

## **A history of Learning Difficulties Australia: part six – looking ahead**

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### **Abstract**

This is the final in a series of articles tracing the history of Learning Difficulties Australia since the late 1960s, and covers the decade beginning in the mid-1990s. This decade has seen increasing professionalisation of the association through adoption and implementation of a Strategic Plan, more rigorous administrative procedures, a strengthening of nation-wide ties through interstate conferences and election of interstate Council members, and a change of name. The regular program of professional development has been maintained, as has the Consultants' Referral Service, with the introduction of a similar service in Queensland. Increased involvement of academic researchers in the association is reflected in greater pressure on specialist educators to employ research-based methods in the teaching of early reading. The association has continued to lobby for greater support for students with learning difficulties.

### **The Australian Resource Educators' Association**

By the mid-1990s AREA, now the Australian Resource Educators' Association, had established a base at the University of Melbourne. Relocation, together with a policy of outsourcing and use of contract services, had eliminated salaries and overheads such as office space, superannuation and insurance, putting the association on a much sounder financial footing<sup>1</sup>. The late 1990s would see strengthening of national affiliations and the opening of a Referral Service in Queensland to coincide with the 1999 conference in Brisbane<sup>2</sup>. Approaching the end of his term as president, Daryl Greaves referred to AREA as "a vibrant and growing organisation", but also noted the complexity and diversity of Council's operations<sup>3</sup>. The workload for Council members was considerable.

Despite teleconferencing and frequent use of email, keeping in touch at a national level with crucial issues in each state was not easy. Sylvia Byers outlined the problem of identifying relevant groups with whom to work: ". . . the only way to get a national perspective on professional groups that lobby government and have a similar focus to AREA is to have one person in each state as a subcommittee", and suggested that a Council member from each state might be able to find a suitable person<sup>4</sup>. AREA had held its first public event in Queensland in 1997, attended by about 35 teachers and parents. The program had provided an introduction to AREA, a discussion of definitions of learning disability, and assessment and teaching strategies<sup>5</sup>.

In 1996 a Mission Statement was developed, the purpose being "to clarify AREA's role and enable effective, focused planning for the future"<sup>6</sup>. The aims of

the association were set out in terms of three functions: "The Australian Resource Educators' Association is the association dedicated to representing, resourcing and promoting members in their professional work, so that the highest level of service can be provided to those individuals experiencing learning difficulties."

Nola Firth, as President for 1999-2000 and convenor of the Strategic Planning Committee, together with President-elect Wendy Scott, prepared a set of targets for the next five years, building on the Mission Statement<sup>7</sup>.

Use of the term 'resourcing' in the Mission Statement implied that the association existed to provide resources for members, rather than the members themselves being a resource for teachers and others. Indeed, some concern had already been expressed by the association's editorial committee about 'resource' being too vague a term, with the need to add riders for clarification<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, the association would continue to be seen primarily as a resource for members up to the present.

Discussion of terminology was not confined to the role of the association. Greaves (1996) questioned the term that should be adopted for children who were having difficulties with reading but were learning quite successfully in other areas. In addition to learning disabilities, specific learning disabilities and learning difficulties, Greaves identified several alternative terms used in the *Australian Journal of Remedial Education* during 1995: dyslexia, deep dyslexia, surface dyslexic, phonological dyslexic, reading disabled, learning disabled, and backward reading children. Greaves himself favoured 'backward reading'. But he also noted the confusion reported by the Australian Expert Advisory Panel on Learning Difficulties in Children and Adolescents between "word blindness, dyslexia,

and minimal brain dysfunction". The panel stated that learning difficulties included 10 to 16 per cent of children and adolescents who failed to show progress, and resulted from "intellectual disabilities, physical and sensory defects, emotional difficulties, inadequate environmental experiences [and] lack of appropriate educational opportunities". Learning disabilities, on the other hand, referred to 2 to 4 per cent of children and adolescents, and was claimed to be a sub-group within the learning difficulties group, presumably intrinsic to the individual but not caused by any of the other disabilities.

Despite reluctance to apply a label to children with learning disabilities, the lack of an unambiguous term suggested that a more distinctive name was needed, and debate about the association's name would continue well into the new century.

### **Constitution and committee structure**

Following legal advice, AREA's constitution was re-written to incorporate a set of model rules developed by the Victorian Government in 1993 for voluntary associations as part of the Associations Incorporation Act. Council members provided written comments on the 1988 constitution, which the solicitor then incorporated into the new document, which was approved by Council in July 1997 (Greaves, 1997).

