Interesting times

The last few months have indeed been interesting times, with the early reading initiatives emanating from the Rose Review in the UK, and more recently our new government and its array of promises.

First, I would like to share my heartfelt congratulations to Kevin Rudd for his moving speech encapsulating the nation’s apology to the Stolen Generations. What we all hope for now is the promised action in addressing the educational and health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (ATSI) communities. As David Burchell noted in his opinion column in *The Australian* (18 February 2008), “warm and fuzzy feelings won’t save anyone”.

Second, I would like to share my concerns about the current government’s initiative to provide computers for every child. Is this a sensible choice for all children, particularly those children in isolated areas such as ATSI communities? There are so many questions. Who will instruct the teachers in isolated communities on how to realise the full potential of computers? Who will service the computers? Have the costs of maintenance and training been budgeted into the proposal? How will we protect children from the many potentially harmful sites on the internet? And of greatest concern, how many of these children will be able to read the sometimes very complex text displayed on internet sites? (This is also relevant for our LD population.)

My feelings on this topic are that it would be far more advantageous to supply a word processor to each child with suitable software for them to practise their reading and writing skills. Of course, there will always be a place for a classroom or school-based computer connected to the internet, but money would be far better spent on providing a robust personal word processor to each student. There are several such word processors on the market and they are considerably cheaper than laptop or desktop computers.

This is a difficult segue but I will endeavour to make it none the less. I have just finished reading an article by Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant (2007) on ‘children’s cognitive development and learning’. One of the important points they make is that learning in young children is socially mediated and that this places limits on the value of e-based learning in the early years. So, there’s my segue. I think we need to think of ways to improve the language of children who are going to struggle in our educational systems.
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LDA NOTICES

Professional Development Program – Victoria
Saturday 12 April, 10:00am to 1:00pm
Helping Students with Writing – Content & Structure
Speaker: Jan Roberts (successful LDA Consultant and author)

Sunday 15 June, 10:00am to 1:00pm
Supporting the LD Student in Primary Maths: ‘What’s my style ? Show me the tools for learning’
Speaker: Mary Delahunty (experienced SPELD lecturer).

Saturday 16 August, 10:00am to 1:00pm
The Use of Rhythm in Reading Tuition
Speaker: Patrizzia Piccinini (speaker from Italy, to be confirmed)

Sunday 5 October, 10:00am to 1:00pm
Helping with Student Stress and Depression
Speaker: Jim Goodin (ex-teacher and Assistant Director, Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria))

Venue: International House, 241 Royal Parade, Parkville, 3053
Note: It is essential to phone 9435 8043 to book a place. Secure a place by booking early as space is limited. Session includes refreshments.

Further workshops in Melbourne are currently being planned, and will be advised by mail or email. If you are interested to receive further information about these workshops, please email Molly de Lemos at delemos@pacific.net.au.

Advance LDA Notice

LDA Annual General Meeting
Saturday, 23 August 2008
Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove Campus, Brisbane.
Details to be advised.
The LD Partnership Groups

The three groups who formed the LD Partnership Group in August last year are Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA), the Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) and the Australian Learning Disability Association (ALDA).

While all of these groups have a common interest in advocating for the needs of students and individuals with learning difficulties and learning disabilities, each of these groups has a different focus and a different membership group.

The aim of the partnership is to establish ongoing communication and collaboration between these three groups so we can better meet our common goals of supporting students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities, and advocating for their needs.

LDA is an association made up of teachers, researchers and academics who are working in the area of learning difficulties. Many of our members provide private tuition for students with learning difficulties. Our aim is to promote better understanding of learning difficulties through our publications and professional development activities, and to support effective teaching practices based on scientific research.

AUSPELD is the national federation of state SPELD associations, and its aim is to support children and adults with specific learning difficulties (SLD), and those who care for, teach, and work with them. It does this through providing resources to teachers who work with students and adults with specific learning difficulties, making submissions to relevant state and government bodies, and also to public enquiries, on issues related to provision of educational and other services to people with specific learning difficulties, and sponsoring workshops and visits by international experts on topics related to specific learning difficulties.

Further information regarding the aims and activities of AUSPELD can be obtained from their website, at www.auspeld.org.au. This website also provides links to the various state SPELD associations.

