

# Bulletin



**Special Issue:  
Teaching Teachers**

## LDA Council 2021-2022

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## LDA MISSION

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

#### THE BULLETIN

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# From the President

## Dr Robyn Wheldall

Now into our third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of lost educational opportunities are being realised. While we are yet to see the full extent of the disadvantage that has resulted for vulnerable learners, the 2021 NAPLAN results released in December provide some evidence of this. The achievement gap that exists between students from advantaged backgrounds and from disadvantaged backgrounds has grown even larger since 2019. Add in a learning difficulty or disability and the layers of disadvantage multiply. Now more than ever, Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) has a critical role to play in ensuring that no educational opportunity for children and young people is squandered. Our mission to disseminate evidence-based practice and to advocate for, and teach, individuals who require additional support to access their education is more important than ever.

With this mission squarely in mind, LDA recently hosted a very successful one-day online conference exploring the best ways to support students with learning difficulties and disability in school using Multi-Tiered Systems

of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks. Getting in early and identifying students who require additional support is essential to ensuring no learning opportunities are wasted. MTSS and RTI eschew a 'wait to fail' approach, which unfortunately was the hallmark of many previous approaches to supporting students with learning difficulties in the education system. As well as making sure that evidence-based approaches are employed in intervention settings, the universal tier of instruction (Tier 1) must also be rigorous and based on effective instruction derived from principles that are evidence-based.

Not only were we delighted that our MTSS conference was so well received, we were also thrilled that participants joined us from all around the country, thanks to the wonders of modern technology. Notwithstanding the privations that the pandemic has wrought, we should celebrate the fact that the circumstances have required us to become accustomed to, and skilled at, connecting with one another in ways that may have seemed foreign to us just a few years ago. And not only can we 'gather' on Zoom, it is now also easy to make recordings of conference presentations. This too gives much greater access to participants. Obviously, there is nothing like being able to come together and to network, but the increased opportunities for people from more remote areas to join the conversation is a very real and welcome benefit.

Another opportunity for us to meet, hopefully in person for many, will be at our Annual General Meeting and LDA/ AJLD Awards



event later in the year. LDA is thrilled to announce that Distinguished Professor Emerita Linnea Ehri will be attending our LDA AGM and Awards Ceremony in person on Saturday October 22 in Melbourne to receive the Eminent Researcher Award of the *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*. To have this esteemed giant of reading research join us is an extraordinary honour for LDA. I encourage you to mark this date in your diary now, make plans to come to Melbourne for the event if you can, or make sure you are able to attend remotely. It will be a wonderful occasion and I look forward to seeing you then. Best wishes, Robyn

*Dr Robyn Wheldall, BA, Ph.D., MAICD, is an Honorary Research Fellow of Macquarie University, a Founding Director of MultiLit Pty Ltd., and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit.*

**Save the date:  
2022 LDA AGM  
Saturday October 22, 2022**

LDA AGM and Awards Ceremony  
Guest Presenter Linnea Ehri, Recipient of the  
2022 AJLD Eminent Researcher Award



# In this issue of the Bulletin...

**Ros Neilson, Editor, LDA Bulletin**

**T**he theme of this issue of the Bulletin, '**Teaching Teachers**', reflects the fact that Professional Learning (PL) has become a very important topic of debate in recent months. (For those who are not sure, PL is a term that seems to be replacing Professional Development, or PD, in the current educational context). Professional learning has become increasingly available to teachers in a range of formats, including online or face-to-face workshops and in-service coaching.

During the very stimulating March 2022 LDA conference on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), speakers and panellists from a variety of perspectives kept returning to the importance of helping teachers to improve instructional practice in mainstream Tier 1 classes. Every speaker at the conference pointed out that providing appropriate professional learning for classroom teachers would reduce the numbers of students who need extra support in Tiers 2 and 3, and would make the movement between the levels of support easier and more natural for the students.