There had been several long-serving presidents since AREA had come into being: Anne Bishop from 1976 to 1979 and from 1989 to 1990; John Munro from 1979 to 1984 and from 1993 to 1994; Dianne Betts from 1984 to 1987; Anne Pringle from 1990 to 1993; and Daryl Greaves from 1994 to 1997. Among other changes in the new constitution, election of future presidents would be for one year only, and at the same time a president-elect would be voted in to gain experience before serving the following year.

By the end of the 1990s, Council committees and sub-committees had been formalised into a relatively complex structure, the aim of which was to reduce the burden on individual Council members and the Consultants' Sub-committee<sup>9</sup>. Instead of setting up committees to deal with specific events or issues which disbanded after fulfilling their function, five nominated committees were established, each with its own sub-committees and budget:

#### ***Executive***

Professional Standards, Strategic Plan and Constitution, Policy and Procedures Manual, Professional Liaison, Lobbying and Research

#### ***Administrative Services***

Budget and Finance, Personnel, Elections, Internal Communications

#### ***Professional Development***

Conference, Awards, Program Activities

#### ***Consultants' Policy***

Consultant Professional Development, Referral Service, Pathways Supervision

#### ***Publications***

Journal Editorial, Bulletin Editorial, Promotion and Policy<sup>10</sup>.

Despite these changes, Council members still had a high workload, with meetings of sub-committees to attend as well as Council meetings<sup>11</sup>.

### **Administration**

The decade to come would also see significant changes in administration, changes which sometimes became sources of tension within the association.

In 1997 Val Sayers retired after two decades as AREA's Administration Officer. AREA President, Daryl Greaves, paid tribute to her central role in many AREA activities, her detailed historical knowledge of the association, and her tolerance and patience in dealing with a wide range of individuals<sup>12</sup>.

In the 1998-99 financial year, administration was outsourced to Professional Resources Services (PRS) at an hourly rate. The responsibilities of PRS were to provide general secretarial assistance, keep financial records and provide regular statements to the AREA treasurer and executive, respond to membership enquiries and maintain the membership database, pay accounts, send receipts, and assist with conference organisation<sup>13</sup>.

The financial situation began to improve. Recalling the "disastrous" results of 1990 and 1991 and the years when an operating deficit appeared to be an annual event, auditor Humphrey Clegg wrote that "there is now the strongest financial position in the Association's history", and recommended that monthly accounts should in future reflect "actual results" so that Council could be alerted earlier to potential financial problems<sup>14</sup>. As honorary auditor, Humphrey Clegg had seen AREA through its financial ups and downs over many years, and retired in September 1998.

The annual accounts were now running into six figures and greater rigour was needed in financial management, which came under scrutiny when Council

failed to pass the Treasurer's report at two successive meetings because of lack of clarity and difficulty in understanding the present budget format<sup>15</sup>. Accountant Philip Dunmill, whose assistance was sought to develop a new financial system, recommended that AREA switch from cash accounting to accrual accounting, which would provide information about assets and liabilities. Separate budgeting should be introduced at all committee levels and for conferences and publications so that actual expenses could be compared to budgeted expenses<sup>16</sup>. Dunmill also recommended adoption of MYOB software and introduction of monthly management reports for submission to the Treasurer by individual committees. Council agreed to adopt Dunmill's recommendations and to undertake a further review of AREA administration at the April-May Council meeting<sup>17</sup>.

Early in 1999 Steven Bowman, Executive Director, Australian Institute of Banking and Finance, prepared a document outlining responsibilities within AREA and offering a framework for operating within the constraints of a voluntary organisation<sup>18</sup>. The document clearly vested power in the Council, while setting out options for members who were not happy with Council decisions, including voting in a new Council, resigning membership, or changing the constitution. The framework was also intended to ensure that Council meetings could focus on strategic rather than operational issues.

Under Nola Firth's presidency a new Strategic Plan was drawn up involving a series of action plans, the aims of which were to ensure greater efficiency in administration, to set timelines, and to clarify responsibility for individual plans<sup>19</sup>. By October 1999, the Executive Committee could report that several targets had already been met, including increased understanding of AREA's financial position, formulation of a budget, a review of the association's structure, and lobbying the government on the GST. Most of the goals of the original Strategic Plan had been achieved, including a conference planned for Queensland, all Council members on email, written contracts for paid workers, financial advice received, Consultant Zone meetings initiated, supervision for Consultants requiring practicum experience, public seminars, and development of the Melbourne University contact. Targets not met were an annual membership growth of 20 per cent, expansion of the Referral Service to all states, provision of information on AREA to all final year students, development of a policy statement, and press responses and lobbying<sup>20</sup>.

