

A history of Learning Difficulties Australia: part one – the beginning

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Abstract

This article is the first in a series tracing the history of Learning Difficulties Australia, an association of educators and other professionals dedicated to the support of people with learning difficulties, especially difficulties in literacy and numeracy. Part one describes the growth of the association from a small group of remedial teachers in Victoria struggling for an identity, to the beginnings of a recognised national body. During this time the association set up a referral service for remedial consultants with strict membership criteria, initiated publication of a successful journal, made submissions to government, conducted workshops and seminars for teachers, and established relationships with other professional bodies concerned with learning difficulties.

The Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria

Learning Difficulties Australia, as it is now known, began life in 1965, established by a small group of remedial teachers in Melbourne who had been meeting for informal discussions at the Alexandra Coffee Lounge in Collins Street¹. Like most classroom teachers, the members of this group – most of them employed in independent schools – were no strangers to children of apparently “normal” intelligence who were significantly underachieving. The learning difficulties of these children were rarely officially acknowledged, however, and there had been few opportunities for teachers to receive the specialised training needed to understand and deal with their problems. Postgraduate courses in special education targeted children who at the time were enrolled in special schools, and whose learning problems were often associated with physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities.

The term “learning disabilities” was introduced by Samuel Kirk in the early 1960s to refer to students who had difficulties with school learning, despite normal school experiences and no evidence of intellectual, physical, sensory, or emotional or social problems (Robinson & Deshler, 1995). In the absence of such explanatory evidence, learning disabilities, also referred to as specific learning disabilities to indicate problems in specific areas of school performance such as literacy and numeracy, were presumed to be due to minimal brain injury that was too subtle to be detectable by available technology. For the classroom teacher coping with a wide range of individual differences, such explanatory hypotheses were of little help. These students often slipped through the net, their learning problems unnoticed or neglected until the later years of schooling.

By the 1950s, there was a growing concern that teachers, trained to teach to the “norm”, were not meeting the educational needs of students with learning disabilities. Remedial teachers, with varying – sometimes dubious – qualifications to deal with learning problems, were making little impact, and there was a need to establish a clearly defined role that met professional standards (Davidson, 1979).

The impetus for increased professionalism of remedial teaching in Australia came with the appointment of Professor Fred Schonell to the University of Queensland in the early 1950s (Anderson, 1976). Fred and Eleanor Schonell had founded the Schonell Special Education Centre at the University of Queensland, where they set up a certificate course in remedial education. Many of the teachers who gathered over coffee in those early years had undertaken the course, and valued the continuing support of fellow graduates in their endeavours to convince school authorities of the benefits of employing qualified remedial teachers.

It was this core group who decided to formalise their meetings and to widen membership. Thus was born the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria (DRTAV), its broad aim to foster a professional image of teachers who worked with students with learning difficulties through a range of activities, including a consultancy referral service, lobbying of funding bodies, professional development and publications. The founding members “did not envisage a trade union type of organisation”, the first president, Dennis O’Malley, told members in 1968, “but a group with a professional approach to our work”².

A Pilot Working Committee was set up, consisting of Dennis O’Malley (chair), Helena Ballard, Miss M. E. Cowan, Mr T. G. Philpott, and Mr N. Thurbon³. The committee was charged, “as professionally qualified remedial teachers and founder members of the

group”, with recommending criteria for membership and associate membership and drafting a working constitution. By November 1967 the committee had drawn up membership forms and begun considering applications for membership⁴.

A statement published in an early issue of the association’s journal, *Remedial Education* (cited in Davidson, 1979), set out the requirements and expectations of the remedial teacher, and the kind of support expected of the school. In addition to formal qualifications in teaching and certification in diagnosis and remediation, the requirements specified personal characteristics, including “a genuine interest in children and individuals, patience, sympathy and a sense of humour”, flexibility and creativity, good communication skills, and stamina. The remedial teacher was expected to be able to conduct “preliminary diagnostic testing”, and to be responsible for referring a child to an educational psychologist “indicating the kinds of tests he feels would be useful to the child and the teacher concerned”; to plan and conduct an individual program which would be taught in intensive sessions on a one-to-one basis; to make others directly concerned with the child’s education aware of the child’s learning difficulties and their practical implications; and “to keep abreast with research and practical ideas in the remedial field” (Davidson, 1979, p. 7).