ALDA's aim is to provide access to information and resources for individuals with learning disabilities (LD), their families, educators and the general public of Australia. Their focus is on older students and adults with learning disabilities, and particularly those requiring support for continuing their secondary and tertiary level studies. Membership of ALDA is open to any person or organisation interested in the area of learning disability.

The goals of ALDA are to create a climate of public understanding, awareness and acceptance of learning disability nationally; to lobby at a national level to promote the understanding of learning disability in education, government and community sectors; to inform people with LD of their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act; to provide educative information relating to learning disability; to evaluate and disseminate information on current research and resources on learning disability; to promote education and training on learning disability for educational institutions and their teachers; to liaise with local, regional, state and international organisations that have an interest in learning disabilities; and to retain an up-to-date web-based Register that lists the location and contact details of Australian organisations, services and resources that focus on learning ‘disability’.

Further information regarding ALDA and their activities is available on their website at www.adcet.edu.au/oao/ald.

Your Bulletin

This issue of the Bulletin has a number of articles which we think will be of interest to our members. Morag Stuart’s article on developments in the early teaching of reading in the UK following the Rose report provide an example of what could and should be happening in Australia, but unfortunately is not. Julian Elliott raises some challenging and thought provoking views on our conceptualisation and use of the term ‘dyslexia’. Margaret Cameron reviews the Reading Assistance Program, and alerts us to the need to keep a watchful eye on its successor, the Even Start Program. Tom Nicholson and Jan Roberts share with us their experience of attending overseas Conferences, the First Reading and Writing Conference at the University of Stavangar in Norway, and the European Dyslexia Association Conference in Luxembourg. Alison Madelaine looks at the issue of book levelling, and the evidence for its efficacy. We also report on the recently formed Australian Learning Difficulties Partnership, and their first initiative in terms of writing a letter to the then Federal Minister of Education, Julie Bishop, in August last year, on issues relating to provision of appropriate resources for students with learning difficulties in Australian schools. And of course our usual LDA notices and reports.

We are planning in future issues of the Bulletin to include sections on book reviews and test reviews, and with this in mind Margaret Cameron has agreed to take on the role of Book Review Editor and Craig Wright will take on the role of Test Review Editor.

We encourage members to contribute articles to the Bulletin, and welcome your comment and feedback.

Your Bulletin Editors

MARCH 2008 – BULLETIN
Letter to the Minister from the Australian Learning Difficulties Partnership

In August last year LDA joined together with the Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) and the Australian Learning Disability Association (ALDA) to write a letter to the then Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Honourable Julie Bishop MP, to express our joint concerns with regard to the lack of appropriate resources for students with learning difficulties in the Australian state school systems. The letter focused particularly on the need for appropriate assessment procedures to identify students with learning difficulties to ensure that appropriate and timely intervention programs were put in place.

The letter read as follows:

Dear Minister,

The newly formed Australian Learning Difficulties Partnership nationally represents students with learning difficulties at all levels of education across Australia. We are writing to ask what assistance the current government will provide these students, especially in relation to the National Assessment Program (NAP), in the event that it is returned to office at the forthcoming election.

At the present time, state education departments offer only limited assistance to students with learning difficulties, which may be either generalised learning difficulties that are due to a variety of factors including inadequate environmental experiences and lack of appropriate educational opportunities, or to more severe specific learning difficulties or learning disabilities, that are assumed to be intrinsic to the individual and in most cases, lifelong. The US and the UK both have for many years had specific legislation requiring schools to meet these needs, but Australia has none.

It is ironic to note two outcomes from the historic April 1998 MCEETYA meeting in Hobart: agreement to develop Education Standards for the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act intending to clarify education providers’ responsibilities under the Commonwealth DDA, and the National Literacy Standard statement aiming “to have every child reading and writing properly by the end of year 3”.

The Commonwealth’s DDA makes it unlawful to discriminate against people who learn differently, and commentary on the act instances ‘dyslexia’ as an example. However, there is currently no data collection category of performance information for students with learning difficulties or disabilities within the Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measure (2006), despite the finding reported in the 1999 Australian Council for Educational Research Issues Paper commissioned by DEST for MCEETYA, that schools need to be accountable for every student, stressing that students who are exempted become “invisible” as they disappear from the accountability picture.