Further procedures were established to improve efficiency of Council meetings<sup>21</sup>, and additional

savings were achieved when Council decided not to renew the administrative services contract with PRS. From March 2000 AREA has had a number of contractual arrangements to provide administrative support, including the provision of financial and other information<sup>22</sup>.

## **Strategic Plan**

The Strategic Plan prepared for 1998-2002 is worth examining in some detail because it covered a comprehensive range of AREA activities<sup>23</sup>. One of the priorities was to attract more members, with a targeted increase in membership of 20 per cent each year to the end of 2001. Key strategies for achieving this target focused on increased interstate as well as Victorian membership, and included maintaining an up-to-date internet site, the annual conference to be held in a state other than Victoria every alternate year, and creating an Australia-wide Referral Service.

Along with increasing membership, professional status and the maintenance of professional standards were seen as essential for the future. AREA had already published a mission statement, a code of ethics and Consultants' guidelines. It had a written constitution and a range of committees to deal with policies and activities such as conferences and professional development. But as the organisation grew there was further room for improvement, and the Strategic Plan saw AREA developing into a more professional association that met standards equal to, or above, those of other professional organisations. Targeted improvements included consistent use of professional meeting procedures, an annual review of organisational structures, the preparation – and use – of procedural manuals for general administration and for operation of the Referral Service, and the use of professional financial practices.

Although expanding membership and increasing professionalism were important, AREA had to continue supporting existing members through its publications and professional development. Both activities had been very successful over the life of AREA, but expectations were increasing for organisations to make greater use of computer technology for communication and training. Consultants were now required to undergo continuing professional development to maintain their registration, and in addition to the website, a target was set to have a unit of study available on the internet by the end of 1999. The Referral Service was currently processing around 600 clients a year on behalf of 160 Consultants. Technology could also assist the planned expansion of the Referral Service by enabling the Referral Officer

to establish links with clients and Consultants in other states, pending appointment of Referral Officers in those states.

Targets for research were modest, and focused mainly on fostering dissemination of current research on learning difficulties at the annual conference, while continuing to publish research articles in the journal. A proposed addition to the journal was to include a quarterly case study written by an AREA member<sup>24</sup>.

Increasing membership was a target for promotional activities such as lectures, video presentations, and hand-outs to final year special education students, while contacts with other organisations and promotion of services offered by AREA through the internet, radio, television and newspapers throughout Australia was important for both increasing membership and raising the profile of the association. Finally, the Strategic Plan proposed that lobbying of governments on issues such as eligibility for the Disability Allowance and private insurance or Medicare rebates for children with learning difficulties be strengthened by creation of a group within AREA to write submissions.

All of these strategies were consistent with the aims and objectives of the Australian Resource Educators' Association as set out in its constitution.

A series of action plans was drafted for 2000-2001 to implement the Strategic Plan<sup>25</sup>. These included attendance at an Early Years Literacy Conference in June 2001 with the aims of promoting public awareness of AREA and increasing membership. Under education, proposed activities included negotiation with the Department of Learning and Educational Development at the University of Melbourne for accreditation of professional development implemented by AREA under a 'pathways' program, to begin in semester 2, 2001.

## **Teacher training**

Throughout its history AREA had sought to influence the content of graduate courses in special education through submissions and representation on course committees. By the mid-1990s, many professional associations were requiring increasingly longer periods of study for entry to a profession, and in 1995 the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) called for submissions on the issue of Professional Education and Credentialism. While acknowledging that professional associations were concerned with maintaining high standards within their professions, NBEET was concerned that their involvement could create tensions between professional boards and university autonomy<sup>26</sup>. Daryl Greaves, then President of AREA, and Anne Pringle, as convenor of

the Consultants' Committee, prepared a submission on behalf of AREA<sup>27</sup>. The submission expressed a concern that graduate courses in special education did not ensure that graduates had "sufficient breadth and depth of training in learning disability subjects". It identified areas in which not enough instruction was given, including "developmental factors in learning, identification and diagnosis of cognitive dysfunction, language disorders, neuropsychology of behaviours, research applications in the clinic/ classroom, consulting skills, collaborative teaching, and professional ethics". The last three of these areas were given greatest weight. The submission concluded by indicating that AREA would prefer its Consultant Members to have Master's degrees in special education, including studies in "well researched methods and strategies to assist students with learning disabilities".

