

Submission to the Productivity Commission Study of the Education and Training Workforce: Schools

Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA)
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Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

In April 2010 the Productivity Commission was commissioned to undertake a study of the Education and Training Workforce with a focus on issues impacting on the workforce in vocational education and training (VET), early childhood development (ECD), and schools.

A report on the first phase of the study, on the Vocational Education and Training sector, was submitted to the Australian Government in April 2011 and released on 5 May 2011. A report on the second phase of the study, on Early Childhood Development, was submitted to the Australian Government in November 2011 and released on 1 December 2011. A report on the third phase of the study, on the Schools Workforce, is due to be submitted to the Australian Government in April 2012.

An issues paper on the Schools workforce study was released on 1 June 2011, and covered a range of issues on which the Commission sought information and feedback. Responses to the issues paper were due by 19 August 2011, and a draft report based on these responses was released on 17 November 2011. Submissions in response to the draft report are due by 17 February, prior to the submission of the final report in April 2012.

The focus of the study on the Schools Workforce is to report on:

- factors affecting the supply of, and demand for, school workers
- whether the knowledge and skills base of the workforce, and its deployment within and across schools and regions, are appropriate to meet the community's needs
- whether policy, governance and regulatory arrangements (in place or in prospect) are conducive to maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of the schools workforce and, if not, what changes may be required.

In so far as LDA is an organisation supporting effective evidence-based instruction, particularly for students who are experiencing difficulties in learning, our concern is with the second and third of the three points listed above.

Knowledge and skills of the teaching workforce

With regard to the second point, relating to the knowledge and skills of the teaching workforce, we submit that there are serious deficiencies in the training of teachers which have serious consequences for the effectiveness of their teaching, and impact particularly on students who are most at risk of learning failure. The fundamental reason for this is that over the past two to three decades teacher training has been dominated by what has been called the constructivist view of learning, which takes the view that learning occurs best through the 'discovery approach', where students learn by 'doing' and finding out things for themselves,

rather than by being specifically taught the basic concepts and skills that are required to develop their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter of the school curriculum. This view has persisted despite accumulating evidence that direct instruction is the most effective approach to the teaching of skills and knowledge, and that a sound basis of skills and knowledge is essential for further learning and the development of expertise in specific areas of learning. (See, for example, Sweller, 2009; Hirsch, 1996).

Maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of the schools workforce

With regard to the third point as to whether policy, governance and regulatory arrangements currently in place or in prospect are conducive to maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of the schools workforce, we submit that there are currently no clear policies or guidelines in place to address the serious deficiencies that currently exist in teacher training programs, leading to the continuing supply of teachers who are not adequately trained to teach effectively, using evidence-based approaches to ensure effective teaching, and who do not fully understand the concept of scientific evidence, and who are therefore unable to distinguish between methods whose use is based on personal opinion, belief, or faith as to their effectiveness, and methods whose effectiveness is supported by research evidence and are based on a theoretical understanding of the processes involved in learning, and why some methods are more effective than others. (See, for example, the Report of the National Enquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005), which found that primary teacher pre-service education did not adequately prepare teachers for the task of teaching the essential skills of reading and writing, and the Report of the Dyslexia Working Party (2010), which identified the link between inadequate teacher training and the high proportion of ‘instructional casualties’, or students whose problems in learning to read were a direct result of inadequate teaching rather than any underlying learning problem.)

Reducing educational disadvantage and students with learning difficulties

Chapter 9 of the Schools Workforce Draft Report addresses the issue of reducing educational disadvantage. It is noted that a large body of Australian and international evidence shows that educational disadvantage is more likely to be experienced by students from low-SES backgrounds, those in rural and remote areas, and those with a disability or other special needs. Indigenous students, in particular, can face multiple sources of disadvantage.

The issue of how best to cater for the needs of students with learning difficulties in the school system is of particular relevance to LDA.

It is generally recognized that some 20 to 30 per cent of students in the school population have difficulties in learning, and particularly in learning to read. Of this group of students, most respond well to effective intervention, although there remain a small percentage, usually estimated at somewhere between 2 to 5 per cent of the school population, who fail to respond to intervention, and have persistent and ongoing problems which require continuing support to address their learning needs.

It should be noted that in Australia, contrary to the situation in the United States, students with learning difficulties who do not have a designated disability are not eligible for funding under the program for students with disabilities. However, there have in recent years been calls to include students with dyslexia in the category of students with disabilities, and the recent trial of a model to gather comparable data about school students with disabilities, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the Department of Education, Employment and

Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2011), included the new category of learning disability, covering dyslexia and speech and language disorders which require ongoing long-term support, and related diagnoses. This category of learning disability has not previously been recognised as a disability under the program of educational funding for students with a disability. This new category accounted for 33 per cent of the students with disabilities identified in this study, which represents an estimated 2.8 of the total school population.

Support for Students with Dyslexia

While LDA supports the need for recognition of the ongoing support needs for students with severe reading difficulties (dyslexia), we have serious reservations about the model of support for such students under the program for students with disabilities.

