

Dear Education and Training Workforce Commission

I have read your draft report, which was released on 17 November 2011 and would like to make the following written comments to the Productivity Commission:

I have had a keen interest in ensuring that children with learning disabilities/difficulties are supported to reach their true potential for a number of years and agree that there are a number of groups that are being failed through weaknesses in the current education system. The comments I make pertain mainly to students who are dyslexic, although I feel that many of these suggestions would benefit all disadvantaged groups.

I believe that all children are entitled to have access to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum, which is differentiated to meet their individual needs and affords them the opportunity to achieve their personal potential. I feel strongly that students with dyslexia are denied this opportunity and are being allowed to fail in Australia's schools through lack of funding, support and teacher knowledge.

I came to Melbourne from England at the end of 2006. I have been a teacher for 30 years. I took a RSA diploma course in Dyslexia, which qualifies me to assess and write reports for children and adults. These qualifications have been verified by the Victoria Institute of Teaching. In England, I gave talks nationally to groups about 'Integrating Children with Dyslexia into the Mainstream Classroom,' I also advised schools about writing policies for learning difficulties/disabilities. I ran courses for teachers, set up parent support groups and advised on resources. My last position in England was as a school principal. I took over a failing school in a rural area with students from an extremely mixed socio-economic background, and increased the number on roll by 100% within 18 months. In 2005 and 2006 the school came top of the league tables in Devon (despite the fact that I had the highest number of children, attending my school, with statements for learning disabilities in the county) and was 10th out of over 17,000 schools in England. In 2007, I was invited to Buckingham Palace in recognition of my "Outstanding Contribution to Education."

I had no intention of returning to education until I found out about the lack of knowledge and support for people who are dyslexic in Victoria. I now assess children and adults for dyslexia and also run courses for parents, teachers and classroom assistants. My courses for teachers are accredited by the Victoria Institute of Teaching and an article I wrote about dyslexic students in Victoria was recently published in The Age newspaper.

My first client in Victoria was a 15-year-old boy who I assessed as being severely dyslexic. This boy bore no relation to the boy the school had described in my questionnaire. According to them, he had no difficulties with reading or with spelling yet his reading age, when I assessed him, was 8 years and his spelling age 7 years. And how was it that no one at the school he attended had picked up that he could be dyslexic? There are many reasons and coming from a country that recognises and funds children and adults with dyslexia, I was shocked at the current situation in Victoria, although, from what I can understand, it is a countrywide problem.

When I assess children for dyslexia, I meet many parents who are upset and angry that their child's teachers have not picked up on the fact that they have dyslexia. Many have tried to persuade the school for years that their children have difficulties with learning, often to be told that their child is lazy, a day-dreamer, that it is a "Boy thing," or they would grow out of it! A number of parents have reported that teachers have informed them, 'At this school we don't mention the 'D' word.' They make it sound like a Disease! Some parents and teachers tell me that when they ask for a school psychology assessment they are told that whatever the psychologist finds they will not diagnose 'dyslexia.' Why not, if that is their disability? I wonder how long a doctor would last in his job if he told a patient that no matter what he found he would not diagnose breast cancer?

It's easy to blame lack of identification on the teacher however, in Victoria, teacher training Universities do not train teachers about dyslexia, even though up to 10% of the Australian population are dyslexic. Every year there will be teachers in Victorian schools who have children in their class who may be intelligent, articulate, and creative and yet, whatever normal classroom methods they use, the teachers cannot improve their reading, writing and spelling ability. And, every year, the school will wonder why there is always a small group of children who don't respond to the Reading Recovery programme?

The teachers have little knowledge or understanding of dyslexia but know that there is a problem that they cannot fix therefore they (or the parents) will often refer the children to a whole spectrum of professionals for assessments to try to find an answer. By the time parents bring their children to me for a dyslexia

assessment many have already been assessed by the optometrist, the audiologist, the speech and language therapist, the occupational therapist and the psychologist and they may only be 7 years old. Parents will do this to find an answer for their children but how much has the parent had to pay and what trauma has the child gone through in the process?