The school, in turn, was expected to provide a well-equipped resource room, to give remedial teachers full responsibility for their work, and to ensure “the cooperation and understanding of all those within the school framework”. There was a strong emphasis on testing in various forms. Recommendations included early identification of children who were likely to present problems using check lists, reading readiness tests, and observation by kindergarten teachers; group testing of all children in intelligence and basic skills; diagnostic testing by a remedial teacher of any child who appeared to be underachieving; gathering of information from other relevant professionals; design and implementation of an individual remedial program by a remedial teacher; ongoing testing to measure the effectiveness of a program; and maintenance of accurate and up-to-date records by the remedial teacher. The remedial teacher was also to be readily accessible to teachers and parents for discussion of a child’s development, should initiate seminars and panel discussions to promote awareness of aspects of remedial teaching, and should “uphold the high standards befitting his profession”.

A draft constitution was drawn up, with administrative procedures based on the constitution of the Assistant Mistresses’ Association of Victoria, and including aims and objectives that had evolved from

early meetings of remedial teachers who had shown interest in forming the association⁵. This constitution was presented to members at a general meeting on 10 July 1968, and Dennis O’Malley, as retiring president, later paid tribute to Mrs Ballard and Miss Cowan for their experience and wisdom “in the arduous business” of its drafting⁶. The constitution was accepted unanimously, with minor amendments, on 22 October 1969. At the same meeting, Geoff Saunders, who had been elected president in November 1968, was re-elected, with Mrs A. Pringle elected secretary-treasurer, Mr K. Byers vice-president, and committee members Mrs H. Ballard, Miss Ursula Tyrrell-Gill, Mr E. Butler, and Mr C. Davidson⁷. The governing authority was known as the “Executive” until April 1972, when it changed to “Council” to comply with the articles of the constitution⁸.

The number of enquiries grew quickly, not just about membership, but also on more general issues related to learning difficulties. Several schools asked for advice on setting up a remedial centre. By 1970 the DRTAV was receiving a “large number” of telephone enquiries from a variety of sources, including the Psychology and Guidance Branch of the Department of Education, hospitals, private practitioners, the school medical service, psychologists, psychiatrists and parents, most seeking remedial teachers willing to take on private students⁹.

By early 1973 the volume of work had grown to the extent that a part-time secretary to work from home was being sought. Permanent premises were also being considered¹⁰. Ann Wicking was appointed part-time business secretary and an office was established at Glamorgan, Toorak, where Chris Davidson was head of the remedial department¹¹. The business secretary handled membership applications and subscription renewals, dispatched journals and books sold by the association, banked cheques, and typed correspondence and the Information Bulletin, thus relieving members of many of the routine duties involved in running the organisation. Much of the extra work came from a rapid growth in membership in the early 1970s.

The Bulletin had begun as an information sheet for members – a single, quarto-size sheet typed on both sides. Its function was primarily to provide news about forthcoming workshops and seminars, events run by other organisations, books available for sale, and membership requirements. By July 1970 it was produced on roneoed foolscap sheets, stapled if necessary, and could run to as many as four pages. It continued to fulfil this function but also broadened considerably in the later 1970s to include more content of practical assistance to teachers in the classroom.

Membership and training

Initially it was agreed that teachers who had completed the course in Diagnostic and Remedial Teaching at the University of Queensland should be accepted for full membership, with consideration of alternative qualifications to be deferred pending finalisation of the constitution. Subsequently the committee agreed to accept courses “similar to the Queensland course”, in addition to a minimum of three years teaching experience. In February 1970 the Special Teaching Certificate, which qualified trained teachers in the Victorian Department of Education to teach in special schools for students with disabilities, was accepted as an alternative qualification for full membership¹².