In 1998 the committee dealing with ethical issues had been renamed the Professional Standards Sub-Committee<sup>28</sup>. Professional standards also implied that AREA should take a leading role in "the learning disabilities profession" by identifying key competencies, by increasing control of accreditation of Consultants through approval of the content of academic courses in special education, by providing relevant professional training through the association, and by enabling registered Consultants to provide supervision for practicum requirements for membership. Professional organisations were already being given a greater role in specialist postgraduate training, although teacher organisations had been slow to take up the opportunity to influence the content of university-based courses<sup>29</sup>.

However, as teachers' colleges merged with universities, the control of teachers over the content of training courses was reduced and less weight was attached to competencies needed to specialise in learning difficulties. 'Inclusion' received its fair share of the blame:

The move to inclusive education has resulted in a washing away of some of the important specialised skills that were developed in special education facilities which were set up to deal with learning disabilities. Courses for inclusion, of necessity, are concerned with policies, school structures and curriculum modification issues rather than have a strong focus on diagnostic assessment and teaching methods for specific learning difficulties<sup>30</sup>.

Nevertheless, Daryl Greaves proposed that AREA, as an organisation concerned with professional standards, should promote a set of competencies it believed necessary for teaching children with learning difficulties:

This will be accomplished through identifying

the key competencies of such a professional, and through ongoing professional development. This is in line with a Federal Government initiative which appears to strengthen the role of professional organisations so that they encompass standards and professional development . . . in contrast with numerous organisations which have been loose associations of like-minded professionals who have an interest in some particular aspect of education, such as reading, or who have similar roles, such as school principals<sup>31</sup>.

Encouraging students continued to be an important way of helping to ensure the future of AREA. In 1996 a Student Awards Scheme was introduced for two students enrolled in tertiary institutions “for an up-to-date paper on any aspect of Specific Learning Disabilities written as part of their course”. The award was to include registration at the annual conference, assistance with travel and accommodation, and publication of the paper. Nominations for the award had to come from a member of AREA, and two papers from each institution would be accepted by the judging panel<sup>32</sup>.

## **Professional development**

Concerns with training were not restricted to the content of courses in tertiary institutions. In 1996, a Consultants’ Professional Development Committee was established as part of the Referral Service to formalise a points system for all Consultants undertaking professional development activities. Consultants were now required to undertake ongoing professional development, and to keep a record of training activities over 12 months in order to maintain their registration with the Referral Service<sup>33</sup>. Procedures for Consultant Members to accrue points for membership renewal took effect from the end of June 1998<sup>34</sup>. Points were allotted on the basis of one point for every hour of professional development, and Consultants were required to accumulate at least 20 points in a year to avoid their registration being suspended. Professional development activities endorsed for this purpose were those related to AREA’s mission statement and could include conferences and workshops held in schools, as well as activities organised by AREA<sup>35</sup>.

The topics for workshops had changed little, except that with more stringent legal and taxation requirements, workshops dealing with legal advice, accounting in private practice, and running a special education private practice were introduced<sup>36</sup>. A panel of speakers representing law, government and education spoke on discrimination against children with learning difficulties<sup>37</sup>. Assessment, case studies, language

delay, reading, spelling, writing and literacy programs continued to be regular topics; workshops related to behavioural problems, including dealing with emotional difficulties, assertiveness training for students with learning difficulties, and attention deficit disorder were also presented. In June 1997 a weekend Council meeting was followed by a very successful free public seminar on ‘starting points for helping students with learning disabilities’, attended by over 100 teachers, parents and integration aides<sup>38</sup>. Disability funding was again addressed in 1997, while running a private practice in special education, testing, and report writing were topics of perennial interest. Language delay, spelling, mathematics in the Curriculum Standards Framework, children’s writing, testing and assessment, and an assertiveness program for students with specific learning difficulties, occupied the early 2000s, and a seminar on a newly-published program to deal with bullying in schools reflected a widespread concern about this topic.

AREA also supported efforts by teachers to upgrade their qualifications. A ‘mini-course’ with three modules, teaching students with a learning difficulty, inclusive methodology, and teaching learning disabled students who have difficulty with writing, was trialled in Melbourne, with plans for packaging the course for presentation in other states and country areas<sup>39</sup>. In due course AREA (now LDA) sought accreditation of these modules with the University of Melbourne<sup>40</sup>.

