Letter to the Editor: We need improved provision for dyslexia, but where?

John Munro

The LDA May eNews ran an article in about the announcement of a proposed universal screening for dyslexia in the Prep year in Victoria. Many people would welcome this. We know that a key aspect of the work of learning disability professionals is to collect data about student learning – data that allows us to understand individual students’ learning profiles and to plan appropriate learning programs. Assessment can be used for a range of purposes, including screening, in-depth diagnosis, and monitoring of student response to intervention. Access to an early years screening facility would no doubt contribute to improved provision in the early years for students who have dyslexia.

Any innovation like this needs to be seen in terms of the resources that exist. I raise this because there is frequently a motivation to create something new and to ignore or reject what already exists. The Department of Education in Victoria already has in place several on-line resources that are freely available to schools, and it is important that schools and teachers should learn how to use these resources effectively before launching into the use of a newly-developed tool.

The existing Victorian online resources, all freely available by navigating through the landing page http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/pages/default.aspx include the following:

- General resources that assist schools to deal with dyslexia and reading difficulties
- A word reading test made up of unfamiliar regular words and exception words, spanning Prep to Year 8, which permits the identification of ‘phonological’ and ‘surface’ dyslexic profiles
- A set of tasks to assess phonological and phonemic awareness skills
- A developmental pathway that specifies, at six-monthly intervals, the development of word reading skills, phonological awareness and comprehension skills
- The on-line Language Support Program, which provides advice to teachers of students who have oral language problems
- There are also two on-line assessment protocols, both supported by very large databases, for assessing a range of literacy and oral language skills in the first three years of schooling, and for assessing reading comprehension and mathematics in Years 3 to 10.

The challenge that faces Victoria and other Australian States and Territories, I would argue, is not that we don’t have the necessary resources. Rather, it is that schools and teachers either don’t know that they exist or how to use them to solve problems and challenges that children in their school face. Re-inventing resources is often not the answer. Instead, schools and teachers need to learn how to use the existing resources to target the learning profiles and needs of their students and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching.

As I see it, an important role for LDA specialists is to assist teachers and schools in these ways. It is up to us, as the professionals in this area and as part of our role as advocates for students who have learning difficulties, to advise how this can be done and how existing provision can be improved. I plan to examine in more detail in the next issue of the LDA Bulletin the kinds of resources available for oral language support.

Dr John Munro is Head of Studies in Exceptional Learning and Gifted Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. He is a trained primary and secondary teacher and a psychologist. His research interests, teaching and publications are in the areas of literacy and maths learning difficulties, learning internationally, gifted learning, instructional leadership and school improvement. He is a consultant to several school improvement projects throughout Australia. He was chairperson of the College of Educational and Developmental Psychologists (Aus) and is a life member of Learning Difficulties Australia.

We welcome the submission of articles from LDA members and others with an interest in learning difficulties for possible inclusion in upcoming editions of this Bulletin.

Please submit articles, correspondence about the Bulletin, or letters for publication to the editor. For questions about content, deadlines, length or style, please contact the editor. (Email: wendy.m.moore@gmail.com)

Articles in the Bulletin do not necessarily reflect the opinions nor carry the endorsement of Learning Difficulties Australia.

Requests to reprint articles from the Bulletin should be addressed to the editor.