

**TO THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT,  
WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE  
REGARDING ITS  
INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

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## Preface

Learning Links is an Australian charity assisting children who have difficulty learning. We help children and families by providing specialist help and counselling regardless of economic status, nationality or religious background.

Nearly 1 in every 5 children has some sort of disability or learning difficulty – developmental or academic problems that can be a result of intellectual, physical or sensory disabilities, serious illness or trauma, emotional difficulties, and/or environmental or educational experiences.

For very young children this can mean that they can not catch a ball as easily as other children, or speak, see or hear as well. It may mean that they cannot control their muscles as well as another child the same age and may have difficulty walking or crawling.

For children at school learning problems can be harder to see. A child who has difficulty reading and writing may be thought of as unable to concentrate or disruptive. Usually there are no physical signs of their difficulty, but they may have low self-esteem and can be the target of ridicule or labelled a troublemaker. Some children just need help to catch up after a serious illness such as cancer has left them behind their peers academically and physically.

All too often we see children with learning difficulties and disabilities feeling distressed and worthless as they struggle to do things that are easy for their peers. Unfortunately if we fail to address these problems, a child may approach adolescence and adulthood with very few skills to equip them for employment and social interaction. Research points to possible future drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, homelessness and very sadly suicide.

Long term community well being depends upon how well we equip our children while they are still children. If we can intervene when the problems first occur, a child will gain confidence in their ability to cope both at home and school. Once helped academically, a child's future prospects for further education and employment are much greater.

Learning Links was formed in 1972 to bring hope to children who have difficulty learning, provide specialist services for the children and their families and give voice in the community to their needs.

We assess each child individually to gain a full understanding of his or her difficulty or disability. We then discuss and implement an appropriate individual education program with the involvement of the child's family, health professionals and school.

Our services include full cognitive and developmental assessments, individualised and supplementary teaching services, specialised help for children who have had serious illnesses, occupational and speech therapy and family counselling. We have five branches – our Head Office at Peakhurst, Southern Suburbs Branch at Penshurst, Northern Suburbs Branch at Dee Why and Western Suburbs Branches at Fairfield and Miller – and also operate in country NSW.

Learning Links is the only charity in NSW offering information, support and direct services to children with learning difficulties and disabilities and developmental delays, such as Down Syndrome, Autism and Attention Deficit Disorder.

## Introduction

Given the length of our waiting lists and the number of families we see in crisis or under enormous stress coping with their child's development and learning the current educational provisions for students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, are clearly not adequate. Each year over 1,000 school students who have difficulty learning voluntarily participate in our program due to a lack of capacity in their schools to provide an effective curriculum for their individual learning needs.

Whilst we may have had access to early childhood intervention for over twenty years there is no equity of access nor consistent program quality for all children. There has been little coordination between preschools and schools, community health services and schools and within learning communities themselves. Further, families are often left to negotiate a complex system of service provision with little understanding of what type of intervention would best help their child and how to access scarce services.

Successful reform will only occur if a concerted effort is made to underscore the fundamental importance of early childhood education, the early identification of children who have difficulty learning and the need for a transdisciplinary family focussed approach to assist children at the earliest opportunity. While research unambiguously supports this view it is yet to be translated into government policies, widespread professional practice or public awareness.

## A Transdisciplinary Approach

Those professionals who work with children should be encouraged to view themselves as collaborators within a wider professional network. Early childhood settings (care centres and preschools) schools and community health centres should have established policies and practices to facilitate ongoing collaboration. Early childhood settings and schools should have ready access to early specialist educators, therapists and counsellors.

## Early Identification and Intervention

All children should have access to preschool the year before school. To ensure that this goal of universality is met, funding should be made available for a public system of preschools. Preschools should be inclusive – i.e. cater for *all* children – and provide a play-based curriculum.

Further, in the early years of life, children should have access to quality care and education programs. Programs should be based on a quality, play-based curriculum that will enhance the social, cognitive, communication and motor skills of children.

All early childhood settings must be in a position to access the benefits of transdisciplinary teams. Early childhood services must operate from a resource base that enables the effective identification of children who have difficulty learning and the development of individual intervention strategies to assist those children at the earliest opportunity.

## Family-centredness

The provision of services to children with disabilities must involve professionals and families working together as partners in the processes of identification, assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. Professionals must acknowledge and accept that the family is the key decision-makers in a child's life and work with the family in an appropriate cultural and linguistic way to ensure that the needs of the child are understood and addressed.

With respect to the educational needs of children with learning disabilities schools need to embrace practices conducive to the cultivation of genuine partnerships throughout the school community. Effective partnerships between parents and classroom teachers are generally important for improved student outcomes but they are crucial if children with learning difficulties are to be given the opportunity to be the best that they can be as learners.

Schools need to expand their understanding of parent participation to encompass the contributions of parents beyond their traditional roles as fundraiser, helper, committee member and occasional visitor.

If a child's ongoing needs are to be properly understood and appropriate classroom strategies developed, the teacher and the parent need to work together on a continuing basis. Teachers must be prepared to value parents as the first and continuing teachers of their own children. They should accept that parents are ideally placed to provide them with crucial information about the child's history, values, lifestyle and actions in the world beyond school. They should be very mindful of their obligations to adequately report to parents about their children's school performance and achievements. They should foster a commitment to formulating practical strategies *with* the parent – and with the child too for that matter - to bolster complementarity between the school and the home.

Unfortunately many teachers continue to reject the importance of working collaboratively with parents. They may well be able to use the language of parent participation but fail to translate that into concrete partnership practices.