## **Conferences**

Conferences were another avenue for professional development, and helped to raise AREA’s profile nationally as a more professional approach to conference organisation was adopted. They also helped to attract more members. The 1996 conference was hailed by Daryl Greaves as “the highlight of the year”, especially the keynote speakers<sup>41</sup>. Selected papers from this conference were published in book form in five sections: The future for resource educators; Factors related to learning difficulties; Strategies and methods for teaching children with learning difficulties; Practitioner case studies; and Professional services (Greaves & Jeffery, 1997).

Unlike conferences held by single professions, AREA conferences drew on a range of disciplines for contributions. Introducing the 1998 conference to potential participants, the conference convenor, Diane Barwood, stated:

Increasingly, one of the strengths of the conference has been that member perspectives from other disciplines have offered valuable perspectives on

learning difficulties, sharing ideas with teachers who work with students experiencing difficulties with learning. It is hoped that this year such specialists as occupational therapists, psychologists, language pathologists, behavioural optometrists and audiologists will offer papers. We also invite teachers working 'at the coalface' to share experiences, insights and lead discussion on relevant issues. . .<sup>42</sup>.

There was, in addition, a resolve by the Executive Committee not to include papers promoting popular programs that lacked a sound research base:

. . . AREA neither advertises or [sic] admits as conference papers those interventions classed . . . as without sound research base. These include sensory integration, educational kinesiology, optometric training, dietary interventions, neuromotor therapy<sup>43</sup>.

The three previous conferences had been held in Melbourne, but in 1999 the venue moved to Brisbane, a choice which would have many positive outcomes for the future of AREA in that state. Conferences held interstate helped to reinforce AREA's national identity, but were nevertheless too costly in both organisational time and funding to become an annual event. Council decided to proceed gradually in adopting a program of regular interstate conferences, and to consider instead holding a biennial conference with a smaller, one-day seminar in alternate years<sup>44</sup>.

### **Consultants' Referral Service**

By 1998 the number of referrals handled by AREA had reached 755 for the year and by September 1999 averaged five per day<sup>45</sup>. As the Referral Service continued to grow, the Consultant Member Sub-committee played a crucial role, meeting regularly and dealing with such issues as current operations of the service, reviewing new applicants for Consultant Membership, publicity, guidelines, and the professional development program for Consultants<sup>46</sup>. The sub-committee also discussed the issue of remedial versus resource as part of Consultants' professional profile, and the Executive decided to enlist the assistance of an "expert in professional standards", Paul McCann of the Catholic Education Office in Brisbane, on report writing and legal liability<sup>47</sup>.

The *Guidelines for AREA Consultants in Private Practice* were still in use, having undergone a number of revisions and reprints since their introduction in 1984. The guidelines now clearly spelt out the procedures to be followed in referrals. If there were several consultants in an area who could match a request, the Referral Officer would supply names and contact details in rotation so that all Consultants would have an

opportunity to be referred. After six weeks' tuition, the Consultant was expected to sign and return a portion of the Referral Confirmation Form with the referral fee – the fee received for one teaching session. Consultants were advised to have parents sign and date a statement agreeing to the services offered and conditions, to avoid any liability problems. A detailed outline for the Consultant's personal record-keeping, which would include identification data, family history, medical history, school history, current assessment, program tasks and child's progress, was suggested. Finally, the *Guidelines* stated that AREA reserved the right to set a recommended fee and expected Consultants to adhere to this fee<sup>48</sup>. This recommendation has been omitted from a recent revision to conform with current legal requirements<sup>49</sup>.

New Consultant Members were needed to meet the demand for services, and criteria for registration as a Consultant Member of the association were discussed at the 1997 national conference. Suggestions for amendments to these criteria included the addition of study skills as an area of expertise, a portfolio to demonstrate competence in instruction in the learning disabilities area as an alternative to a specified time of experience, and categorisation of Consultants for referrals in their area of specialisation (for example, speech pathology). Consultants recommended that the special education component remain an essential qualification, although some members questioned whether core subjects rather than a full diploma or degree could be identified as necessary<sup>50</sup>.