This presents another problem: At the moment, the only people who can assess children for dyslexia in Australia (unless they have gained their qualification overseas) are psychologists and many have never taught in schools or specialised in the field of dyslexia. A lot of parents and teachers complain to me that educational assessment reports are full of terms that they do not understand and come with no recommendations. Reports like this are expensive, pointless and unhelpful. Nobody wants a label for the sake of it. We need some kind of standard and guidelines for educational reports.

Please take into account the fact that there are also a number of overseas trained experts living and working in Australia who can support these children with their wealth of knowledge and skills, when making your recommendations.

So much support and remediation could be provided within the school without resorting to a formal assessment and a label if teachers were trained to identify dyslexia and knew how to meet those needs. Moreover, it is not just in Victoria; I have parents who fly in to Melbourne for the day, from other states, just so that I can assess their children, which is ludicrous.

Teachers want to know more about dyslexia, they want to be able to help their students. I have started running whole day courses and twilight PDs accredited by the Victorian Institute of Teachers to provide teachers with knowledge and resources to meet the needs of the dyslexic child in class and individually. At the end of my courses, a number of teachers say that they thought they knew what dyslexia was but realise they had no idea. They can all tell me of children they have in their school who they now suspect are dyslexic. Many ask me if I could recommend a course where they could do further study or train to be an assessor. I do know of courses but they would have to travel to England or America, which sounds ridiculous but there are teachers in Victoria who do this. A one-day course is helpful but is not enough; the Diploma course I took in England, which qualifies me to assess and teach dyslexic children and adults, was excellent, it was comprehensive and intense. However, it was a year in length, it was accredited, and that is what we need here. A series of courses that addresses the issues that dyslexia presents in the education system.

In your draft report (chapter 9 page 174) it states that 'The National Professional Standards for Teachers....articulates the requirement for teachers to have knowledge and understanding of the learning needs of students....with disability.' Chapter 9, page 178 of your report states 'Overall, it is important that teachers have the capacity to identify and respond to the needs of every student, recognise and act on underperformance early on in a student's learning, and maintain high aspirations for all students. Strategies that aim to enhance the overall effectiveness of the schools workforce are therefore very important for improving the outcomes of disadvantaged students, and, in some ways, offer the prospect of the largest gains to these students.' Yet in Chapter 9, page 183, final paragraph; your response to suggestions that training in how to meet the needs of 'disadvantaged students' should become a mandatory component of teacher training courses is that; 'the potential benefits need to be balanced against the practical limits of expanding the teacher training curriculum.'

Whilst I understand that there is only so much that can be packed into the four years of teacher training and priorities have to be made; every teacher is going to meet students with learning difficulties in every class that they teach. This will happen from the first day that they start teaching; therefore it makes most sense to provide training as part of the initial teacher training curriculum. I have not yet met a teacher who has told me that initial training about learning difficulties has adequately prepared them to meet needs of their students in the classroom. I have not met one teacher who has had any training about dyslexia at university. It is both vital and possible to include training. For example, an Exeter university whose trainee teachers were mentored at my school, devoted a 2-week block to Specific Learning Difficulties. They invited practitioners and experts to run workshops for the 2 weeks and the students signed up for them. I was invited to talk to the trainee teachers about how to integrate children with learning difficulties into their classroom and who could support them. Other experts ran workshops on more specific areas like Autism, or Behaviour Management, Useful IT resources, effective management of classroom assistants etc. Over the 2 week period the students receive input over a wide of issues concerning learning difficulties/disabilities. It would not be difficult to do this here. You would not have to create new positions to deliver this program as there are experts in every Australian state, who you could call on.

Unfortunately, if we train teachers and ensure that assessment reports are easy to understand and helpful, we come up against the next major hurdle: In Victoria there is no funding in schools for dyslexic children. In order to receive funding for learning, children have to have a very low IQ. Most dyslexic children are of average to above average intelligence and some are gifted, therefore immediately they are discriminated against. Some parents tell me that, even without funding, the school should still provide the appropriate support. To an extent I agree as there is a lot that can be done in terms of organisation and teaching styles to accommodate these children. However, to truly meet the needs of dyslexic children, there should be one member of staff in each school who has received extensive dyslexia training and is capable of writing individual learning programmes for students. All teachers should know what dyslexia is, how to recognise it and how to teach dyslexic children. In England, dyslexia is recognised as a disability and students are funded in schools. As a school principal in England, I would have found it difficult to provide individualised support and resources if I had not been provided with appropriate funding and can sympathise with the difficulties faced by schools here due to lack of funds.