- If re-elected, will the government legislate to ensure that the assessment and intervention needs of students with learning difficulties are met by state education systems?

Further, with the intended 2008 commencement of the NAP, as recently as April 2007, MCEETYA had yet to reach agreement in relation to protocols for the use of data collected centrally. Until this is done, the Commonwealth cannot claim that results from these tests, some of which are reported to inform the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, are valid indicators of student achievement.

Most states already specify reasonable assessment accommodations for students with learning disabilities and it is standard practice in the US and the UK, but the Commonwealth legislation makes no mention of it.

- Will the Federal Government include reasonable accommodations for students with learning difficulties and other disabilities in its requirements for the National Assessment Program?
The current benchmark standards are so low that students with specific or generalised learning difficulties are simply classified with others who have difficulty for quite other reasons. At the least, all students who fall into the lowest band in reading and writing and numeracy should be required to undergo further specialised testing to determine whether their poor performance is the result of a specific or a generalised learning difficulty.

- If re-elected, will the Federal Government ensure that the current benchmark standards are reviewed to ensure that they allow students with learning difficulties to be identified?

We are always ready to meet with you to advise on any of these matters should it seem helpful for us to do so. Please find enclosed a focus paper from AUSPELD, member of the Reference Group for the National Reading Inquiry, in which some of these matters are canvassed.

Max Coltheart, President of AUSPELD
Ruth Fielding-Barnsley, President of LDA
Jenny Shaw, President of ALDA.

LDA Awards

Nominations for the 2008 LDA Awards are now being called for, with nominations closing on Friday 30 May.

The LDA Awards are designed to recognise outstanding work in the field of learning difficulties. There are three Awards – the Mona Tobias Award, the Bruce Wicking Award, and the Tertiary Student Award. The Mona Tobias Award is awarded annually, while the Bruce Wicking Award and the Tertiary Student Award are occasional awards. Nominations for each of these Awards are called for at the beginning of each year, with nominations closing at the end of May. Nominees need not necessarily be members of LDA.

The Mona Tobias Award

The Mona Tobias Award is presented in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the field of learning difficulties in Australia. This contribution may be in the area of leadership, research, practice or teacher and community education.

Emily Mona Tobias, B.E.M., died in 1980 at the age of 74 years. She was acknowledged for her exceptional skills as a teacher and her devotion to children with learning difficulties. Mona took early retirement from the Victorian Education Department to study learning disabilities under Sam Clements at the University of Arkansas. This led to her second career where she influenced many teachers and parents of students with learning difficulties.

The Mona Tobias Award commemorates the pioneering work of Mona Tobias in helping children and adults with learning difficulties.

The Bruce Wicking Award

The Bruce Wicking Award is presented to an individual or an organisation in recognition of innovative programs or practices relating to the teaching of children with learning difficulties. Bruce Wicking established the Currajong School in 1974, and was committed to the provision of programs which catered for the individual needs of children with learning difficulties. The funds for this award are provided through the generosity of the Wicking family and their friends to commemorate the life and work of Bruce Wicking.

The Tertiary Student Award

The Tertiary Student Award is presented in recognition of significant research which advances the understanding of theoretical and practical issues in the field of learning difficulties, carried out by a student in the course of their tertiary level studies. The research would normally have been carried out as part of a postgraduate program for the award of a Masters or a PhD degree, which has been completed or undertaken within the last few years. The award is based on the submission of a paper presented in the form of an article or research paper suitable for publication in the LDA journal – the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties.

Further information regarding the Awards and nomination procedures are provided on the LDA website, at www.ladaustralia.org

MARCH 2008 – BULLETIN
After the Rose Review: Developments in the early teaching of reading in England

Morag Stuart, Institute of Education, University of London

The Rose Review1 into the teaching of early reading was published in March 2006. Rose was asked to investigate best practice in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics, and how this might relate to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, birth to five) and inform the renewal of the National Literacy Strategy’s Framework for Teaching, published in 1998. He was also asked to comment on staff training needs, provision for children falling behind, and value for money. The Rose Review made clear recommendations2, which are briefly summarised below.

