

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

SCHOOLS WORKFORCE

SPELD NSW

Reference: Productivity Commission 2011. *Schools Workforce* Draft Research Report.

Introduction

The Specific Learning Difficulties Association of NSW Inc. (SPELD NSW) welcomes and supports the Government initiative in conducting a Productivity Commission study to examine issues impacting on workforces in the early childhood development and schooling sectors.

SPELD NSW is a Public Benevolent Institution founded in 1968 whose mission is to provide advice and services to children and adults with specific learning difficulties (SLD) and those who teach, work with and care for them. The State based associations are linked nationally through The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD).

The Draft Report contains valuable and relevant discussion on issues related to the schools workforce and has made a significant number of valid recommendations for change. Some of the discussion in this submission will support the report findings. The aim of this submission is to emphasise the importance of appropriate support for students with learning disabilities and of how this support can be best provided in schools. The submission contains matters that are also of relevance to the support of other disadvantaged students.

SPELD NSW believes it can make a valuable contribution to this crucial study into the education workforce by highlighting some important issue in the provision of adequate care and support for young people with SLD that impact upon their education. It is of concern that in the Draft Report there is little mention of learning disabilities or difficulties. Mention of learning disadvantages; have in the main been confined to indigenous, poor socio-economic and remote students. These are important and significant categories of students whose learning needs require attention, but in the context of this submission, we need to view the school and its workforce in a more systemic way. The broader impacts of learning and behaviour disability on education delivery and student life ambitions need to be addressed. For example it is estimated (NSWJJ, 2008) that 40% of juveniles in correctional centres and serving Community orders, have learning difficulties (in need of special education - Custody 40%, Community 36%. In addition 30% suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is appreciated that other people with learning disadvantage are also over represented in these centres e.g. Indigenous youth.

Learning disabilities

It is estimated that 10% of students in classrooms have some form of learning and/or behaviour disability and of these 80% have Dyslexia (Coltheart, 2010). Dyslexia is a lifelong neurological impairment that affects ability to read that is not associated with intellectual ability, indeed many highly intelligent people can be affected by Dyslexia and other learning or behaviour difficulties. Whilst Dyslexia is of much significance, it has to be understood that other learning disabilities also have to be addressed, such as Dysgraphia (writing), Dyscalculia (maths) and (ADHD) (concentration

and behaviour). Dyscalculia is a disability that can have a profound effect on people, in that they often have no memory retention for numbers or formulas. Dyscalculia is again a lifelong disability. ADHD affects up to 5% of school age children and can feature inattentive or hyperactive-impulsive disorders or a combination of both (Selikowitz, 2009).

The estimate of the number of students with SLD is made difficult because there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a 'learning disability'. The terms 'learning disability' and 'learning difficulty' are often interchanged and can lead to confusion. We must remember that there are students at all levels of education provision who have a learning disability.

In the context of this review it has to be emphasised that some students are 'instructional casualties' through poor curriculum or classroom practice and are not learning disabled. Students need to be given guidance in 'learning to learn' (Olivier & Bowler, 1996) through identifying their preferred learning style and learning environment. Teachers need to apply a range of teaching strategies and methods to meet individual student learning styles and needs. It is also important that teachers monitor developments in information and communication technology with a view to applying new applications in the classroom, and to support those students whose learning styles are best met by using such new technology.

Importance of early identification in schooling

Early identification and assessment of children with SLD is essential to the achievement of positive academic and daily life outcomes. If SLD persists, remediation becomes increasingly problematic and expensive. It is thus imperative that SLD are identified, with appropriate screening, assessment and intervention in primary and secondary stages of education. The Kindergarten and Grade One and Two years are particularly important. The whole matter of early intervention, while logically desirable, is fraught with difficulties because children develop skills and understandings at such different rates in early years. It can also be argued that the pre-school stage of learning plays a foundational role in learning. This stage can have a positive or negative impact on the kindergarten stage of education, depending on the learning environment and the appropriateness of the literacy and numeracy strategies used by parents and/or pre-schools.

A recent and informative approach to the important task of identifying and supporting students experiencing difficulties with learning, as early as possible during their years of schooling, is the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Although having some deficiencies, this model has been increasingly adopted in the United States (see NJCLD, 2005) and has also been recommended in the UK (Rose, 2009).

The RTI model, which was designed to improve learning outcomes for all students, is based on the premise that if effective instruction is provided during the earliest years of schooling, fewer students will require more intensive levels of instructional support during their subsequent years at school (Mellard, McKnight & Jordan, 2010).

