



LEARNING DIFFICULTIES COALITION OF NSW Inc.

Supporting the Learning Difficulties Parent Help Line

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Inquiry into Teacher Education
The Secretary,
Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

8/4/05

To the Committee Secretariat

On behalf of the Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Inc I commend the Australian government inquiry into teacher education. I congratulate the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson and the committee chaired by Luke Hartsuyker MP for acknowledging the need to standardise the training of teachers in Australia and advance excellence in teaching.

When children spend 30 hours a week with their teacher(s) it is essential that these educators are equipped with evidence of best practice and ongoing access to professional support.

The Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Inc is the peak advocacy group for the 1:5 young people who learn differently. The LDC represents parent support groups across the state encompassing ADHD, Aspergers syndrome, learning difficulties, hyperactivity, Autism, and Tourettes to name a few. Many students with these difficulties often absorb a large amount of school resources. Yet teachers often feel ill equipped to manage different learning styles and this can result in restricted access to the curriculum by the student.

In the absence of a national body representing families of children with learning difficulties, we would welcome the opportunity to participate in the hearings scheduled for this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Jude Foster

President

Response to Terms of Reference

1. Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training courses.

Teaching is not seen as a valuable career in the general community. Lack of appropriate remuneration is one of the factors that has reduced demand for teaching as a career. As a result the entry score to teaching has been very low and has attracted candidates that may not strive for excellence. The average age of teachers is approx 44 years so we aren't attracting enough bright young people to the profession.

Rural areas often lack experienced teachers and receive a disproportionate number of new graduates, which leaves them professionally vulnerable.

Solutions:

Public media /advertising campaign led by the federal government highlighting teaching excellence and raising awareness of extra incentives such as HECs free or post graduate scholarship places for students from rural areas to enroll or continue studies. Offering post graduate scholarships or access to professional development or research would be additional incentives.

Consider an interview component of the entry so communication skills can be evaluated.

2. Examine the extent to which teacher training courses can attract high quality students including students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Teacher training is not attracting highly academic students with entry scores of approx 70 –77 UAI. Teacher morale is so low that it would be hard to recruit existing teachers who would promote teaching to young people as a satisfying career so this need to be addressed at the same time.

Solutions:

Public media /advertising campaign led by the federal government highlighting teaching excellence and raising awareness of potential undergrads of incentives such as HECs free or post graduate scholarship places for students from rural areas to enter or continue studies. Offering scholarships or access to professional development or research would be an additional incentive.

3. Examine attrition rates from teaching courses and reasons for attrition.

4. Examine and assess the criteria for selecting and rewarding education faculty members.

5. Examine the educational philosophy underpinning teacher training courses and assess the extent to which it is informed by research.

Current teacher training appears to hit and miss. Lack of standardisation of courses means that different teachers have different and often outdated information and there is no input from other disciplines¹. Eg: A first year out teacher who was taught that 'stimulant medication treatment of Attention Deficit Disorder would stunt little Einsteins' She explained at a recent conference that her goal the following year was to get the two children in her class OFF medication, thereby working at odds with the health professionals involved in management. Yet the NHMRC report into ADHD² acknowledged the role of medication as a component of best practice case management.

The language used within education means different things to different people³. There is no common understanding of the language used in education settings.

There is no regular contact between tertiary universities, government departments of education and health and board of studies. This means that decisions are made in isolation: state board of studies dictate curriculum and learning outcomes and DET deliver this information to the schools. This leaves the new teachers and researchers "out of the loop". e.g: the Learning Assistance Program in NSW which is supposed to increase access by students with learning difficulties to support. There are no quantitative measures of student performance to assess the efficacy of this initiative.

Solutions:

Standardise teaching courses so there is the same evidence based information delivered to students with a greater emphasis on underlying cause than symptomatic management.

Involve other disciplines in development of the teaching curriculum. There is so much overlap with health and allied health professions but teachers are often unaware of different perspectives and end up working in isolation which doesn't help them or the student.

Teacher training is currently focused on deficits – what a child can't do and is also directed at symptomatic management. It is high time that schools adopted a more systematic approach to a child's difficulties⁴. Ravitch, a US professor of Education asks why we don't insist on well tested validated education research we expect in health?