A widely-circulated recent pamphlet published by Hill, Papay & Schwartz (2022), of the RPPL team (Research Partnership for Professional Learning) at Brown University, is entitled *Dispelling the Myths about Professional Learning*. These researchers summarise evidence to refute half a dozen widely circulating opinions or 'myths' about professional learning, including the concern that professional learning can be a time- and money-waster, and that it is unlikely to work at scale when it is extended

beyond its original research base. Hill et al. (2022) argue that although sustainability is only achieved with strong implementation strategies, professional learning programs can be effective, efficient, and adaptable to a range of contexts.

But the challenge of implementation remains at the chalk-face. What can actually be done to support teachers with ongoing professional learning? As teachers, we can all benefit from learning more about how to teach each other.

Dr Hannah Stark and Beth Shingles start the discussion of professional learning in this issue of the Bulletin with an account of a research evaluation of a wide-scale program that has been designed to support teachers' effective use of oral language as a component of literacy teaching in early primary classrooms. Some of the outcomes of the professional learning are described, and where effects were not sustained at scale, the authors offer reflections on issues that this ongoing study has raised.

A different perspective on current efforts to implement professional learning is then provided by Brendan Lee, who discusses the *Think Forward Educators* group's efforts to support teachers' development via a volunteer mentoring process.

Our Book Review section follows, providing reviews of three recently published books that were written with the aim of supporting effective teaching in primary and secondary classrooms. Reid Smith reviews a book designed to guide primary teachers through the complex field of English instruction in primary school; Melanie Henry evaluates a book designed to support instructional coaching at the secondary level, and Bec Rangas, writing as a well-informed parent, comments on the usefulness of a publication that aims to clarify basic concepts about both the science and the art of evidence-based literacy teaching.

Next, we offer a thought-provoking discussion by Carly Steele, Graeme Gower and Jill Wigglesworth, addressing

the important issue of providing essential professional learning for teachers about students who speak a dialect as a first language that is not Standard Australian English – in this case, Aboriginal students, whose second-language learning needs may be 'invisible' in the classroom.

Finally, Professor Linda Siegel invites us into a Canadian courtroom, providing a brief account of a project on which she was a consultant: the Ontario Human Rights Commission's findings on the *Right to Read* report. This report brings into clear focus the need for teachers to continue to help other teachers to understand and use evidence-based practice in classrooms.

Thanks to our authors for their generous contributions to this ongoing topic of discussion. We hope you enjoy this issue of the Bulletin!

**Dr Roslyn Neilson  
Editor, LDA Bulletin**

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# Challenges of Teacher Professional Learning

In this article **Brendan Lee** outlines the rationale of his own journey as a school leader in thinking about, planning, and delivering professional learning to teachers.

*“And cut!” calls out the Instructional Leader.*

*The ‘students’ start chatting amongst themselves, and the Instructional Leader approaches the practising teacher. “Do you know why I called, cut?” asks the Instructional Leader.*

*“Yeah, after the Turn-and-Talk, I asked the speaker to respond to the class, rather than the listener. This let the listener off the hook.” responds the teacher.*

*“You got it, but that’s why we’re practising now, so we can fine-tune your teaching!” replies a relieved Instructional Leader.*

I’ve just described a fictional scene that Dr. Simon Breakspear, founder of [Teaching Sprints](#) and [Agile Schools](#), alluded to in a recent webinar for the Think Forward Educators (TFE) Mentoring Program. This article provides the context for that webinar.

I begin with the fact that as teachers, we normally don’t get time to practise new skills in a training environment. Teaching is not like playing competitive sport, where you have training nights on Tuesday and Thursday before a game on Saturday. And this presents a challenge when it comes to teacher professional learning.

## Teachers aren’t prepared to do a good job

Some of the major challenges currently facing teachers include:

### Initial Teacher Education

- A number of recent reports on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) on reading, writing and mathematics (Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Fahey et al., 2021; McLean & Griffiths, 2022) tell us that we are not preparing novice teachers adequately for the challenges of the classroom. A report published by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022) argues strongly that ITE courses should be evidence-based and more support should be provided for early career teachers.