In the first level (Tier 1), the primary prevention level of the RTI model, teachers work collaboratively with support staff to ensure that they are delivering effective initial instruction; that is, systematic, direct and explicit instruction as required, to all students in the inclusive classroom (DEST, 2005). In the second level (Tier 2), the secondary prevention level, the teacher and support staff work collaboratively to deliver effective small group targeted instruction that supplements level one

instruction for the small group of students who require additional support (approximately 10-15% of students). In the third level (Tier 3), the tertiary prevention level, intensive ongoing individual support is provided by support staff in consultation with the classroom teacher for students whose learning difficulties continue, despite effective initial teaching and extra small group instructional support. It is this third group of students (2-5% of students), who can be considered to have significant or severe learning disabilities. This approach provides an educational solution to assist classroom teachers who have to face the real issues of dealing with students who have differing degrees of SLD and desired behaviour in the classroom. However, we have to remember that an effective long term solution requires the collaboration and active engagement of education, health professionals and importantly, parents. The RTI model also has application to the support and more productive learning of other disadvantaged students.

Other education departments, particularly the UK, USA and Hong Kong, have placed a lot of emphasis on the “Whole School Approach” (WSA) to education. This is a systemic approach wherein all involved with the education of students work collaboratively in a co-ordinated way. There is a need for a close relationship between teacher, student, parent, other subject teachers, principals, school administrative staff, school counsellors, special support teachers, teacher aides and if required, medical and other health professionals. The development of effective relationships requires effective instructional and managerial leadership and engagement at all levels. The successful development of students with learning disabilities is premised on all teachers having an understanding of the issues associated with learning disabilities and what they can do to identify and assist learning disabled students. The need for this understanding is critical and cannot be ignored. Again, the WSA has application to all categories of disadvantaged students. WSA makes the need for a ‘school community’ explicit and emphasises that parents and other professionals are important members of this community. It has to become part of the culture of the school. This requires instructional and managerial leadership by school principals and the whole leadership team.

The development of Student Learning Plans (SLP) by teachers, in consultation with students and parents, involves the WSA and the RTI model and have relevance in meeting individual motivation and learning needs. Student commitment and parent engagement are essential to ensure that what is agreed, is supported in the home and that the child is appropriately supervised to commit time and effort to the achievement of the SLP.

Teacher training

Initial or beginning

Internationally and nationally, there is evidence that at the university undergraduate teacher training course level, there has been a lack of emphasis placed on Special Education (Rohl & Greaves, 2005). In most universities Special Education for beginning teachers involves one core subject of 30 (or fewer) hours face to face plus some practical involvement during a practicum. There are thus a growing number of teachers who do not have the knowledge and experience to enable them to provide timely and effective assistance and advice to those teachers and parents who are struggling to meet their student’s special needs. It is appreciated that initial training courses are time bound, but an understanding of special education is essential in the schooling workforce. As a minimum requirement, teachers need some exposure to the issues in their initial training, followed by required CPD, with additional mentoring by experienced special education teachers in each school.

There is also the matter of literacy training for teachers. There needs to be a requirement for education authorities to stipulate that beginning teachers of early childhood and primary-aged children demonstrate competence in teaching sounds of letters and how to blend and manipulate them to form words. Phonics needs to be taught to mastery.

In addition to the requirement for special education awareness training for beginning teachers there is the matter of literacy training of teachers. The 2005 Nelson inquiry into the Teaching of Reading (DEST, 2005) found that 50% of the 34 teacher training programs in Australia devoted less than 5% of the curriculum to teaching about reading and that 60 % of senior teachers considered the majority of beginning teachers were not equipped to teach children to read.

Ongoing or Continuing professional development

There is also a critical need for classroom teachers to be given encouragement, opportunity and support to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Such training is needed now in the systematic teaching of phonics and also to enable teachers to identify, assess and support students with SLD. SPELD recommends that the possibility of academic recognition for engagement in CPD should be examined to give recognition and reward of their involvement and professional competence.

In NSW, as part of the Department of Education and Communities School Learning Support trial, an on-line distance learning special education package is being developed to assist teachers in continuing their learning experience. It has been well received by participants and can indicate one direction for ongoing learning.

Teachers and the school leadership team should be given the opportunity and encouragement to engage in Post Graduate studies in Special Education and related subjects. Principals and leadership teams should not just rely on learning instructional and managerial leadership by osmosis. Post-Graduate studies and other in-house and external course participation should be required as part of CPD. If the school workforce is to be considered as being a professional workforce, then participation in CPD activities should be a mandatory requirement, as it is in many other professions.