With regard to best practice in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics, Rose recommended that discrete, systematic teaching of phonics, and skill and understanding should be the prime approach to beginning to learn to read and spell words. The emphasis on systematic and structured teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and phoneme blending and segmentation should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum, designed to develop children’s oral and written language skills. To this end, the EYFS and the renewed Framework for Teaching should provide clear guidance on developing children’s receptive and expressive language.

Relevant pre-reading activities should pave the way for most children to be ready to start multi-sensory, imaginative and exciting phonic work by the age of five. In the renewed Framework for Teaching, learning to read should be conceived as developing word recognition processes and language comprehension abilities, as portrayed in the Simple View of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990).3

Additional support should be provided to children who need it. This should be sustained and built upon in their regular classroom environment. Primary head teachers and managers of Early Years settings should ensure that priority is given to phonics in the early teaching of reading, should organise appropriate staff training, and make sure that at least one member of staff is fully able to lead on literacy. The Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA, responsible for Initial Teacher Training) should take account of all aspects of the review, to ensure that initial training and continuing professional development provide good value for money in the teaching of reading.

The recommendations of the Rose Review were accepted by the Secretary of State for Education, and the National Primary Strategy began to implement a concerted plan of action at many different levels designed to bring about the recommended changes to the early teaching of reading. This involves training at all levels, as well as the production of a high quality teaching programme for systematic, structured synthetic phonics teaching, and the implementation on the ground of funded support for introduction of the recommended changes in teaching practice. I will discuss each of these initiatives in turn.

Training: Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

In response to Rose, a new team was created in the National Strategies: the Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) team, which works collaboratively with the Literacy team and the Early Years Foundation Stage team. The CLLD team early on began to produce documents giving information and guidance to primary school heads and teachers, and managers and practitioners in Early Years settings. These include presentation and explanation of the Simple View of reading, and discussion of ways of ensuring beginning readers’ progress in each of the two dimensions of word recognition and language comprehension contained in the Simple View; an overview of phonics and early reading and guidance in implementing phonics teaching, including presentation of a sequence for teaching high-quality phonic work; a set of papers covering progression and pace in listening to, orally relating, reading and writing different kinds of texts from poetry and narrative to information and instructional texts; and guidance on planning for and improving writing. These resources can be explored at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframeworks/literacy/.

Funding was also devoted to provision of additional training to the Strategy’s team of regional advisors and consultants to ensure they were up to date in their knowledge and understanding of language development and interventions and practices that facilitate language development in young children; in understanding the cognitive processes involved in skilled word reading and how these can best be developed in children; in systematic structured phonics teaching and how to deliver this creatively and effectively to young children; and in the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in understanding texts and how these processes can be developed in children. This additional training, which drew heavily on psychological research over the past 30 years, was filmed and edited down into a set of training DVDs, which has been delivered to every Local Authority and teacher training institution in England for use in training.

The CLLD team is now producing a set of interactive web-based training materials for use by practitioners and teachers in EYFS settings and in primary schools, in both the state system and the private and voluntary sector, which is due to go live within the next few months. These
Training: Initial Teacher Education

Initial Teacher Training establishments were asked to audit their current provision against the Rose recommendations. This was done through response to a set of key questions – how does the training programme ensure that:

1. trainees understand and are able to use in their teaching and assessment the Simple View of reading?
2. trainees understand how to develop children’s speaking and listening skills?
3. trainees are assessed specifically on their phonetic knowledge and understanding?
4. opportunities are provided for trainees to structure teaching and learning over sequences of discrete phonics lessons as well as within lessons?
5. trainees understand the interdependence of speaking and listening, reading and writing and how this should underpin planning and provision for a broad and rich language curriculum?
6. trainees are able to assess both during lessons and across a sequence of lessons and that these assessments inform their planning?
7. all trainees see examples of good practice in teaching phonics in schools?
8. trainees are able to plan appropriately for teaching assistants’ work in developing children’s reading skills?

These responses were submitted to the Training and Development Agency (TDA), together with reports on actions already taken and those still pending to ensure that the objectives implicit in these key questions would be fulfilled. Training institutions were also visited by regional advisers, and input about the CLLD programme was provided for them by Senior Directors from within the National Strategies.

