

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

My name is Christine Killey. I am a trained Primary teacher, with a Graduate Diploma and a Master of Education in Special Education. I have been teaching for 17 years, the first 7 years in the classroom, and the last 10 years as a Special Education teacher.

I am presently the coordinator of the Speld Learning Centre - Victoria and run a private tutoring business teaching children both at home and in class during school hours. I have 3 children of my own. I am very passionate about teaching and feel strongly that all children deserve the best education possible.

Each week I tutor a range of students from varied socio economic, schooling, social and geographic backgrounds, all whom have learning difficulties. Some of my students have been identified with a problem and referred to SPELD or myself directly; others have slipped through "the system" and through the initiative of parents or teachers are now my students. As the system stands today, many of these later students would not be classified as learning disabled, but each of them has learning difficulties that are not being met by the education system.

Education for the majority of children, is a positive, enjoyable experience. My concerns as a specialist are:

Criteria used to define disability and differentiate between levels of handicap

The criterion used is orientated towards learning problems that are visually apparent eg. hearing or sight impaired, physical disability or behavioural disorders. It is more difficult to define disabilities that are not physically apparent eg. dyslexia, delay in development, specific learning difficulties in reading, social problems to name a few. All of these disabilities impact on a child's ability to learn.

The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed

It is difficult for untrained teachers to recognise that a student has a disability. Lack of specialist resources results in many students with learning disabilities go through their education without the disability being recognised.

If a teacher does suspect a student does have a learning disability most are unable to assess the problem and do not have the skills to address the problem.

The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

I believe strongly the earlier we can intervene with the problem, the more chance there is to fixing it. More intervention programs needs to be offered at earlier age. The effectiveness of early intervention programs is good, if the are made available

The most common early intervention program, Reading Recovery, has proven to be an excellent program for students behind in reading. However, I believe there is insufficient follow-up for students once they complete Reading Recovery and, as students are not allowed to repeat the program, the question remains what happens to students who are still behind at the end of the program.

For some students Reading Recovery is not suitable for their needs, yet there is no alternative.

In my experience there are no widely available programs, similar to Reading Recovery, for students with difficulties in maths or writing.

Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

In my experience funding does not appear to be an issue in private schools with many schools having dedicated specialist resources. Families are also more able to afford for extra tuition should it be identified that this is required.

In public schools funding is limited and the school must weigh up the benefits of a specialist teacher against reduced resources elsewhere. It is a school's decision whether to have a specialist resource, such as a Reading Recovery teacher. However, this resource comes at a cost, possibly resulting in increased class sizes or cut backs in other school programs. The limited resource also means that not all children can participate in the program.

Another area that is inadequately funded is resources for parents. I see desperate, caring parents who know their child has a problem but do not know what to do. So many are very willing to help their child, but are not sure how to help. Resources for parents are only available at some schools.

The nature, extent and funding of programs

At this stage the funding seems to be limited to Reading Recovery, with little available for other learning disability needs.

If a student is assessed and it is found that the problem does not qualify for funding there are no resources to help the child. Funding is only available for obvious and more easily recognised disabilities, but not for students who are slow learners or have slipped behind.

Teacher training and professional development

Teachers are not adequately trained in the detection or addressing of learning disabilities. It is not part of undergraduate teacher training. Only teachers who choose to complete extra or postgraduate studies in the learning disabilities field receive formal training in this area.

I believe there is a great opportunity to introduce learning disability training into teacher training and extending on this via the provision of specialist Inservice training.

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