While full members were required to be qualified remedial teachers, associate members represented several professions, including teachers from technical and private schools and the Catholic school system, medical practitioners, educational psychologists, a teacher’s college lecturer, a preschool teacher and a music teacher. Early in 1973 there was a further change in the criteria for full membership, requiring teacher registration plus training in a “recognised allied discipline” of remedial education.

Approval of applications for membership became a regular agenda item for executive meetings, and by late 1971 the association had 42 full members, 60 associate members, seven organisational members and two student members. Journal subscribers totalled 340. Between 1972 and 1973, the number of members virtually doubled, from 45 to 91 full members and from 44 to 87 associate members. Over a period of four years there had been a four-fold increase in membership¹³.

The increase in membership was gratifying, but the association could only grow and remain viable with continuing recruitment of new members. A major barrier to future growth was the lack of opportunity for teachers to train in remedial work. The remedial teaching course at the University of Queensland had been discontinued, and in 1971 the DRTAV established a sub-committee to consider other training options. Negotiations with Mr R. McWilliam of Mercer House (the independent teacher training institute in Victoria), resulted in a proposal for Mercer House to conduct a two-year, part-time course over one day a week during school terms, provided evidence of support from independent schools was forthcoming. The prerequisite was a Primary Teachers’ Certificate and a minimum of five years’ classroom teaching experience.

Executive approached independent schools to gauge their support for the proposed course and obtained positive responses from about 20 principals¹⁴. Support

was also sought from SPELD (Specific Learning Difficulties Association of Victoria), and by the end of 1972 the DRTAV president was able to report that there were sufficient applications for enrolment “for it to be viable”¹⁵. The course, to be known as the Diploma in Remedial Education (Mercer House) would be run by Ian McMillan, an educational psychologist who had undertaken postgraduate studies at the Universities of Alberta, Melbourne and Monash. The qualification requirement for entry became a certificate or diploma from a recognised teachers’ college or a university department of education, thus allowing secondary- as well as primary-trained teachers to enrol. In addition, course applicants must be currently employed as teachers for a minimum of three days a week, preferably in a remedial capacity. Content of the course, for which a fee was set of \$400, was to include the psychology of learning disabilities and “mental dysfunctions”; theory of remedial teaching and therapy; testing; and case work¹⁶.

By 1973 the course was running successfully and promised “to be an in-depth course culminating in a Diploma of Remedial Teaching”¹⁷. But despite this initial enthusiasm, by the end of 1973 the future of the course was in doubt¹⁸; Mercer House was soon to be absorbed into the State College of Victoria at Toorak, putting an end to separate training for teachers in independent schools.

The remedial model and development of a referral service

The DRTAV worked on a diagnostic-remedial model, which assumed that the learning difficulties of many students could be neither diagnosed nor supported in the normal classroom, thus requiring withdrawal of the child from the classroom for one-to-one or small group specialist attention.

There was no lack of support for this model at the time. Class teachers were not trained in remedial techniques, nor did existing frameworks and class sizes allow students with specific learning difficulties to receive the help they needed in the classroom. It was in this context that the Executive decided to set up a referral service which could match individual students to qualified remedial teachers.

For the referral service to be successful, the DRTAV needed to increase awareness of learning difficulties in the wider community. Through the journal and other media the association was becoming more widely known. Links were established with several other organisations, including the International Reading Association (Victorian Chapter) and the Department of Education Reading Centre¹⁹, and an approach was made for recognition by

the Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria, an umbrella organisation for registered teachers in independent schools. Publicity received a boost in 1970 when Ormsby Wilkins, whose program “Powerline” on radio station 3AW had received a large number of calls from parents of children with learning difficulties, approached the DRTAV for an interview²⁰. By October 1971 the DRTAV was receiving an average of four calls a week seeking remedial teaching for individual children²¹. As the number of requests continued to grow, the consultants’ referral service became a central function of the DRTAV and subsequently of AREA.