Phonics teaching materials

In collaboration with the DfES, Rose drew up a set of criteria for what constituted a systematic, structured phonics programme, which was circulated to schools and to publishers. Schools were asked to audit their current phonics teaching against these criteria, and, if their current provision failed to meet the criteria, to decide and act on what needed to be changed to ensure compliance. Publishers now use the fact that their phonics teaching materials comply with these criteria in their publicity materials. Although not a recommendation of the Rose Review, publishers have also increased their production of decodable books, which can be used for children to practise their word reading skills.

The criteria for a systematic, structured phonics programme state: “What is important is that the programme adopted by the school or setting reflects the key features of high quality phonics work and that it is adhered to ‘with fidelity’, applied consistently and used regularly, avoiding drawing in too many elements from different programmes. Programmes to support the teaching of phonics vary in both pace and timescale, though they are all careful to introduce phonemes, graphemes and the processes of segmenting and blending. Schools and settings will need to consider whether their current approach to the teaching of phonics, and the material they use to support their approach, form a programme that will:

- be fully compatible with a broad and rich curriculum;
- be systematic, with a clearly defined and structured progression for learning all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences: digraphs, trigraphs, adjacent consonants and alternative graphemes for the same sound;
- be delivered in discrete daily sessions at a brisk pace that is well-matched to children’s developing abilities;
- be underpinned by a synthetic approach to blending phonemes in order all through a word to read it, and segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell them;
- make clear that blending and segmenting are reversible processes;
- be multisensory, encompassing various visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities that actively engage children (for example, manipulating magnetic or other solid letters to build words, activities involving physical movement to copy letter shapes);
- make clear the importance of speaking and listening as the foundation for embarking on a systematic phonics; programme and for acquiring the skills of reading and writing;
- offer clear guidance on how to assess progress and use this to inform the next steps of learning; and
- offer guidance about adapting the programme for children with special educational needs or who have missed earlier elements."

The criteria, and further guidance on phonics, can be explored on the phonics website at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/phonics/programmes/core/. You can go directly from here to the CLLD website by clicking on the ‘Letters and Sounds’ link.

Letters and Sounds: the new phonics programme

The DfES also commissioned a new phonics teaching programme, ‘Letters and Sounds’, which was developed by the National Strategies in partnership with independent experts, including Sir Jim Rose. This was distributed to all schools, Early Years settings and initial teacher training establishments in May 2007 (somewhat later than planned). All teachers in initial training are now trained to use this programme. The feedback from schools and settings which have also adopted it has been uniformly enthusiastic. The programme can be downloaded from the CLLD website www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/local/clld/.

In ‘Letters and Sounds’, phonics teaching is organised into six phases. Phase 1 is designed for EYFS settings and emphasises the development of oral language both as important in its own right and as the foundation for...
reading and writing. It provides helpful
guidance and video examples of best
practice in provision of a broad and rich
language experience for children, which
courages them to talk, increases their
vocabulary and improves their listening
skills and conversational abilities.

Activities for developing phonological
awareness are included.

In Phase 2, systematic structured
phonics teaching begins, starting
with the letters ‘s’, ‘a’, ‘t’, ‘p’, ‘i’, and
‘n’, which can immediately be used
in reading and writing activities that
provide practice in phoneme blending
and phoneme segmentation. In this and
all subsequent phases, video examples
of good practice and suggestions for
creative and developmentally appropriate
teaching activities are given. Phase 2 is
intended to be covered in six weeks, by
which time children should be secure
in their knowledge of 19 letters of the
alphabet and their sounds, and able to
blend phonemes for reading and segment
phonemes for spelling. Children also
learn a few high frequency ‘tricky’ words
which cannot be decoded by application
of the letter sound rules they have been
taught.

In Phase 3, children complete their
learning of single letter sounds and
start to learn digraphs, so that by the
end of this phase (designed to be
completed in up to 12 weeks) they
have secure knowledge of one spelling-
sound correspondence for each of the
(approximately) 44 phonemes of English.
A further set of ‘tricky’ words is taught.

In Phase 4 (designed to be completed
in four to six weeks), no new grapheme-
phoneme correspondences are taught.
Previous learning is consolidated and
children practice reading and writing
words with more complex phonological
structures (CCVC, CCVCC, CVCC,
CVCCC, etc.) They also learn more
‘tricky’ words, so that by the end of this
phase they have been taught a sight
vocabulary of 31 high frequency ‘tricky’
words. The programme anticipates that
most children will complete Phase 4 by
the end of the Reception year.