As a further means of expanding Consultant Membership, a model of supervision was adopted similar to that operating in the Australian Psychological Society (APS). Under this model, applicants who did not have sufficient practical experience to meet Consultant Membership requirements would be able to undergo supervised training in practical skills<sup>51</sup>. The Consultant Policy Committee organised a workshop for potential AREA supervisors with two APS members who were experienced in this type of training. A limited number of participants would be accepted for the first course, which would in turn enable them to prepare other experienced Consultants for their role as supervisors of suitable applicants for Consultant Membership. AREA supervisors could also provide relevant experience in their place of employment for students completing courses in special education.

The role of the supervisor would be to oversee work performed by the applicant or student in special education, and to assist in the development of professional skills in testing and teaching learning disabled students. For Consultant applicants, legal

issues, professional ethics and communication with other professionals would also be covered<sup>52</sup>.

To provide more support for existing Consultants, Consultant Zones were established early in 1999<sup>53</sup>. These were a more organised successor to the Consultant Support Group meetings begun in 1994. The aim was for Consultants to meet in their own locality to share practical ideas for teaching. Groups of ten Consultant Members were drawn up according to postcode and a leader appointed for each group. Leaders were responsible for contacting each consultant on their list, organising meetings, and keeping records of attendance. New Consultants were assigned to a nearby zone and contacted by the leader. Groups usually met in members' homes, usually once per term. The discussion could be led by one member, or be a group discussion on a chosen topic. Networking was an important part of the meetings.

Zones were initially successful, with 17 zones operating in Victoria by early 2003<sup>54</sup>. Difficulties in maintaining leadership, however, have meant that the number of zones has fluctuated, and there appear to be eight currently active<sup>55</sup>.

## Submissions and lobbying

Lack of support by education authorities for students with learning disabilities was still an issue, and a motion was passed by Council in September 1998 that AREA continue to make submissions on behalf of these students. Of particular concern was a perceived emphasis on the medical model for defining those eligible to receive the Child Disability Allowance<sup>56</sup>.

Two state reviews of public education provided opportunities to put this resolve into action. An AREA submission, prepared by Nola Firth, was made to a Ministerial Working Party on Public Education: The Next Generation (Accountability and Development Division) on future educational needs in Victoria. The submission made five recommendations: that all schools should have a written policy for dealing with learning difficulties; that learning difficulties should be included as a criterion for eligibility for disability and impairments funding; that support should be maintained throughout the whole of school life; that every school should employ a teacher with advanced specialist knowledge of learning difficulties, and that professional development for teachers in the area of learning difficulties should be increased<sup>57</sup>. These recommendations were seen as needing urgent implementation to achieve goals of school retention and equality of opportunity for students with learning difficulties.

AREA also responded to an invitation from the Adult

and Family Association of NSW to make a submission to an Independent Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW. The general terms of reference were to consider the purposes and values of public education in society, and the resources and structures necessary to achieve these purposes and values. In her response the President, Sylvia Byers, indicated that AREA planned to have a NSW representative on Council from September 2001<sup>58</sup>. Another submission in 2001 was to the Ministerial Advisory Committee for the Victorian Institute of Teaching, supporting the establishment of the institute<sup>59</sup>.

Introduction by the Federal Government of a \$700 voucher system for 'failing readers' in mid-2004 sparked a critical response from AREA (now LDA) for lack of consultation with appropriate researchers regarding the needs of these students and the reasons for their failure (de Lemos & Galletly, 2004). The short timeline for setting up and completing the scheme, the lack of a clearly defined procedure for evaluating its effectiveness, insufficient time to train tutors and inflexibility in not allowing for more cost-effective group tutoring were further aspects of the scheme that drew criticism. Moreover, the subsequent delay in setting up the scheme would mean that assessment results on which the vouchers were to be allocated would be out of date. Indeed, as de Lemos and Galletly pointed out, the fact that the scheme was seen as necessary reflected the lack of provision for students with specific learning difficulties since the abolition of specialist support centres.

Consistent with previous submissions to government by AREA, these criticisms of the voucher scheme drew attention to the difficulties experienced in obtaining appropriate services and support for both students and teachers. But de Lemos and Galletly also criticised the scheme for its lack of recognition of the underlying causes of reading difficulties and related outcomes.

