortable recommending a similar course to parents of my students, most of whom are struggling financially. Testing through the public system such as public hospitals often takes a year or more. This is precious time lost for a struggling child and more time for the child to label themselves a failure.
6. **Ignorance about specific learning difficulties reflects poorly on the teaching profession.** There is an expectation in the community that teachers are experts in the field of education. Primary teachers in particular are expected to be experts in teaching the basic skills of literacy and maths. Although this is true to a large extent, the gaping hole in teachers' knowledge when it comes to specific learning difficulties makes teachers appear ignorant. In my experience, parents of students with specific learning difficulties often say they have to educate each teacher each year about their children's learning difficulty. That's if they have a diagnosis. When there is no diagnosis but parents know there is something amiss with their child's learning, parents are often given inappropriate advice by teachers. Parents are not aware that teachers are not trained in recognising specific learning difficulties. They interpret teachers' responses as trying to 'fob them off', not caring or being incompetent at

their jobs. This is an unjust and unhelpful interpretation for all involved – teacher, student and parent.

7. **Teachers want to know more about specific learning difficulties.** The primary staff at my school recently requested further training in this area. Some staff members (including myself) have undertaken training in their own time and at their own expense. The vast majority of teachers I've worked with in twenty years of teaching are highly motivated to help their students succeed. They need to be trusted with the knowledge to help them do this.
8. **Ignoring students' specific learning difficulties has a dreadful psychological impact on the child.** In the long term, it also leads to reduced productivity in the workforce as otherwise intelligent (and sometimes gifted) students grow into adults who have not reached their full potential. Our children deserve better. Building a teacher workforce which can bring out the best in students with specific learning difficulties will lead to greater wellbeing for the individual. It will also lead to a fairer, happier and more productive society.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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