Phase 5 extends throughout Year 1,
when children are five- to six-years-old.
They begin to learn alternative spellings
for phonemes, and are taught a further
25 ‘tricky’ words.

In Phase 6, the emphasis is mainly
on spelling, learning which phoneme-
grapheme correspondences are used in
specific words. By this time children are
six- to seven-years-old and in Year 2. It
is recognised that many children will by
now have figured out or be capable of
figuring out the system for themselves,
and will need no further direct teaching.

The CLLD funded support
programme

The National Strategy’s consultants in
local authorities have a crucial part to
play in this programme. Consultants in
each of the funded Local Authorities (LA
– with several local authorities in each
region) work under the guidance of a
regional adviser, whose role is to provide
support and challenge to the LAs, to
meet the LA lead advisers, visit schools,
and work alongside and train the CLLD
consultants in the LA. Consultants and
regional advisers take part in national
training events held three times each year.

In the autumn of 2005, the
National Strategy team initiated a
pilot programme, the Early Reading
Development pilot, to test the feasibility
of teaching phonics in EYFS, within
the context of a rich and relevant Early
Years curriculum, to meet the objective
that by the end of the Reception year
most children would know, and be able
to use in their reading and writing, one
grapheme for each of the (approximately)
44 phonemes of English, without
detriment to the children’s personal,
social and emotional development, and
with benefit to their early reading. An
Early Reading Development consultant
was appointed in each participating local
authority to work with participating
schools and settings. The phonics
teaching used the NLS programme
‘Playing with Sounds’ (which has now
been replaced by ‘Letters and Sounds’).
Consultants received three days training;
teachers and practitioners received the
equivalent of two days training delivered
to ‘clusters’ of participating schools and
settings; and schools and settings then
received between four and six days on-site
consultant support. Schools and settings,
with consultant support, first audited
their current provision of phonics
teaching to support early reading, and
then worked to establish and implement
priorities for change.

In the summer of 2006, the National
Strategy team reported a positive impact
on children’s progress and achievement,
linked to higher expectations and
improved pace of teaching. Children
were more confident and keen to ‘have
a go’ in applying phonics in reading and
writing. Their vocabulary had increased,
they listened more intently, and had
more sustained conversations. Teachers
and practitioners reported their subject
knowledge and confidence had increased,
and they had raised their expectations of
children. They felt better able to observe
children and use their observations to
plan more precisely. Their assessment
and tracking of children’s progress had
become more regular, rigorous and
accurate. This made it possible to identify
starting points for Year 1 teaching. There
had been no perceived detriment to the
children’s personal, social and emotional
development. Teachers and practitioners
particularly valued the teaching sequence
with its daily routine of revision,
introduction of new sound, practise with
new sound, apply new sound in reading
and writing words and sentences.

The DfES was sufficiently impressed
with the results to agree to roll out
the programme as a two-year CLLD
programme starting in 2006-7 in a
further 32 local authorities, and which
continued in the original 18 authorities
from the pilot project. The 32 new
authorities were asked to appoint a
dedicated full-time CLLD consultant
with expertise in language development
and in the teaching of reading within
a foundation stage context. Each
local authority selected 10 schools
to receive consultant support: they
were encouraged to select schools and
settings that were in need of significant
improvement. In the second year
(2007-8), a further five schools per
local authority were to be added to the
programme. As in the pilot project, teachers and practitioners received training and their practice was observed and monitored, with lessons also modelled by the consultant.

The impact of the first year of the roll-out of the CLLD programme has been measured in terms of increases in the percentage of children reaching desired targets on the Foundation Stage Profile in different aspects of early literacy. Children who meet six of the nine scale points in the each of the four CLL scales are deemed to have a sure foundation which will allow them to successfully meet the new challenges of the Year 1 literacy curriculum. At the end of the school year in 2007, analysis of the 2007 Foundation Stage Profile data showed an increase of 5.3 per cent in the percentage of children meeting six of the nine scale points in 'linking sounds and letters' from schools in the 18 original local authorities, and an overall national increase of 3.7 per cent. Teachers and practitioners rated themselves as more proficient and effective in teaching phonics and early reading, and reported that the children they teach now better understand what they are learning these things for: previously, immediate application of new knowledge and skill in reading and writing seldom took place.