Special Education (currently the unit that addresses different learning styles), should be a mandatory subject. If the skills are taught properly, teachers will be better equipped to adapt teaching practices to their class. They will benefit the whole class, not just the child with learning difficulties.

1 Cranston C.S.; Ulrey, G., Hansen, R., Hudler, M., Marshall, R., Wuori, D.; (1988). Interprofessional collaboration: Who's is doing it? Whos isn't? *Developmental and Behavioural Paediatrics*, 9, 134-139
Kline F.; Rubel L.; Teacher-physician collaboration: what we know. *Learning Disabilities Journal* Vol. 10, (1)January, 2000
2 National Health and Medical Research council ADHD report 1996

3 Bridging the Gap in Health and Education. Words are not enough. O'Keefe & McDowell, 2004 *Journal of Paediatric Child Health*

4 Physicians leave Education Researchers for Dead. Ravitch , Sydney Morning Herald Feb 1999

Adopt the findings of Dr Robert Brooks⁵ where education was focused on a student's "islands of competence". This not only improved educational outcomes but provided increased teacher satisfaction.

Fund and promote education research.

Provide opportunities and forums for educators from universities, board of studies, departments of education and training and classroom teachers to meet to prioritise educational directions and develop and integrated evidence based approach.

6. Examine the interaction and relationship between teacher training courses and other university faculty disciplines.

7. Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:

(i) teach literacy and numeracy; Teachers generally do not have a solid understanding of language development or the difference between expressive and receptive language. This means that a child must be significantly delayed or disordered to be identified and referred to other professionals.

Modification of curriculum to accommodate different learning styles seems to be one of the greatest difficulties for teachers. As 1:5 students are presenting with difficulties at school, every teacher should be able to incorporate different learning styles in their KLA.

Secondary teachers are not well grounded in teaching or understand literacy or numeracy. Given the language embedded in each KLA, literacy difficulties can seriously impair school connectedness. The culture in high schools is more to blame the student or their family. There is much more evidence of sarcasm, put downs and ignorance of a child's difficulties.

(ii) teach vocational education courses;

(iii) effectively manage classrooms; A recent UK study⁶ found pupils with behaviour difficulties absorbed more than 50% of teacher time in class and teachers reported they feel ill equipped to manage challenging students except by exclusion. It is high time that schools adopted a more systematic approach to child's difficulties⁷. Ravitch, a US professor of Education asks why we don't insist on well tested validated education research we expect in health?

(iv) successfully use information technology; Thank you for recognising this issue for teachers. Many teachers do not feel confident in use of technology and are left behind by primary students. There is no consistent training or ongoing professional development of teachers (other than IT teachers) in this area.

5 The Self Esteem Teacher, Brooks 1999

6 Costs and Outcomes for pupils with moderate LD in special and Mainstream schools. 1999, UK Research report.

7 Physicians Leave Education Researchers for Dead. Ravitch , Sydney Morning Herald Feb 1999

(v) deal with bullying, disruptive students and dysfunctional families; Teachers feel ill equipped to manage challenging behaviours and it wears them down. The recent UK study⁸ teachers were found pupils with behaviour difficulties absorbed more than 50% of teacher time in class, yet teachers report they feel ill equipped to manage challenging students except by exclusion. Teacher training is focused on deficits – what a child can't do and is also directed at symptomatic management. It is high time that schools adopted a more systematic approach to child's difficulties⁹. Ravitch, a US professor of Education asks why we don't insist on well tested validated education research we expect in health? Teachers involved in long term partnerships with other disciplines have reported significant benefits from this professional support and education. There is so much overlap with health and allied health professionals but teachers are often unaware of different professionals and end up working in isolation which doesn't benefit them or the student. Systematic barriers exist that mean teachers often don't have access to all the information they need to support a student. e.g psychometric assessments that suggest effective management strategies are often locked up in a counsellor's office.

(vi) deal with children with special needs and/or disabilities; Teachers feel ill equipped to manage children with special needs or disabilities. In a recent UK study¹⁰ pupils with behaviour difficulties absorbed more than 50% of teacher time in class, yet teachers report they report they feel ill equipped to manage challenging students. the majority of behaviour difficulties are underpinned by learning difficulties or emotional problems. We need to be looking more at cause. It is high time that schools adopted a more systematic approach to a child's difficulties¹¹. Ravitch, Professor of Education (USA) asks why we don't insist on well tested validated education research we expect in health? Teachers involved in long term partnerships with other disciplines have reported significant benefits from this professional support and education. There is so much overlap with health and allied health professionals but teachers are often unaware of different professionals and end up working in isolation which doesn't benefit them or the student. Systematic barriers exist that mean teachers often don't have access to all the information they need to support a student e.g psychometric assessments that suggest effective management strategies are often locked up in a counsellor's office.