Not all educators agreed with the remedial model for dealing with learning difficulties. In a provocative article in the association’s journal, Jonathon Anderson, professor of education at Flinders University in South Australia, examined the model of remedial education that had evolved in Australia over the past 20 to 25 years (Anderson, 1976). He questioned the effectiveness of this model both in preventing students from dropping out of the education system without adequate literacy skills, and in rehabilitating those who remained. His assertion that the role of the remedial teacher was “indefensible” was made in the light of a recent Schools Commission Report which singled out functional illiteracy as a major factor in social and educational disadvantage.

Equally controversial were Anderson’s assertions that the DRTAV had come 20 years too late, that the growth of the remedial education “industry” was not a matter for congratulation, and that his “preference would be for an industry in decline and for remedial teachers and regular teachers to move closer together”. Anderson attributed recent growth in remedial education to a number of factors: that students who failed to show progress were no longer required to repeat a grade or encouraged to leave school early; that society no longer had a place for students who had not mastered basic school skills; and that teacher training institutions were not adequately preparing their students to become teachers of reading.

Anderson went on to criticise the remedial teacher concept for implying that, since the child could not apparently learn from normal classroom instruction, there must be “something wrong” with both child and teacher. Remedial teachers were placed in an “impossibly difficult” position, only entering the scene after the child was deemed to have failed and the class teacher had been unable to deal with that failure. Dependence on psychologists or medical practitioners for referrals reinforced the remedial concept. “What other group of workers in the community sets up in parallel a second group to rectify the errors it makes?,” Anderson asked (1976, p. 24).

Instead of training more remedial teachers, Anderson

proposed that more in-service support should be given to class teachers to develop their teaching skills and their ability to locate and diagnose students’ learning problems, as well as identifying skills that students had already mastered. Smaller class sizes would facilitate this role and enable class teachers to spend more time with individual students. Resource teachers could be employed in schools – perhaps an alternative role for remedial teachers – but responsibility for all students’ learning should rest with the class teacher.

It is to their credit that the association was prepared to publish this criticism. In a later reference to Anderson’s article, Davidson (1979) commented that:

the point of view expressed in this article, and shared by most administrators, has done nothing to improve the remedial teacher’s temporary or stop-gap status... If the remedial teaching of the future is to be done by the classroom teacher, class numbers will have to be reduced, teacher training will have to be drastically improved and much more time devoted to the reading process. (p. 7)

Like Anderson, though, Davidson admitted that he also hoped “that education would progress to the point where our ‘industry’ became a self-destructive one”.

The Psychological Practices Act

An assumption of the diagnostic-remedial model was that learning difficulties could be “diagnosed” with the use of appropriate ability tests, and “remediated” by focusing on weaknesses identified by the tests. Simple solutions were sought to reading failure, with a tendency to latch on to published tests and remedial programs that offered, if not a cure, then at least a chance of improvement. Many remedial teachers therefore saw access to a range of diagnostic tests as a crucial element of their practice. Graduates of the certificate course at the University of Queensland had received training in the use of the 1960 edition of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, and believed that the strict qualifications requirements for full membership of the DRTAV entitled members to access to this and similar tests.

Problems of visual perception and visual-motor co-ordination were also gaining attention as possible sources of reading difficulty, and the test of visual-motor development and related remedial program published by Dr Marianne Frostig in the United States were of considerable interest to remedial teachers. Dr Frostig visited Australia in 1968 for a five-day Dyslexia Symposium in Melbourne, and visited again in December 1972 when the DRTAV included her in a successful one-day seminar at Mercer House²². Frostig’s visits added fuel to demands by remedial teachers for access to

psychological tests, and provoked a challenge to existing interpretations of the *Victorian Psychological Practices Act 1965*.