Nor did the voucher scheme resolve the more fundamental question of methods currently in use for teaching reading, which had been debated over several issues of the *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities* (see Part 5 in this series). This question had been raised in a letter initiated and drafted by Molly de Lemos and Kevin Wheldall and signed by a group of 26 leading academic experts on reading, which was sent to the then Federal Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson. The letter, also published in the *Australian Higher Education Supplement* of 21 April 2004, pointed out that methods currently in use for the teaching of reading in schools had not taken into account research into reading over the past 20 years, which had concluded that "mastery of the alphabetic code is essential to proficient reading":

. . . Reading instruction in Australia is based largely on the whole language approach, which makes the assumption that learning to read is like learning to speak, and requires only exposure to a rich language environment without any specific teaching of the alphabetic system and letter-sound relationships. However, the research on reading development has shown clearly that this is not the case, and that the ability to read is a complex learned skill that requires specific teaching<sup>60</sup>.

The letter went on to request a specific review of research evidence relating to the teaching of reading.

The debate about phonics versus whole language spilled over into the *LDA Bulletin*. The first issue of 2005 reproduced part of the transcript of an ABC Radio interview by Norman Swan with Reid Lyon, an outspoken critic of the whole language approach to the teaching of reading. A ‘belated’ response to the LDA letter by Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, was announced in the form of an inquiry into reading instruction, its terms of reference to examine how reading is taught in schools, how teachers are trained to teach literacy, and how reading is assessed. But, as de Lemos (2005) pointed out, the committee set up to undertake the review was largely made up of education administrators, teacher educators, and teacher and parent representatives, but did not include reading specialists. A quote from Max Coltheart made the point: “How children learn to read is not a matter of opinion. It is like any other scientific research . . . but none of the people on the committee are scientists who do research on reading” (p. 6). In the same issue, Wheldall (2005) deplored the “political correctness” of the whole language approach by educators who downgraded the value of fluent reading as a necessary skill in favour of “critical literacy” that made demands on children’s critical powers well beyond their years.

A submission to the Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading, prepared by Kevin Wheldall and Sylvia Byers, again called on the committee to base its model of initial and remedial reading on the scientific research literature. The submission pointed out that the scientific community now acknowledged that reading is phonics-based and that the development of phonological sensitivity is necessary, although not sufficient, for learning to read. The authors argued that phonics methods must replace methods currently used for the teaching of reading, even though the latter may be based on sincerely held views, and that evidence-based practices at both initial teacher training and through professional development would lead to improvements in overall literacy standards, would help to reduce the need for expensive but relatively ineffective school

literacy programs such as Reading Recovery, and would release more time and resources for students whose reading difficulties were more intractable<sup>61</sup>.

## **Learning Difficulties Australia**

The name of AREA represented neither its aims nor its activities and had been a cause of dissatisfaction for some years. Council members were asked to submit suggestions for clarifying the name, and the issue was thrown open to the membership when almost the whole of the May 2001 *LDA Bulletin* was devoted to exploring a possible name change<sup>62</sup>. ‘Remedial’ had been an accurate description when the association was founded, but by the 1990s had been replaced by ‘resource’, when some special educators began to be called resource teachers and worked in resource rooms. Confusion arising from ambiguity in the use of ‘resource’ had led to adoption of a new title for the journal that more accurately reflected the interests and purpose of AREA on the international scene: the *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, a title that was not consistent with the name of the association. Members’ views were sought on options: retain the present name, with or without an added tag identifying the fact that members worked in the field of learning disabilities; change the name to Australian Association of Learning Disabilities; or revert to the old title, Australian Remedial Education Association. Other options would be considered.

The views of several key members who had participated in past discussions about name change were presented. Arguments in favour of change were the confusion created by the existing name and the fact that it did not clearly reflect the interests of either members or their clients. Arguments against change were the established identity of the association, especially the acronym AREA, and the difficulty of reaching an agreed definition of learning disability if that concept were to become part of the title.

Minutes of the AGM held on 1 September 2001 reported that members voted to change the name of the association to Learning Difficulties Australia. The vote was not unanimous, but some older members had been swayed in favour of change by newer members and by the argument that the association could no longer represent only remedial or resource teachers as schools embraced the inclusion model<sup>63</sup>. An Executive Committee report noted that “AREA became officially known as Learning Difficulties Australia when Consumer and Business Affairs Victoria changed our registration” and that “Wendy [Scott] sought support of people on the Executive in making this decision as an accurate reflection of the wishes of those members



voting at the AGM on the name change”<sup>64</sup>. At the next Council meeting it was pointed out that members had not agreed to this name but had in fact voted against it and in favour of ‘Learning Differences/ Difficulties/ Disabilities Australia’. However, registration did not allow this title. A motion “that the association name be changed to the LDA – Learning Difficulties Inc. Australia (formerly AREA)” was carried. Common sense prevailed, and, as the minutes reported: “It was thought that this name better describes who we are. The association has changed and grown and the name change is a reflection of this.”<sup>65</sup>

With the change of name there was a new mission statement, now less ambiguous but still emphasising the role of the educator: “Learning Difficulties Australia Inc. is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to representing, resourcing and promoting professional educators so that the highest level of service can be provided to individuals experiencing learning difficulties.”

