

Einstein once defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Perhaps this was not one of his more famous statements in the scheme of things (as he said so many profoundly wise words) but this would seem to be a revelation to many even in 2015. Especially it would seem those designing the schemas for education.

The question concerning the current attainment and access for students with disability is one that my mother was asking about in the 1980’s. My entire family is Australian. I am not talking about overseas in 1980 – I am referring to Australian education.

My youngest brother was diagnosed with a learning disability way back in the 1980’s. The questions my mother asked about equal access to education, the effects of discrimination my brother experienced and was exposed to and the pitiful attainment of educational knowledge my brother accumulated in his state education life have changed marginally for the average “John Doe” students in WA in 2015. I know this for sure from personal experience, for although I myself do not have any disability or issue with learning, my school aged child does. At 10 years of age and currently in Year 4 my child has the reading skills of a Year 1. My child’s spelling is so poor it can not be graded. My child spent 2 years attending the school remediation therapy groups, 1:1 school based but private occupational therapy sessions, private speech therapy, 18 week intensive behavioural optometry sessions, individualised remedial tutoring sessions (in both literacy and numeracy), intensive, private remediation specifically for dyslexia and countless hours of extra homework activities from various school teachers and tutors.

Despite the WA Education Department’s statements that a child does not need any professional assessments to access the necessary remediation within the schooling system I can categorically state that in our case

without the professional assessments (all of which are incredibly expensive) my child would be spending countless hours in detention or similar for poor performance and negative attitude. The cost for a basic literacy assessment once you have been through the paediatrician, speech pathologist etc (which also all cost money), and suffered through the long waiting times, is between \$700-\$1200. This money will usually give you an assessment and basic guidelines to present to your child's school. It is a parent's ability to negotiate with the school which ultimately decides which of these recommendations will be taken on board. Most school administrators are reported to tell parents one of 2 things

1. Dyslexia, dysgraphia, dycalculia, dyspraxia does not exist and is the latest generational catch cry
2. Learning disabilities such as those listed above are not funded therefore any special accommodations that are afforded to the student have to fit in with the educational system itself.

When it comes to any accommodations for learning disabilities from my personal research with other parents who have children with learning disabilities there seems to be a direct correlation between the amount of funds parents have invested in the educational facility and their ability to fund other subsidiary items.

In our own case even after the first literacy assessment – which focussed primarily of literacy acquisition, my child did require further assessment. This was for the secondary issue of dysgraphia. Which to me, the parent, unqualified in the educational arena, could clearly see that by aged 8 my child, despite the 2 years of school based private occupational therapy sessions specifically to address his handwriting letter formation, was making no inroads into his ability to handwrite sentences and correctly form letters in the designated

handwriting lessons. During the handwriting lessons he was always behind, the work was close to illegible by the end of the 40 minute session and he was coming out of class agitated, panicked and distressed – knowing well that he would have to give up his next lunchtime to complete the handwriting book exercises. Dyslexia is hard enough to get educationalists to believe in, unless they have had personal contact and experience with someone in their lives or themselves, but the other learning disabilities such as dysgraphia have almost no understanding and certainly many in Australia have no idea what the treatment is or what is required to accommodate this issue within a classroom. It took a professional assessment, which apparently my child didn't need according to the WA Education minister, to get my child the minimal and transient accommodations afforded within the classroom. Without a professional assessment my child would have been viewed as a child with messy handwriting and by the end no doubt termed lazy and not applying a concerted effort.

But even with a professional assessment our issues continue to gain equal access for our child in the educational system. By aged 9 years the focus seems to shift in that the schools we have attended do not offer individualised remediation but to start looking at accommodations. These being the things that a teacher can do within the classroom to give the child with the disability equal and equitable access to the information that is being delivered to the average student. These things can be quite simple like providing a visual cue to the set activity. Most teachers understand this concept and often you will walk into a classroom and see the timetable in visual cues as well as text. But as the child progress through the school system the

cueing decreases and the text increases. So the accommodations need to grow with the student. Even at the lead WA organisation for those with dyslexia DSF WA the handouts for parents document extensively the suggested accommodations for students – particularly those students deemed to be older ie middle primary school. The most popular accommodation that schools like to talk about is time. In specifics “extra time”. You will be told that professional assessments are useful for this reason – as most school teachers know these assessments are expensive. I was told this exact thing. When it comes to NAPLAN and ONLA my child can “apply” for “extra time”. Mind you this application does not mean he is automatically granted “extra time”. Someone somewhere decides if he is deemed “disabled enough” to get such charity. In the words of Ben Foss...if a child who is physically confined to a wheelchair was placed at the bottom of a set of standard stairs and an educational administrator then tells this disabled child he will give him 10 minutes extra to get up to the top of the stairs; how successful do you think that time accommodation was?

