

## Inquiry into children with disabilities- submission from Stephen Mysliwy

Depending on who you talk to and how and if statistics are being collected and collated the incidence of learning difficulties could be between 5% and 40% of the school population. If it is at the very low end then we are talking about very specific processing learning disability within the learner. If it is on the high side we need to carefully examine the learning environment, teaching style and expectations on the student. The field does seem to be very fuzzy in this regard because we often attribute learning problems to the child themselves. I often think in my role as a support teacher- learning difficulties(STLD) in a large percentage of cases that the school causes the learning difficulty. I am concerned for teachers as well because I think there are many external pressures impacting on the classroom, the economic environment, unemployment and the changing nature of employment, war, problems in the environment etc. etc. It may seem a little extreme to bring in all these external forces but there is an interconnection that is often ignored. Teachers then retreat to the classroom, plan programs whose relevance may be questionable teach to the illusory middle to the class, blame the victims, family, society for the child's difficulty then ask for the child to be taken away and 'cured' by someone else. Well now that I have that off my chest let me continue more constructively.

Teachers are a very hard working group of professionals who have to nurture, educate and generally be concerned for social and emotional welfare of the group of children in their room. This has over the years become an increasingly difficult job because of the aforementioned problems. Added to this are the burdens placed on schools such as inclusivity with reducing resourcing and departments of education continually rolling out agendas, syllabus documents and school based management issues with little training and once again lack of resourcing. Coupled with these are the concerns parents have over discipline issues and openly hostile politicians to the work of teachers in public schools. All of these issues once again impact on the work of teachers and their perceptions about students and what needs to be done to be educated.

One of the major problems in learning difficulties is the definition of the of the field. We have to realise that we are talking about two groups of people; those with learning difficulties and those with learning disabilities. There are those with a combination of these problems. The much larger group, learning difficulties, are those whose problems may be outside as well as inside the student. This is where the school, teaching style, pace of work, family, geographical and other problems impact on the child and any processing problems they may have. Learning disabilities is a smaller group of people who have disabilities in visual and auditory processing not primarily caused by organic problems. One of my colleagues used a computer analogy to describe the problem succinctly. The children with learning disabilities have hardware problems and those with learning difficulties have software problems. My first recommendation would therefore be the creation of a definition that is research based and can be agreed upon nationwide to account for the interstate movements of children. Agreed practices about the identification and intervention strategies throughout Australia would help in the interstate dialogue between teachers.

In addition to the above my second recommendation is the need for quality ongoing Australian research in the field of learning difficulties and learning disabilities. The research could be pursued formally at university and by way of action research techniques at the school level. The federal government could provide grants for this research to take place. Federal government could also coordinate and distribute this information.

Research could also take place into the social and economic causes of learning difficulties and disabilities and either confirm or deny their significance.

Teachers need support with both good quality research and ongoing professional development. State based voluntary organisations such as the Remedial and Support Teachers Association of Queensland provide a valuable service through the provision of a regular journal of professional literature and weekend workshops as well as biennial conferences which feature international speakers who bring the latest ideas in overseas research. My third recommendation would be support for state and national conferences and recognition of the contribution made by these organisations. Help with the cost of publications, creation of short term secretariats to help alleviate the work of practicing /working support teachers in performing functions like organisation of conferences, arranging accommodation and venue

booking, collation and distribution of conference materials.

My focus for this submission has been learning difficulties and learning disabilities because that is the field in which I work . In Queensland children with low incidence disorders such as visual ,auditory and physical impairments are ascertained as to their level of need. This is a comprehensive system of identification and intervention which leads to an individual education plan. Resourcing for these children is always problematic. School budgets have to reflect inclusivity issues so that adequate modification to the physical and learning environment can take place. Unfortunately , in a 'low tax state' these constraints make schools participate in unseemly heated debate about whether we should or shouldn't include children with disabilities not the actual debate about how we ought to integrate.

The federal government has recently produced some excellent resources namely 'Successful Programs and Strategies for Children with Learning Difficulties' written by Mary Rohl,Helen House,William Loudon, Marion Milton and Judith Rivalland and a pamphlet entitled 'Students with Disabilities' written by Christa Van Kraynoord ,John Elkins and others. Both of these pamphlets were published and distributed by the Department of Education, Training and Youth in 2000. Both of these texts came under the umbrella of a Federal Government initiative called Mapping the Territory. Much of the work outlined in the senate's terms of reference seems to have been done in the collection and collation of the material in the field of learning difficulties. What should now be done is to enact and resource the recommendations. I don't know what the original distribution of these pamphlets was but I would like to strongly suggest that a wide scale distribution into the hands of all teachers take place immediately. A distribution of quality Australian texts such as Ashman and Elkins (1998) Educating students with special needs(3rd edition).Sydney.Prentice Hall into school libraries may address the problems of current research.

In our federation of states it seems that we have governments that administer education without reference to the other states this despite the frequent declarations by the state ministers of education meetings. Once agreement has been sought the states then set about creating state guidelines which alter ever so slightly the intention of the recommendations . Nationwide research and recommendations needs to be binding and therefore giving a unity to definitions and terminology, intervention techniques and remediation. This will greatly increase the body of knowledge and help address the needs of those children who travel between states.

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