The fundamental problem with this model is that it requires a diagnosis of dyslexia prior to support being made available. However, a diagnosis of dyslexia, in terms of non-response to intervention following adequate exposure to effective teaching of initial reading, can only be made after intervention has been tried and failed. Prior to this it is not possible to determine whether observed reading difficulties are due to dyslexia, defined as a language-based learning disability of neurological origin, most usually associated with difficulties in phonological processing, or to other causes, including environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage, poor oral language skills, inadequate instruction, or low ability level. As a result, the emphasis shifts from providing support to students who have reading difficulties, regardless of the cause of the difficulty, to spending time and effort on diagnosis, in order to distinguish between those students whose reading difficulties can be attributed to 'dyslexia' and therefore meet the criteria for funding under the program for students with disabilities, as distinct from those students whose reading difficulties are due to other causes, such as environmental disadvantage or inadequate teaching, and who therefore do not qualify for support under the program for students with disabilities. This process both delays access to early intervention, which is known to be a critical factor in the effectiveness of intervention, and excludes from access to support for their reading difficulty a large number of students whose reading difficulties cannot be attributed to dyslexia.

Another major problem with this model is the nature of the support provided.

Typically a student who has been identified as eligible for support under the student disability program is eligible to receive funding to support an integration or teacher aide to assist the student for a certain number of hours per week. How effective this assistance is will vary from student to student, depending on the nature of their needs and the competence of the teacher aide. However, in the case of students experiencing difficulties with reading, the evidence indicates that such students require expert help based on systematic teaching of the essential skills required for reading. Teacher aides do not normally have this kind of expertise, and while it is possible that they can be trained to deliver a program, this would need to be done under the supervision of an appropriately qualified expert in this area. In effect, this means that those students most in need of expert assistance are receiving support through less qualified teacher aides rather than from teachers with special expertise in the teaching students with learning difficulties.

The Response to Intervention Model

Given the problems associated with models of funding for students with learning difficulties, as outlined above, there has been a shift in both the United States and the UK to what has been termed the Response to Intervention model.

This model is based on three levels or tiers of support.

The first level is designed for all students, and is based on an initial program of effective instruction in the area concerned. Applied to reading, this would typically be a program for initial teaching of reading based on synthetic phonics, covering the development of oral language skills, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

By the end of the first year of schooling students who are failing to progress as expected, or who are in the lowest quartile based on a standard measure of reading progress, are given extra support at the Tier 2 level, in the form of small group intervention. This form of intervention is less expensive than one to one intervention, and is generally effective for students whose difficulties are less severe, and can be remediated by a little extra help.

Of those students who receive group intervention at the Tier 2 level, a small proportion, usually about 5 per cent, will fail to show progress, or will show only very slow progress. Such students would then be identified as requiring more intensive one to one intervention, or intervention at the Tier 3 level.

The Response to Intervention Model is a cost effective approach to providing support for students with learning difficulties. It can be applied to reading, as described above, but also to other areas of learning such as maths. However, it is most commonly associated with intervention in reading, both because of the high proportion of students experiencing difficulties in learning to read, and the critical importance of reading for learning in all other areas of the curriculum, and for participating in society as a whole.

To implement an effective Response to Intervention to approach to support students with learning difficulties, the following conditions would be necessary:

- improved training of teachers so that they can deliver effective initial teaching of the basic skills in reading and maths
- ongoing assessment of students' progress to identify students who are failing to progress as expected
- in the case of reading, the use of a simple test such as the UK Year 1 phonics test, to identify students who have failed to grasp the essential skills of decoding in their first year of school
- ongoing support for students whose difficulties persist despite intensive extra help

Recommendations

To maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the schools workforce it is necessary to improve the effectiveness of school instruction and the efficiency of the models used for delivery of school programs.

The effectiveness of school instruction depends on the implementation of teaching strategies based on the scientific evidence of what works best. There is a need for a

review of teacher training to ensure that teachers are aware of the relevant scientific evidence relating to effective instruction, and are able to implement effective teaching programs. In the area of reading the continuing dominance of teaching programs which are based on outdated notions of how children learn to read, and fail to incorporate training in the use of effective strategies for the teaching of beginning reading, is a major factor in reducing the productivity of the teaching workforce in the early years of schooling. This is an issue that needs to be addressed by government, in terms of reviewing the content and effectiveness of teacher training courses, particularly at the primary level, and ensuring that teachers of beginning reading are adequately trained to deliver effective programs of reading instruction, thus reducing the number of 'instructional casualties', and the wastage of student talent and potential in the case of those students whose failure to learn to read adequately at the primary level leads to ongoing failure in schooling and subsequent employment. As noted in the report of the Dyslexia Working Party (2010), individuals with poor reading skills are at high risk of mental health problems, juvenile delinquency, dropout from school, and unemployment. They are also less responsive to health education and the use of disease prevention strategies, are less able to successfully manage chronic disorders such as diabetes and asthma, and incur significantly higher health care costs. They are also more likely to attempt suicide than adolescents with normal reading. There is therefore a high long term cost attached to ineffective teaching of reading at the primary level, and a marked gain in productivity to be achieved by implementation of effective programs for the teaching of reading in the early years of school.

In the case of students with learning difficulties, particularly in the area of reading, the response to intervention model provides a more efficient approach to the provision of effective intervention as compared with alternative models, including the provision of extra funding for individual students identified as having a learning disability, and the widely used reading intervention program Reading Recovery, which is a high cost one on one intervention program with limited evidence of success. The response to intervention model has the further advantage that it not only provides effective intervention for students with learning difficulties, but it also ensures effective teaching of the basic skills of reading (and maths) for all students at the Tier 1 level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, LDA submits that to improve the productivity of the Schools Workforce, it is necessary to improve the quality of the training of teachers, particularly in the area of instruction in beginning reading, and to adopt cost effective programs such as the Response to Intervention model in providing support to students with learning difficulties.

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