### Pressures of decision-making

- Teachers have to learn and apply their learning simultaneously. Decision-making becomes very difficult in this context – and that’s if you remember what aspect you wanted to change, under pressure.
- Jackson (1990) pointed out that teachers make between 1200-1500 decisions every day and that doesn’t even include outside-of-class time! For example, teachers have to decide: How will they allow students to enter the classroom? Where do they put their bags? Where will the teacher stand as they enter? Where will the students sit? Who can they sit next to? How much noise will be allowed? ... As well as ‘What am I going to teach today?’!

### Lack of time

- A report by [Hunter et al. \(2020\)](#), published by the Grattan Institute, includes a survey of 5,442 Australian teachers and school leaders, in which it was found that “more than 90 per cent of teachers say they don’t have enough time to prepare effectively for classroom teaching – the core of their job.”

## Challenges of learning as an adult

As adults, we are all hindered to some extent by a number of cognitive biases such as:

- The Dunning-Kruger effect: We think we know more than we do.
- Confirmation bias: We look at new information based on preconceived ideas.
- Sunk-cost bias: We make decisions based on how much we have previously invested (time or money).
- The ‘curse of knowledge’: When we know what we know, it can be hard to understand what others don’t know.
- Halo effect: We are influenced by who is presenting information to us due to their status or presence.
- Fundamental attribution error: We can over-emphasise personality-based explanations for a person’s actions.

Essentially, therefore, teachers are not entering the profession properly prepared, and they are then not given adequate support to improve on the job. It doesn’t matter how you look at Australia’s results in PISA over the past couple of decades, any teacher would be able to tell you that our students are not where they could be. This lack of success then leads to low morale. Experiencing early success is vital for building intrinsic motivation. As McCreary (2020) argues, we are more likely to pay attention if we believe it is a wise investment to do so.

## Schools aren’t prepared to support teacher improvement

Teachers are a product of their school’s system. If classroom teachers are feeling that they don’t have enough



time, knowledge, and resources, it's likely that school leaders will be feeling the same. Teachers and leaders know that they have to be adaptable, but they are currently faced with an overload of 'jobs' being added on without anything being taken away.

This article is not about changing systems and policies. Rather, I'd like to focus on something that all schools have to do, but don't always execute as well as they could: professional development (PD) or teacher professional learning (TPL). Currently, if teachers are feeling exhausted, undervalued, and lacking a sense of purpose, how can they find the mental capacity to learn?

I have empathy for those that feel under-valued and missing a sense of purpose. I have also sat in PD sessions after school - sessions that feel like they will have no bearing on how you teach. From an economic point of view, we should also value teachers' time:

- PD length of time x number of staff x pay per hour = A lot of money!

In NSW, the Maintenance of Teacher Accreditation Policy of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) mandates that full-time teachers complete 100 hours of professional learning throughout each 'maintenance period' of five years, and I know the expectations are similar across the country. Due to the expectations around professional learning, all schools will have some sort of time allocated for it. However, on average TPL is having minimal impact on improving student learning outcomes (Lynch et al., 2019). This lack of impact can be put down to a number of factors:

- Not having access to evidence-informed programs
- Lack of time to prepare
- The timing of when it is offered e.g., it is often after school when teachers are tired
- Lack of teacher expertise
- No practical element of how to apply the new knowledge
- Poor learning culture in the school

## What can be done?

I like to begin with Professor Dylan William's well-known *quote*: "If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve."

As Hanushek & Rivkin (2006) point out, "The quality of the individual

teacher is one of the most significant variables influencing how much progress students make in school." We can either get rid of underperforming staff or support their development. We don't want to push teachers out (especially in this current climate), so teacher improvement is the most effective and efficient way of advancing student learning outcomes.