Engagement with research

In the case of SLD, the possible causes are many and the interventions required differ according to individual underlying factors. It is important that teachers and administrators take account of multi-disciplinary empirical research into the causes, identification, assessment, treatment, curriculum and learning and teaching methods needed to reduce the impact of SLD on students and the community. More empirical research effort into the causes, diagnosis, assessment, treatment, learning techniques and support for disabled learners needs to be encouraged and given real recognition and support. This research effort needs to be co-ordinated at the Federal level. As with other medical and health professions, teachers need the training and encouragement to engage in empirical research studies. If teaching involves professionals, who are ongoing learners themselves, then they need opportunity to engage in relevant multi-disciplinary research with medical and other health professionals, such as paediatricians, neurologists and speech pathologists.

Classroom teachers should also be encouraged and supported to engage in Action Research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). It is not possible in this submission to discuss Action Research in detail, but it is involved in finding solutions to existing problems and the taking of action to resolve those problems. The process can lead to new theory being developed. In this submission, it is related to how teachers can address the actions that will assist them in overcoming the learning difficulties experienced by their students and the gaining of more generalizable knowledge about SLD. Networking and collaboration between teachers, in and outside of their school, can draw attention to problems and share possible solutions.

A variety of apparent causes, treatments and teaching and learning strategies for SLD have been espoused, but not all have been empirically demonstrated to be effective. The need for an evidence based approach to teaching and learning difficulties is needed.

Conclusion

SPELD NSW believes that the draft report contains much discussion about the schooling workforce and the recommendations are worthy of further examination and application. However we do feel that there has been little emphasis on the teacher and school leadership preparation and their role in addressing the quite significant and important influences of SLD on student learning and the achievement of their life goals. Education providers play a very significant role in helping students and future community members to play a positive and not dysfunctional or destructive role in society.

Many of the issues raised in this submission have been clearly expressed in an article by Firth (2008).

Points of significance and relevance are:

“Compared with the US and Britain - and, more recently, New Zealand - learning disabilities have been ignored in Australia. The consequences are that these students are at risk of developing behavioural problems at school - of school dropout, mental health problems and delinquency.”

“There is instead widespread confusion among Australian teachers [and many others] over the terms "learning difficulties" and "learning disabilities".

“Because a shared definition of learning disabilities is not a part of Australian educational discourse, many teachers and parents are unaware of its genetic and permanent nature.”

“Lack of definition also precludes diagnosis. It is possible in Australia for students to progress through some schools without an accurate diagnosis that explains the difficulties faced by them and their teachers and that provides a basis for effective support.”

“Recognition of the problem and adequate funding for diagnosis and school support is urgently needed. A nationally agreed definition of learning disabilities, its compulsory study in teacher training, and at least one teacher with advanced specialist knowledge in each school would be an excellent beginning.”

“Such support would prevent the economic and social costs that occur when students are not given the opportunity to develop their potential. It would help students...to succeed.”

SPELD NSW recommends that:

1. All Australian undergraduate Education degrees have a minimum of two core subjects dedicated to Special Education with at least 50% of Special Education teaching to be focused on SLD.

2. A National mandatory CPD program for the teaching profession be introduced with a minimum of 20% of CPD credits to come from SLD training.
3. Teachers be supported financially and given the employment flexibility to undertake Post-Graduate studies in Special Education with a focus on SLD.
4. Teachers be given the skills, opportunities and encouragement to engage in empirical research activities related to developments in SLD and learning and teaching practice. Teachers be encouraged to engage in Action Research, addressing the actions they can take to solve problems and issues they face in the classroom or the broader school.
5. Principals and school leadership teams be encouraged to undertake Post-Graduate studies in Education Administration, with an emphasis on instructional and managerial leadership, managing change and inter-personal communication.
6. Students be assisted in identifying their preferred learning style, through engagement in 'learn to learn' awareness and development sessions.
7. Teachers be involved in the development of a Nationally agreed definition of SLD.
8. Teachers should be involved in monitoring the incidence of SLD and the educational, social and economic impact on students with SLD.
9. Teachers be rewarded for improved educational, social and economic outcomes of students with SLD.
10. Teachers be involved in the early identification and treatment of SLD in schools, using a systematic framework (such as the RTI model) within the boarder context of the WSA.
11. Each primary and secondary school should have at least one teacher with Post-Graduate SLD training.

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