The Act was the first to legislate the practice of psychology in Australia and had come into force primarily to prevent the charging of fees for dubious testing practices by the Scientology organisation following several complaints. The Act restricted the use of certain prescribed tests to registered psychologists, but provided exemptions from the restriction for testing conducted by teachers and ministers of religion in the course of their work. At the time the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), as agent for several overseas test publishers, had a virtual monopoly on the supply of psychological tests in Australia, and the Victorian Psychological Council (VPC) was guided by ACER restrictions in compiling their list of prescribed tests. Despite exemptions from the Act, ACER considered that individual ability and diagnostic tests, because of their clinical nature and required background knowledge, should only be supplied to psychologists.

The issue came to a head in 1973 when Scientology declared itself a religion, and therefore exempt from restrictions under the *Psychological Practices Act*. The DRTAV Council asked Chris Davidson to approach the DRTAV solicitor for clarification, and if appropriate to place a trial order for psychological tests with ACER. The solicitor agreed to investigate the legality of ACER refusing to supply DRTAV members with certain tests²³. The Council then decided to recommend that six restricted tests be released by ACER for sale to members of DRTAV (which had by then changed its name to AREA). Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting recorded that the following were cogent factors for the release of the above tests:

1. They were needed for our diagnostic work.
2. Under the *Psychological Practices Act* we are entitled to use these tests, and many of us are in fact using some or all of them.
3. It is possible to learn more from the administration of a test than from a referral. It was emphasised that we are not attempting to take over the role of the psychologist, we are attempting to work within a multidisciplinary framework.
4. As a last resort, we would have no objection for any member of the APS [Australian Psychological Society] to determine whether or not a member of AREA is competent... in the administration of a given test.²⁴

The solicitor's advice confirmed that remedial teachers were not contravening the *Psychological Practices Act* if they used psychological tests while working in schools, but that they could not force ACER to sell tests to them.

This advice would be confirmed some years later by the VPC, but the VPC also indicated that "irrespective of training undertaken by remedial teachers in the use of certain psychological tests, the teachers are prevented under the terms of the Act from using these tests for fee or reward in practice outside the normal school situation".²⁵

In a further bid to resolve the issue a meeting was arranged between AREA and ACER. The meeting appeared to be positive: "They [ACER] are sympathetic and the general feeling was that when there is a course available where students can receive practice in administering these tests then the tests will be released"²⁶.

AREA was asked to submit details of membership requirements to ACER.

Over the following years the use of restricted tests by remedial teachers and the development of suitable training courses continued to occupy Council meetings. During 1974 AREA worked with ACER and with psychologist Dr N. Cox to develop appropriate course content²⁷. As graduate courses in special education began to include content on assessment, ACER modified its policy on supply to remedial and special education graduates of some individual tests that had previously been supplied only to psychologists. These included tests of auditory and visual perception and some language tests, but not individual tests of intelligence. For AREA, although many tests remained restricted, it was seen as a "breakthrough" (Keir, 1976).

Relations with other organisations and professions

Teachers were not the only profession concerned with learning difficulties, and from the beginning the DRTAV recognised the benefits of good relationships with other organisations and professions. Foremost among organisations with which they shared common ground was SPELD (Specific Learning Difficulties Association).

Formed in 1968, SPELD shared with the DRTAV the aim of educating the public about specific learning difficulties and, through political pressure on governments, achieving recognition of the problem and appropriate educational provision (Davidson, 1979). Membership of SPELD, however, included parents as well as teachers, and a major focus of SPELD was the right of parents to receive adequate information from schools about their children's difficulties. SPELD encouraged parents to be assertive, but not aggressive, in seeking both information and support for their children. SPELD also provided assistance for adults with

reading difficulties. Some SPELD branches had become referral agencies; others offered assessment and classes themselves at a central location. In 1970 the various state branches formed the Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) to strengthen their political power, while retaining autonomy at state level (Stewart, 1982).