We acknowledge, of course, that not all parents will seek or welcome this level of partnership. Regardless of this schools must be ever ready to encourage and enjoin partnerships. Schools must ensure that the parent community is aware of the possibilities of pursuing real partnership and they should promote those partnerships as a professional responsibility and show how they are advantageous to effective learning.

## Screening Strategies

A wide-ranging number of screening strategies is needed to ensure children with disabilities are identified at the earliest possible stage. Certainly, there should be no universal reliance on a single screening instrument or process that is activated at a pre-determined age in every child's life. All of those who come into contact with babies, toddlers, children and young people as part of their professional lives should see themselves as playing an active role in screening processes, as agents of referral, diagnosis or service delivery.

Well-trained early childhood professionals with expertise in child development and observational skills will be able to identify those children struggling. After the child is identified a specialist early childhood intervention team would provide more in-depth analysis of the child's strengths, interests and areas of concern. With this information intervention can be planned. A collaborative approach to intervention would ensure support at both the home and the educational settings.

## **Early Childhood Professionals**

Both childcare and preschool workers should be esteemed as crucial members of the educational community. Their training should highlight the importance of early identification of children who experience difficulty learning and the identification of children at risk. Training institutions should be encouraged to not only keep up with the latest research and practice in the area of children at risk and early intervention but also take an active role in researching related issues.

Early childhood teachers must be provided with incentives to take up and pursue a career in early childhood education. Training for all early childhood teachers should be of a consistently high standard. Those who successfully complete training should receive a credential that signifies a high level of professional understanding, competence and performance. Thereafter, they must be provided with pathways for further professional growth and development to ensure that their chosen career remains challenging and rewarding.

Salary parity with other teachers is essential.

Early childhood teachers must be recognised by the wider educational community as professionals within a specialised field. The value of their skills and competencies to all subsequent stages of schooling should be recognised.

## **Teachers' Professional Development**

There are two important components relating to the preservice and inservice of teachers that are relevant to the scope of the current inquiry.

The first of these relates to the crucial importance of early childhood education. Early childhood education should be far more represented in the training and professional development lives of *all* teachers.

Early childhood education has for too long been viewed as the lowest rung in the hierarchy of formal education and written off by most teachers as irrelevant to their domain of professional responsibility and action. This is to confuse the place of early childhood learning in the chronology of a child's formal education with its importance in the child's development as a learner. Early childhood learning is the foundation stone upon which a child's school life is built and this should be impressed upon and understood by all teachers. The early childhood teacher is ideally placed to identify learning disabilities and to facilitate access to those services and programs that will assist the child.

All Infants teachers should be properly trained and accredited in early childhood education. Such training opportunities should be widely available at the University level and pathways to post-graduate study should also be available.

There should be regular inservice opportunities for K-2 teachers to liaise with early childhood practitioners and to receive professional updates on changes to the theories, policies and practices that pertain to early childhood education.

The second component relates to the teaching profession as a whole. All teachers require both preservice and inservice training on disabilities and learning disabilities in particular.

Teachers are in need of management and training strategies to assist them to deal with those children who exhibit oppositional or challenging behaviours, a fact made all too apparent by the huge number of student suspensions and expulsions in New South Wales' schools over the last decade. The concept of every teacher's pastoral care towards the children in his/her care and the obligation of every teacher to meet the needs of the whole child should be vigorously revived.

## **Class sizes**

It is essential that class-sizes in schools, particularly in the early years, be reduced. Currently Infants classes in excess of 25 or even 30 are commonplace throughout New South Wales school systems.

The Infants years are crucial to every child. It is inevitable that individual student needs will be either overlooked or inadequately responded to in overcrowded classrooms.

We acknowledge that the issue of class-size is a matter of continuing debate but the research clearly reveals that *significant reductions* in class-sizes provide measurable and considerable learning benefits to students. Our own knowledge, as professionals who work with children in classes and groups on a daily basis, also persuades us of the essential importance of reducing class sizes in the early years of school.

The maximum class-size for an Infants class should not exceed 20 and every classroom should be allocated a full-time teacher *and* a full-time teacher's aide.

Given that resources are not limitless, the possibility of effecting this crucial set of reforms by increasing the size of classes in secondary school - particularly in Years 10, 11 and 12 - should be explored. Staggered or continuous Kindergarten intake throughout the year is also a procedure that could be productively trialled.

## **Inclusion**

Children with disabilities have the right to be educated with their peers. Much has already been highlighted in the *Action for McRae Report* - a report on students with special needs who are integrated into the New South Wales public school system – which has been largely ignored by policy makers and administrators.

Adequate resources to the teacher and school must be provided to ensure children's learning is enhanced through their participation in the classroom. Inclusion promotes community responsibility for all children and promotes positive social outcomes.

### **Children with mild intellectual disabilities**

In New South Wales schools it has become more difficult to for those students with mild intellectual disabilities to be given a place in IM support classes. Increasingly these students are being placed into integrated classrooms and are not given the resources and support they need to maximise their learning potential.

### **The Public and Community Sectors**

Much more needs to be done to foster ongoing partnership between government *and* non-government organisations. It is impossible for government to meet all of the challenges of family support throughout Australia. Often government would be best to invest its limited monies to support the work of community-based, family-focused organisations that operate in various parts of the country rather than attempt to do that work through centralised or devolved department functions.

The wider possibilities of partnership between public preschools/schools and non-government organisations like Learning Links should be explored and vaunted. While organisations like Learning Links are confined within fairly limited geographical boundaries - when compared for instance with the New South Wales system of over 3,000 schools - much can be done by organisations like ours to support the work of preschools and schools. Both preschools and schools can refer cases to non-government service providers like Learning Links and work with them to help develop and support programs for families and students. An organisation like Learning Links can also provide advice and training for preschools and schools because it has specialised knowledge of children who experience difficulties learning.