(vii) achieve accreditation;

(viii) deal with senior staff, fellow teachers, school boards, education authorities, parents, community groups and other related government departments;

8. Examine the role and input of schools and their staff to the preparation of trainee teachers.

9. Investigate the appropriateness of the current split between primary and secondary education training.

Primary training appears to be more inclusive and enables teachers to take a more holistic approach to management. Artificial boundaries appear evident in the high school setting which pit faculty against faculty, rather than look at commonality and where the overlap of curriculum occurs. Primary teachers appear to 'own' the problems

⁸ Costs and Outcomes for pupils with moderate LD in Special and Mainstream schools. 1999, UK Research report.

⁹ Physicians Leave Education Researchers for dead. Ravitch , Sydney Morning Herald Feb 1999

¹⁰ Costs and Outcomes for pupils with moderate LD in special and Mainstream schools. 1999, UK Research report.

¹¹ Physicians Leave Education Researchers for Dead. Ravitch , Sydney Morning Herald Feb 1999

experienced by students who learn differently and work hard to understand each student. The nature of high school and the limited time each teacher has with an individual student doesn't lend itself to finding a solution for students who struggle.

10. Examine the construction, delivery and resourcing of ongoing professionals learning for teachers already in the workforce.

Current professional development (PD) for teachers is ad hoc. Particularly in the public sector, PD is highly prescriptive with strong focus on new initiatives from both the Board of Studies and the Department of Education. This means that schools often have limited opportunities to pursue PD requested by staff. In rural areas there is a double whammy for teachers. The costs of PD in major centres combined with the travel and accommodation costs provide a significant cost disincentive to attend conferences and seminars.

Solutions:

Provide additional PD days for staff to plan education relevant to them. Provide teachers with an individual PD allowance to facilitate teacher directed professional development. OR recognise teachers who fund their own PD when promotion and advancement is being considered. Develop accredited online training modules for all teachers to access at a limited cost.

11. Examine the adequacy of the funding of teacher training course by university administrations.

SOLUTIONS SUMMARY

- Public media /advertising campaign led by the federal government highlighting teaching excellence and raising awareness of extra incentives such as HECs free or post graduate scholarship places for students from rural areas to enroll or continue studies. Offering post graduate scholarships or access to professional development or research would be an additional incentives.
- Consider an interview component of the entry so communication skills can be evaluated.
- Public media /advertising campaign led by the federal government highlighting teaching excellence and raising awareness of potential undergrads of incentives such as HECs free or post graduate scholarship places for students from rural areas to enter or continue studies. Offering scholarships or access to professional development or research would be an additional incentive.
- Standardise teaching courses so there is the same evidence based information delivered to students with a greater emphasis on underlying cause than symptomatic management.

- Involve other disciplines in development of the teaching curriculum. There is so much overlap with health and allied health professions but teachers are often unaware of different perspectives and end up working in isolation which doesn't help them or the student. Consider the benefits for teachers of involvement in long term partnerships with other disciplines.
- Special Education (currently the unit that addresses different learning styles), should be a mandatory subject. If the skills are taught properly, teachers will be better equipped to adapt teaching practices to their class. They will benefit the whole class, not just the child with learning difficulties.
- Adopt the findings of Dr Robert Brooks where education was focused on a student's "islands of competence". This not only improved educational outcomes but provided increased teacher satisfaction.
- Fund and promote education research.
- Provide opportunities and forums for educators from universities, board of studies, departments of education and training and classroom teachers to meet to prioritise educational directions and develop and integrated evidence based approach. Adoption of more cross faculty contact, study and research.
- Provide additional PD days for staff to plan education relevant to them.
- Provide teachers with an individual PD allowance to facilitate teacher directed professional development, or recognise teachers who fund their own PD when promotion and advancement is being considered.
- Develop accredited online training modules for all teachers to access at a limited cost.