There were also changes to the *LDA Bulletin*, which was the main avenue for communicating with members. It now adopted a much more pro-active role. An inaugural meeting of the Bulletin Editorial Committee identified two main objectives:

Objective 1. To refine our understanding of the target readership. The *Bulletin* is an ideal way to increase our profile in the community and invite more members. It represents LDA as a research-based professional organisation with exemplary ethical and educational standards existing for the benefit of professionals, practitioners, students and their families. Objective 2. To provide an active and lively networking organ for the members of LDA, with the emphasis being on participation by the rank and file.<sup>66</sup>

To achieve these objectives the format as well as the content had to be attractive. Suggestions for content included letters to the editor, readers’ contributions on practical activities and resources, investigative reports on programs targeting learning disabled students, internet and journal articles, previews of papers to be published later in the journal, a schools corner presenting exemplary programs of successful intervention, non-refereed papers, advertisements, publicity for programs which reflected LDA policy, information on the professional development program and short accounts of activities, and discussion and debate relating to LDA sub-committees. Other proposals included Zone profiles, logbook procedures for Consultants under supervision, and ongoing issues such as insurance<sup>67</sup>. In August 2005, Kevin Wheldall, now Executive Editor of LDA Publications, announced that the *LDA Bulletin* was to be expanded and transformed into a “practitioner

focused magazine-style publication reporting news, exploring opinions, reviewing books, resources and software, and providing updates on topics of interest within the field of LD”<sup>68</sup> (p. 1). It is now a glossy, attractive publication with substantial and interesting articles.

## Conclusion

From its beginning over 40 years ago as the Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria (DRTAV), Learning Difficulties Australia has made some significant achievements. Foremost among these has been the continuing support offered to specialist teachers, especially those working on an individual basis, as they have battled for recognition. The history of the association contains numerous stories of skilled and dedicated teachers who have made a difference in the lives of children with learning difficulties, despite governments and education authorities that have seemed at best indifferent, at worst, even obstructive.

Working behind the scenes, there has been an equally dedicated Council and Executive, operating a Referral Service, lobbying and preparing submissions, publishing a respected journal and regular news bulletin, organising conferences and professional development, and setting professional standards for specialist teachers in private practice.

A major achievement of the past ten years has been an increase in interstate activity, assisted greatly by email contacts, but also reflected in conferences held in other states, and election of presidents from states other than Victoria. There has been an increased involvement of academic researchers.

Yet there is much that has not changed. A summary of responses to a member survey in 2002 suggests that both the definition of learning difficulties, and the problems faced by students who are referred to the association, are no different from those encountered by the original members of the DRTAV<sup>69</sup>. It is still a fact that a significant proportion of children in the education system at any given time is likely to experience difficulty in dealing with the demands of a literate society, while both funding, and effective, research-based programs remain elusive.

Membership fluctuates, but the association remains small by the standards of most professional societies. Within the association, internal tensions still exist. This is by no means a negative, because without such tensions organisations can become complacent. Wheldall (2006a; 2006b) has continued to push for an end to educational innovations that are not backed by sound research, especially in reading. He points

out that improving literacy is not necessarily a matter of more funding but is rather a matter of attitude. A more balanced approach to the teaching of literacy can incorporate both whole language and phonics methods, along with other aspects of reading.

In October 2000, the then President, Sylvia Byers, tried to imagine the learning difficulties scene in 2050 with some pertinent questions:

. . . will people still have difficulties with learning? Will there still be a need for an association such as AREA to represent professionals working with these people? Will there still be a need to improve the status of these professionals? How well will people understand learning difficulties? . . . Will there still be a need to lobby for improved services?<sup>70</sup>

More sophisticated technology and a greater understanding of both brain-behaviour relationships and environmental impact on learning may help to increase our understanding of learning difficulties. But if the past 40 years are a guide, it is safe to say that the answer to the other questions will be 'yes'. Learning Difficulties Australia will still be needed.

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