The DCFS (formerly DfES) has recently agreed to provide additional full funding to extend this programme to a further 50 local authorities, selected on the basis of the number of children living in disadvantaged households. This extension will be launched in March 2008, and implemented from April 2008. Once this is done, two-thirds of all local authorities will have received funding to participate in the programme. Consultants from non-participating authorities attend national and regional training events. Regional advisers visit these unfunded authorities, at school and other levels, to monitor implementation of the Rose recommendations. For those who are interested, some of the consultant and teacher/practitioner materials are available on the CLLD website www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/local/clld/.

Additional support

Rose recommended that additional support compatible with mainstream practice should be provided to children who need it, and that this should be sustained and built upon in their regular classroom environment. Additional support is not intended to shore up unsatisfactory teaching, but to help those children who might need more than very good to excellent mainstream teaching to catch up and continue to make good progress. The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is clearly impressed with Reading Recovery, and last year announced increased funding to train Reading Recovery teachers and teacher tutors. This raises questions about the compatibility of Reading Recovery with reformed mainstream practice with its emphasis on systematic structured phonics teaching as the prime approach to teaching beginner readers, and about the likelihood that what is learnt in the Reading Recovery lesson will be sustained and built upon in the tuition children receive alongside Reading Recovery.

These difficult issues are beginning to be addressed. Training of Reading Recovery teacher-tutors-to-be takes place in the UK in the London Institute of Education. For some years now, this training has included modules on literacy development which cover psychological theories of skilled word recognition and of the development of these skills. Teacher-tutors are also now routinely exposed to a variety of outside speakers with backgrounds in the psychology of literacy and its development. At present, there seems certainly to be a mood of acceptance of the necessity for phonics teaching, which is still combined with a reluctance to accept that this is all that is needed. It is possible that the Simple View of reading will prove helpful here: phonics teaching is the basis of development of all printed word recognition skills, but these skills are only one dimension of reading. They are necessary to, but not sufficient for, understanding what you read. Children’s oral language and background knowledge underpins development of the ‘other’ dimension, language comprehension, and must not be ignored. However, teachers must understand which aspects of their teaching affect which aspects of the child’s reading development: for example, by all means discuss a book with a child before you read it, and predict what the story will be about. But do not then encourage the child to ‘predict’ what an unfamiliar word says and means! Encourage the child to use their phonics knowledge and blending skills (which, in one-to-one lessons, a teacher has ample opportunity to consolidate and extend) to work out unfamiliar words. If the word is not amenable to phonetic decoding (either because of an irregular spelling pattern, or because it contains grapheme-phoneme correspondences that the child has not yet been taught), then just tell the child what it is, so as not to disrupt the reading. There is moderate cause for optimism that, by the introduction of small changes to practice and new insights to training, it will be possible better to align Reading Recovery lessons and reformed mainstream classroom practice, to the benefit of the most vulnerable children. Interesting times!

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Endnotes

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The Dyslexia Myth

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There is a popular and widespread view about dyslexia that runs something like the following. Among the wider population of people with reading and spelling disabilities, there is a subset that has a condition called dyslexia. This can be identified by skilled assessors on the basis of specialised tests. Having diagnosed that an individual is dyslexic, it is then possible to set in train intervention programmes that are geared to remediate the individual’s problem. Failure to recognise the condition will result in incorrect forms of intervention and ultimately, unrealised potential.

In line with this reasoning, the popular media are often eager to highlight examples of individuals who have struggled with literacy for many years only to discover at a late stage that they were, in actuality, dyslexic. These individuals often bemoan the fact that this condition was not identified earlier but may express delight that “…at last I can get the help I need”. In some cases, litigation can follow whereby the newly diagnosed dyslexic seeks redress for the absence of specialised assistance in school.

It is my contention that such reasoning is deeply flawed and not based on available evidence. In this article, I shall endeavour to outline three key questions, the answers to which, I believe, demonstrate the folly of this dyslexia myth:

1. Is the diagnostic term ‘dyslexia’ meaningful in differentiating between children with literacy difficulties? Can one locate such individuals into clear dyslexic/non-dyslexic groups? Essentially this is an issue of conceptualisation.