There are a number of guides that support the implementation of effective professional learning. The one that I have found really useful is the new theory from Sims et al. (2022), on designing and selecting effective professional development, with their findings and recommendations published in the Education Endowment Foundation's *Effective Professional Development Guidance Report*. After conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis on 104 evaluated PD programs, Sims et al. (2022) summarised their findings in terms of four necessary building blocks:

- **Insight:** Teachers gaining an enhanced or expanded understanding of teaching and learning.
- **Goals:** Motivating a teacher to consciously pursue a specific change in their practice
- **Technique:** Helping a teacher to utilise a new teaching practice.
- **Practice:** Supporting a teacher to consistently make use of some technique in the classroom.

Each of the building blocks has active components that the report refers to as 'mechanisms', which are defined as "empirically evidenced general principles about how people learn and change their practice." (Sims et al. 2021, p.5). These mechanisms, such as 'managing cognitive load', 'modelling' and 'prompting action planning' form the essential ingredients of the building blocks.

Since the release of that report, I have found myself using the guide as a checklist of features to ensure are included when delivering professional learning to teachers.

## Planning a Professional Learning Curriculum

Last year at my school, I introduced a TPL framework at a planning day with school leaders. We looked at Education Consultant Tom Sherrington's three levels of planning professional learning: Whole school, Team, and Individual

(Sherrington, 2021). I divided it up like this:

- **Whole school:** Based on teaching practices that need to be changed across the whole school e.g., curriculum, behaviour, effective teaching. Guided by our Strategic Directions, NSW Curriculum and DoE Policies.
- **Team:** Groups to be formed based on shared goals. Focused on research-informed precise teaching strategies that are deliberately practised.
- **Individual:** Personalised learning based on teacher and student needs, personal interests, and performance and development plan (PDP) goals.

Collaboratively with the school leadership team, we put together a continuous and coherent plan to build teachers' knowledge on the Science of Learning in 2021, before narrowing the focus onto literacy and numeracy in 2022 in preparation for the new NSW K-2 English and Mathematics syllabuses.

## Why I have found the Teaching Sprints Model effective

We decided to focus on the Team level and, having looked at the various guidance reports and other Cycles of Inquiry styles of TPL, I really connected with the Teaching Sprints model articulated by Dr Simon Breakspear. He has co-authored a book with Bronwyn Ryrie Jones: *Teaching Sprints - How Overloaded Educators Can Keep Getting Better*. The book outlines three big ideas:

- 1 Start with the Best Bets
- 2 Practice Makes Progress
- 3 Focus on Tiny Shifts

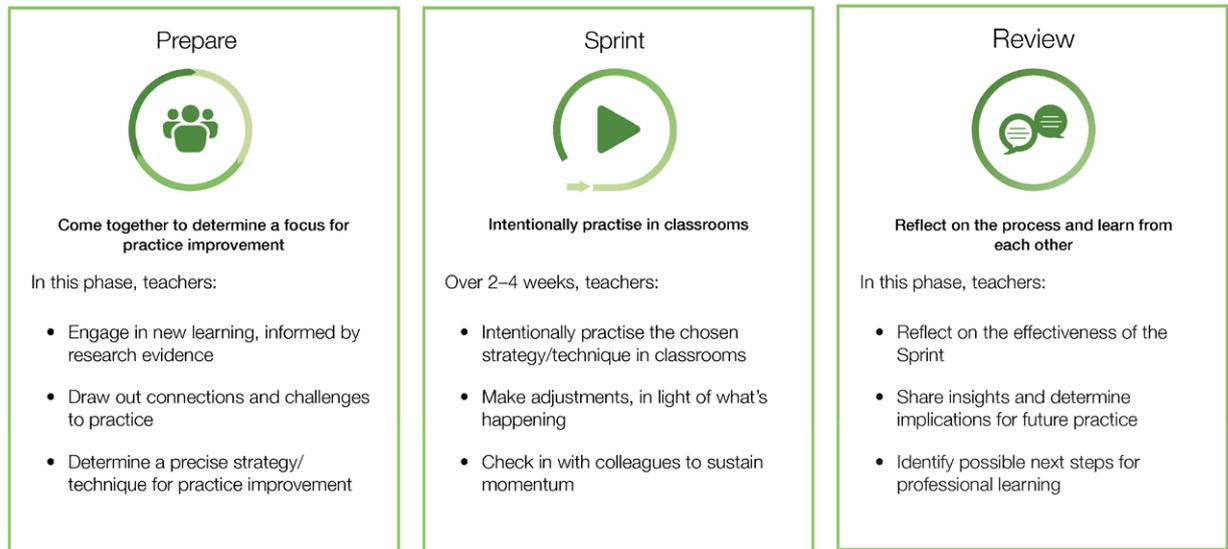
These big ideas are supported by the three-step process:

- 1 Prepare: Come together to determine a focus for practice improvement
- 2 Sprint (over 2-4 weeks): Intentionally practise in classrooms
- 3 Review: Reflect on the process and learn from each other

Looking at the various barriers that teachers face that I outlined at the beginning of this article, I have found Teaching Sprints really helps educators overcome them. This is how it addresses the challenges that I mentioned earlier:

- **Initial Teacher Education:** While it doesn't improve the actual ITE being delivered, by working in

## Teaching Sprints Process Overview



small groups, novice teachers are supported by experienced colleagues during the learning process. The simple steps and focusing on “tiny shifts” serve to decrease the cognitive load on the novice teacher.

- Decision-making: It can be overwhelming looking at all the different aspects of teaching and sifting through the mountains of evidence.
  - Firstly, taking a “best-bets” approach narrows down what teachers look at.
  - Secondly, by intentionally working on one specific element of their teaching practice, this reduces the range of things that the teacher has to think about. Professor Viviane Robinson (2021) has described this deliberate practice phase as ‘relentlessly’ focusing on a goal and leaving everything else as business as usual, even if it means that it is not very good.

Too often we attend workshops, but then fail to enact our learning due to the lack of having a process that forces us to practice. Habits are hard to break, especially if we are not intentional.

- Lack of time: The Teaching Sprints’ website ([teachingsprints.com](https://teachingsprints.com)) provides Protocols, which are described as tools “For Evidence Engagement & Disciplined Dialogue”. It also provides research resources and starters. This means that school leaders do not have to

learn a new method for running TPL and don’t have to spend hours trying to find sources of information.

There are also very realistic suggested time frames for each phase, with the recommendation of trying to fit this into the school timetable. This shows staff that there is an emphasis on teacher learning and that their time is valued.

- Cognitive biases: By leading with the research, this reduces the danger of ‘fundamental attribution error’ or ‘halo effect’ that can be experienced when an individual presents new information. Challenges like confirmation bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect and sunk-cost bias can also be addressed by the group, or more specifically the Sprints Leader.

The leader’s job is to keep referring back to the evidence and to move away from anecdotal personal experiences that may have a detrimental effect on the team’s ‘buy-in’. Leaders have the role of creating a psychologically safe environment, which is why working in small groups rather than as a whole staff group is encouraged.

### Think Forward Educators Mentoring Program

Unfortunately, not all schools are ready to implement the Science of Learning in an evidence-informed manner. Luckily, Dr. Nathaniel Swain saw this as an area of concern and founded the [Think Forward Educators](https://thinkforwardeducators.org) organisation. The Mentoring Program offers teachers

the opportunity to link with educators outside of their own school.

For more information on the program head to: [thinkforwardeducators.org/mentoring](https://thinkforwardeducators.org/mentoring)

### In a nutshell

- ITE needs to improve, so that beginning teachers are adequately prepared for the challenges of the classroom
- School leaders need to prioritise teacher professional learning and plan for it
- Delivering TPL in an evidence-informed manner means including the building blocks (Insight, Goals, Technique and Practice) and mechanisms
- We might never have a ‘Practice Classroom’, so we have to choose to deliberately practise.
- Take a best bets approach and focus on tiny shifts

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# TEACHING SPRINTS

How Overloaded Educators Can  
**KEEP GETTING BETTER**

SIMON  
**BREAKSPEAR**

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BRONWYN RYRIE  
**JONES**