Next problem; - Naplan tests (like SATs in England) should tell a school how well their students are performing, what the schools are doing well and what they need to improve. The results should inform the Federal and State Governments how well the education system is working and also inform future planning and funding. For example, if a high percentage of children are achieving below the National average or the National average is falling there would be a need for the government to look into this and direct funds to raising standards where needed. Here's the problem: there is now a school's website publishing results and league tables and parents use league tables to choose schools. Schools are therefore under pressure to perform and many parents who bring their child to me for assessments tell me that the school asks them not to bring their child to school when the Naplan tests are taking place because it will lower the school's scores! Therefore, as well as the terrible effect on the child's self-esteem, the government will have no idea how many children actually need support because they aren't taking the test.

The pressure was the same in England but we were not allowed, quite rightly, to preclude a child from the tests and if we did our percentage score was calculated from the number of pupils in that year, not the number who took the test. Therefore, if pupils did not take the test it had a negative impact on our scores. As a consequence, because all children had to take the test, a lot more effort was made by teachers to improve the achievements of every child. Perhaps Naplan tests could be made compulsory here with the appropriate support given to pupils by way of extra time, a reader or amanuensis, if appropriate? Dyslexic students often fail formal mathematics tests because of the reading involved, not because of their lack of mathematical ability; with the support of a reader this issue can be overcome. Many dyslexic students are verbally articulate and imaginative but have difficulties in processing and choose safe spellings, which do not match their verbal intellect. With the help of an amanuensis they can display their ability in the writing tasks. However, at the moment, I am informed that dyslexic students are not allowed additional support because dyslexia is not recognised.

This is another way that dyslexic children are actively discriminated against. They are not allowed additional time, a reader or amanuensis yet, because of their poor processing abilities, dyslexic students read at a much slower rate than non-dyslexic students, they also take longer to process their thoughts and sequence them in a logical order for writing. According to a 1991 study conducted at the University of California-Berkeley, allowing extra time for students in examinations makes a significant difference. Dyslexic students taking a standardised reading test scored on par with their peers when granted extra time, but lagged significantly when they were not. Importantly, students without the disability produced virtually the same scores regardless of whether they were given additional time, therefore this is not giving dyslexic students an advantage; just the same opportunities.

Many of the dyslexic teenagers and adults I assess have low self-esteem and lack confidence. Some have anxiety attacks when they have to take formal exams, some are on anti-depressants and under-going counselling. Many adults still feel resentment towards the schools who failed them, years after they have left. They are angry that they were placed in the low ability group and were "bored to tears" when there was nothing wrong with their intelligence. They resented being told that they were not trying hard enough when they knew they were trying harder than most and were exhausted by the time they got home from school.

A number of teenagers I assess have been excluded from a school or are on the verge of being excluded. When I talk to them about their behaviour, they often tell me that if they are made to stand up and read in front of their peers or to come up to a board and scribe, they will play up enough to be sent out of class. The

reason; because this is infinitely better than their peers finding out that they cannot read or spell and thinking that they are stupid.

Now that Victoria has cut VCAL funding another path has closed for many of these children.

Teachers in Victoria tell me that training was, and still is, inadequate or non-existent. Children are not being identified soon enough if, at all. In England, there was a Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs and a Disability Code of Practice for schools, which gave guidelines to teaching staff about specific learning difficulties and the type and amount of support that should be provided. There was training for teachers and classroom assistants at a variety of levels. Individual schools could work towards a Dyslexia Mark by becoming dyslexia-friendly. Employers could do the same for their companies. I would be very happy to share any of these documents and information with you.

Dyslexia is a learning disability. It is essential that the Government recognises this and provides the appropriate funding and training for schools so that the dyslexic student, like other students with disabilities, has equal access to the curriculum and their needs can be met.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours faithfully

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