Over the years the DRTAV (and its successors) would co-operate with SPELD on several issues, particularly when the strength of two organisations was seen as being more effective than one, such as in writing submissions and organising workshops, seminars and conferences. In 1975 the DRTAV Council agreed that AREA should become a corporate member of SPELD, and AREA was later represented on the SPELD Management Committee²⁸.

Although teachers faced the day-to-day challenges presented by learning difficulties, the DRTAV was also aware that remedial consultants would benefit by contacts with other professions, including psychology, medicine, speech and occupational therapy, and optometry, especially as sources of referrals. The medical role was perceived as important in identifying possible physical causes of learning difficulties²⁹, and would be given due recognition in future issues of the association's journal. A meeting of "allied disciplines" held at Rossbourne House in mid-1973 was attended by 14 people and judged to be "worth continuing", the Executive agreeing that the DRTAV should be an "outlet" for a multidisciplinary group. The president's report for 1972-73 noted that the group was planning seminars and other activities "employing a multidisciplinary approach to the learning process and learning difficulties"³⁰. Full membership of DRTAV, though, remained restricted to qualified remedial teachers.

Lobbying was another important activity. Although its primary concern was with students who were underachieving, the DRTAV did not hesitate to become involved in more general issues if it saw an opportunity to promote the cause of remedial education. In a submission to a Ministerial Committee of Enquiry into Special Education in Victoria (Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers' Association of Victoria, 1973), Council made clear the association's concern with "the intelligent underachiever". Such students were defined as having "a lag of at least 18 months behind their chronological ages in language development", likely to display one or more of a range of characteristics, and having in common a label of "school failure". The submission recommended that the government should employ at least one permanent remedial teacher for every 300 children, and that there should be one educational psychologist available to carry out assessments for between one and five of the remedial

teachers employed. It further recommended that three-year teacher training courses for primary teachers should include at least 50 hours on recognising and dealing with specific learning difficulties in the classroom. Systematic screening of children on entry to school was also seen as desirable to avoid a culture of failure as the child progressed through school. The submission fell short of estimating the costs of its proposals, but it was an important first step in putting the case for remedial education before government.

Workshops and seminars provided another avenue for reaching beyond the membership. The DRTAV believed it had a responsibility to foster awareness of learning difficulties generally, and once the association was established the provision of educational activities for practising teachers became a central part of its activities. The first seminar was held in 1968 at Mount Scopus College, Burwood, with keynote speaker Dr Rickard, Director of the Department of Psychiatry at the Royal Children's Hospital³¹. Proposals for talks and seminars prompted lots of discussion and included outside speakers, a professional panel, workshops, demonstrations of teaching aids, technical developments, and meetings either of general interest or on specific topics. An ambitious one-day seminar on the Frostig Visual-Perceptual program, covering "ability training" with a focus on visual perception, child development, psycho-educational evaluation and programming, and teaching reading to children with learning difficulties also helped to put the DRTAV on the map for teachers, while a film and discussion meeting in February 1972 attracted over 100 members of the association and the public³².

The journal

There is no doubt that the journal helped to get the DRTAV off the ground and established remedial education as a force, not only in education generally, but well beyond. By publishing and circulating a journal the association hoped to reach, as well as DRTAV members, "other disciplines also interested in this field and also parents" as a means of achieving recognition for the work of remedial teachers. Chris Davidson became editor of the journal from its first issue in 1969, remaining editor until 2005, long after his retirement.

Volume 1 No 1 appeared in May 1969. Called simply *Remedial Education*, the journal set out to give teachers practical solutions to learning problems in the classroom, and information on research, books and equipment that could assist in the management of children with learning difficulties. The first issue ran to 250 copies. By popular demand, it was reprinted and 500 copies

of the two succeeding editions were produced. The journal had rapidly become the association's major form of communication "to all levels of professionals and interested parents" and was described by the editor as the "mainstay of the Association"³³.