People would be horrified to see such an event unfold; yet everyday it is presented as a suggestion to children with dyslexia. Don't believe me? Go to the instructional handouts and information on the Naplan site. How on earth one believes giving a person who is struggling to read words extra time is truly going to help them pass a test? Educational facilities use time as a token gesture to appease the relevant authorities. It is cheap, easy to apply and relatively quiet.

But the award for saddest state of affairs in concern to accommodations would have to be awarded to the ONLA test. The

test that currently is being applied in WA only to students who in their Year 9 NAPLAN sitting fail to achieve Band 8.

Those students who fail to achieve the desired results in a YEAR 9 (aged 13-15years old) sitting of a test that they have sat in years before and would have sat countless school based literacy and numeracy assessments – all of which one would assume, if they have any accuracy, would have indicated that the said students had some issue with literacy/numeracy. In Year 10 the students that failed to achieve the said NAPLAN band then have to sit the ONLA with limited but usually no accommodations. Even if they use a specific accommodation everyday of their school life. Some schools are pre-testing and the results are showing a child will fail without their accommodations. The official statements floating about in parent groups is that ONLA is computerised so accommodations are not relevant and many of them can not be applied but the greatest motivator seems to be maintaining the purity of the data. Blow the final effect to the student!

A NAPLAN band lower than 8 enforces an ONLA sitting; an ONLA sitting restricts the subjects the student can access in the year forward; some schools are requiring the failed students attend ONLA classes further restricting their subject choices.

If a student fails in the Year 10 sittings of ONLA they resit in Year 11. They get 3 resits I am told. If a student fails all their resits the grand reward is that they will not graduate from high school.

What a great reward for a student! After years of struggling to attain literacy and numeracy, with limited, effective school based remediation and transient accommodations this student will now not

graduate. They will not be gaining a graduation certificate. Which employer is supposed to give a non-graduate a job? Not to mention what it does to that students self esteem, self belief and hope. There are schools already in WA who have dropped the term “graduation ceremony” for their Grade 12’s and now term it “leavers ceremony”- knowing full well that not all the students will in fact be graduating.

So as a system the education department who tested far earlier in this students career and knew this students had difficulties with numeracy and/or literacy, initiated no effective program to educate this student to the required level – that being at WA in 2015 NAPLAN band 8. That in my mind is a failure of attainment.

There are students already in this predicament. The cost to them and their families must be huge. The system that they are forced to attend has failed to educate them to the level set by the Educational organisation. They will have to locate an employer who will offer a job to a non graduate. Being a non graduate they will not gain access to tertiary education. I have not heard but there may now be organisations setting up courses for non graduates – which of course means someone has to fund this extra education – one I would suggest should have been afforded in primary and high school. Without educational attainment these disability students – who are not intellectually disabled – will be forced to work in more menial, minimum wage jobs. Their options of career advancement will be limited. Their remuneration will be similar.

The sad thing is the cost to Australia will be far greater,

It is estimated that between 7-15% of the Australian population has dyslexia. I would suggest that many of these students will be the ones sitting standardised test such as the ONLA and failing it. These people are well capable of learning – providing the information is presented to them in a manner in which they can learn it. Once these students are failed by the educational system and deemed non-graduates they are forced to remain in menial, minimum wage employment. As our future workforce ages, tax generation declines. As we have all been told from the intergenerational report this is the reality. Surely investing in these disability students education, allowing them to gain better paid employment, is better for all of Australia. These students can learn. Research all around the world has proven this. Australia doesn't need to re-invent the learning wheel for these students. Australia needs to apply what is already known. The educational system needs to stop doing what they have done for decades, it's not working for these students. Teachers need to be educated in their basic degrees about disability..and spend more than a few hours in the subject.

Teachers need to be given the knowledge about programs that are proven to be effective with those students that have learning disabilities. They need to be taught about the application of effective accommodations. Educational facilities need to be held to account for their failures. How can a student who has attended a school for 12 years come out at the end as a non-graduate?

Application and change does not always need to be “funded”. Making changes at a school level does not always need more money. Often it requires leadership and vision. Yes there is obviously some disabilities that require more physical hands to do the work but

dyslexia is not one of them. It is an educational systems leadership and direction that seems to make the greatest change for students with dyslexia. Accommodations can be costly but in general remediation in fact teaching costs the same. One only has to examine the Robina State school in Queensland or West Beechboro Primary or Dianella Heights in WA to see schools whose leadership have effected literacy change with limited money.

Change for students with dyslexia and I would suggest dysgraphia, dyscalculia is about changing the way the information is delivered. This idea of just doing more and more of the same work over and over again, or louder and louder, or adding in punishments or with drawl of rewards is insanity. It certainly didn't work in 1980 and it isn't working in 2015.