Volunteer labour and the support of other organisations helped. At first copies were reproduced from Gestetner stencils and collated at Glamorgan, the task vividly recalled by Geoff Saunders (1975):

The memories of those early days – the inky, black, chewing, spewing machine that consumed our time and meagre capital to produce the pages of those early editions; the Council members plus the children of Glamorgan, whose education was extended by the numbing experience of collating and stapling those thousands of pages... the slow, budget-watching process from amateur production to the professional edition of today. (p. 2)

The time spent duplicating, collating and stapling soon became excessive and a more efficient means of production was needed. Publishers were showing interest in a journal with a more professional finish, and an order was placed with Jenkin Buxton and Co. "for 1000 copies of a 36 page edition with photographs"³⁴. Davidson wrote to professors in most Australian universities asking them to encourage staff to contribute, solicited papers from overseas contacts, and sought assistance in reviewing books, keeping records, and dealing with contributions. Meryl Silver agreed to act as Reviews Editor, a position which she retained until 1975 when Mim Davidson took over.

The journal was produced three times a year until 1972, when it changed to four. The title *Remedial Education* duplicated that of an English publication, and in March 1973 Volume 5 Number 1 appeared with the title *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, reflecting the fact that the journal was now established nationally. Jeff Prentice, as business manager, was responsible for collecting advertising, arranging printing, and distributing to local and interstate shops as well as collecting subscriptions from schools and colleges.

The intention was that the journal should have a practical bias, "and should be used to educate the Australian community towards a better understanding of the work of the remedial teacher with the intelligent underachiever" (Davidson, 1974, p. 2). Issues often adopted a specific theme, for example the medical perspective on learning difficulties, the role of counselling in the school context, mathematics programs, or behavioural problems. Contributions dealing with reading difficulties, though, were most frequent.

The journal also set out to provide a much-needed forum for debate on remedial education practices.

Reflecting on editorial policy over the first 25 years, Davidson and Weigall (1991) would later write:

The journal has a policy of being open-minded to new ideas... We have published controversial issues or fringe approaches for the interest of our readers, in the hope that there may be a new line of understanding in our work... knowing that they do not necessarily express the views of AREA, but feel that unless we have an open forum for discussing new ideas, there is very little point in producing this journal.

The Editors support properly conducted research procedures and are aware of the importance of maintaining high professional standards. However, we owe it to children to be informed of new ideas to ensure that they have every possible chance to achieve their potential. There is no doubt in our minds that without the stimulus of relatively untried ideas, little progress will be made in our understanding of the learning process. (p. 2)

No issue provides a better example of this policy than the Doman-Delacato program for "treating" learning difficulties. Because it was a highly controversial program that occupied both contributors and readers of the journal over the early years, it is worth discussing some of the relevant contributions more fully.

The program, founded at the Institute for Achievement of Human Potential, Philadelphia, USA, was based on a theory that learning difficulties had their origin in poorly developed neurological organisation resulting from lack of progress through the "normal" phases of development that reflected established hemispheric dominance and laterality, such as crawling and hand dominance. The "treatment", which involved a strict, time-consuming exercise regime, was promoted in Australia by an organisation known as ANSUA (A New Start for the Underachiever). Dr Carl H. Delacato, director of the US organisation, visited Australia in April 1972. A great deal of interest was generated by a talk-back program conducted on Radio 3DB in February 1972 with Graham Forbes, who ran a remedial clinic in Adelaide. As a result Forbes had agreed to address parents and teachers on the subject of "Positive help for children with learning difficulties" as an introduction to Dr Delacato's lecture tour³⁵.

Prominent among critics of the program was Charlton (1972a), a South Australian educational psychologist who pointed out "the dangers of over-simplifying diagnosis and remediation of the bewilderingly complex medley of learning disabilities which our schools present". In a review of a recent book by Delacato, Charlton (1972b) was equally scathing for the book's emphasis on self-promotion, its simplistic treatment of diagnosis and parent-run therapy, its dismissal of qualified teachers

and psychologists, and its inadequate and misleading presentation of “data”.

In the following issue Charlton (1973) wrote a more detailed critique based on several studies published in refereed journals which found no relationship either between failure to establish single-hemisphere brain dominance and reading difficulty (as Delacato’s theory claimed), or between laterality and reading or other areas of academic achievement. While concluding that “no scientifically respectable proof [of results claimed by Delacato] has yet appeared”, and acknowledging that this did not preclude such proof emerging in the future, Charlton pointed out several more disturbing features of the Delacato program. These included the pressure on parents to commit to an unproven technique, potential guilt feelings if they delayed “treatment”, and “the dangerous inflation of parental hopes”; the rigidity of the program which involved proscription of “some natural and enjoyable activities, such as long walks or listening to music”; and last but by no means least, the “virulent denouncing of other forms of remedial diagnosis and treatment” which would induce many parents to refuse potentially valuable help “to follow out a rigid, expensive and potentially harmful wild goose chase”.

Not surprisingly, not all readers accepted Charlton’s view. Another correspondent (Williams, 1972) wrote in defence of Delacato, claiming personal knowledge of at least 15 case histories of children in Victoria who had shown “marked improvement” in both classroom performance and behaviour. The debate would continue over a number of issues of the journal, provoking some lively discussion and leading one reader (White, 1973) to write: “What I liked most [about the previous issue] was that some articles were excellent (to me), while others irritated me for various reasons, but all were stimulating and interesting, and clearly written by people who are intensely involved.”

Conclusion

Much had been achieved during the time of the DRTAV. In just eight years the association had initiated a two-year part-time course for training remedial teachers at Mercer House, established the journal as a recognised quarterly publication, provided a free referral service for students in need of qualified remedial teachers and a free advisory service for people seeking information on remedial education, made a submission to the Victorian Government on special education, and organised lectures, seminars and workshops for teachers and the general public (Davidson, 1974).

The number of enquiries was growing, not just about membership, but also on more general issues related

to learning difficulties as well as from schools seeking advice on setting up a remedial centre. The association had also acquired a number of publications for sale, and Council considered the possibility of opening a shop³⁶. “It is gratifying to note the tremendous upsurge in interest by educationalists in the field of remedial education in the last year or so,” Chris Davidson wrote (1974). With a stable and recognisable identity, the DRTAV could now look towards expanding its activities Australia-wide to form a national body that would carry more weight in approaches to government authorities.

Endnotes

1. Davidson, C., personal communication, 2005.
2. Agenda for 1968 Annual General Meeting, 3 November 1968.
3. Dennis O’Malley, letter to members, 21 October 1968.
4. Minutes of Working Committee, 29 November 1967.
5. DRTAV Executive Minutes, 10 May 1968.
6. Dennis O’Malley, letter to members, 21 October 1968.
7. Minutes of Special General Meeting, 22 October 1969.
8. DRTAV Council Minutes, 20 April 1972.
9. Minutes of Annual General Meeting, 7 July 1970.
10. DRTAV Council Minutes, 21 March 1973.
11. DRTAV Council Minutes, 18 April 1973.
12. DRTAV Executive Minutes, 26 February 1970.
13. Information Bulletins Vol 1 No 3 (1970), Vol 2 No 4 (October 1971), Vol 4 No 4 (1972), Vol 5 No 2 (May 1973).
14. DRTAV Council Minutes, 20 April 1972.
15. DRTAV Council Minutes, 10 October 1972.
16. Information Bulletin Vol 4 No 5 (September 1972).
17. Report of 1973 Annual General Meeting, Information Bulletin Vol 5 No 2 (May 1973).
18. AREA Council Minutes, 10 December 1973.
19. DRTAV Executive Minutes, 26 May 1969.
20. Information Bulletin, Vol 1 No 3 (July 1970).
21. Information Bulletin, Vol 2 No 4 (October 1971).
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23. DRTAV Council Minutes, 22 March 1973, 4 May 1973.
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