2. To what extent does a diagnosis of dyslexia guide the educator in devising appropriate forms of remedial assistance/teaching? This is an issue of intervention.

3. To what extent should a diagnosis result in the provision of additional help or the provision of specialist equipment? This is an issue of resourcing.

Conceptualising dyslexia

It is something of a paradox that those who advocate most strongly for the value of the label often readily agree that the nature of the difficulties of dyslexics can be highly diverse. The list of possible underlying symptoms is lengthy and it appears that there are none that are essential for the diagnosis (other than literacy difficulties themselves, of course). Thus, dyslexics are often considered to present with such symptoms such as speech and language difficulties, poor short-term (or working) memory, difficulties in ordering and sequencing, clumsiness, poor sense of rhythm, limited speed of information processing, poor concentration, inconsistent hand preference, poor verbal fluency, frequent use of letter reversals (d for b, for example), a difficulty in undertaking mental calculations, low self-image, and anxiety when being asked to read aloud.

The weakness of such long lists is that they routinely fail to offer meaningful differentiations. Similar symptoms are often used to describe other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or dyspraxia. Furthermore, many symptoms seen as indicative of dyslexia are typically found in people who have no significant literacy difficulties and similarly found in poor readers who are not considered to be dyslexic. Often difficulties that are seen as typical of dyslexics are also found in younger normal readers who read at the same age level, for example, letter reversals (Cassar et al., 2005), suggesting that these problems are typically characteristic of a certain stage of reading development, rather than pathological features.

One simple way around this is to take an exclusionary approach that argues that dyslexics are those whose literacy difficulties cannot be explained by low intelligence, socioeconomic disadvantage, poor schooling, sensory (hearing or vision) difficulty, emotional and behavioural difficulties, or severe neurological impairment that goes significantly beyond literacy (Lyon, 1995). However, does this mean that those from poor schools, disadvantaged backgrounds, or with low I.Q.s, cannot be labelled dyslexic? Few would argue this nowadays.

Grigorenko (2001), a leading specialist in the genetics of reading disability, points out that reading involves a vast range of processes and there is little agreement as to which, and how many, of these have to be discrepant, and to what extent, for the condition to be termed dyslexia. Although researchers are still unable to resolve such questions, they are required to take a position that ultimately results in various methodologies, interpretations and theoretical perspectives. For many researchers, the “gold-standard definition of dyslexia is linked to the person’s difficulty in dealing with single words” (Grigorenko, 2001, p. 93). From this conception has emerged a vast raft of research studies, with increasing numbers focusing upon brain structure and functioning, and the genetics of reading disability. Using such work to support the clinical value of the notion of dyslexia, however, represents something of a conceptual sleight of hand (Elliott, 2005). What this work demonstrates is that reading difficulties have strong neurological and genetic bases, something that has long been accepted. Unless, one would want to argue that dyslexics are those whose reading difficulties are genetically based, with non-genetic factors underpinning the difficulties of other poor readers, using
neurology or genetics as a rationale for a clinical diagnosis of dyslexia is to jump from exciting work in laboratories that holds great promise for the future, to making diagnostic decisions about individuals who need help and support now; psychologists and educationalists simply lack the measurement tools to make individual distinctions of this nature. Equally important, whatever their future promise, at the current time genetic and brain studies cannot help us to make decisions about differential forms of intervention. The key issue, then, is that while researchers may define dyslexia in various ways for the purposes of scientific investigation, and proffer differing underlying theoretical explanations, such accounts are far less helpful when a clinician or teacher is faced by a youngster experiencing literacy difficulties.

Another argument often put forward to support the clinical value of the concept of dyslexia relies upon the work of cognitive psychologists. The rationale here is that key cognitive processes have been identified that can explain the dyslexic profile. Foremost among these is the role of phonological awareness, that is, the ability to recognise different sounds in spoken language. The majority of cognitive psychologists see reading as primarily a linguistic, rather than a visual, skill in which phonological factors play a significant role for beginning readers, and semantic and syntactic skills become increasingly important as the reader’s expertise increases. However, there is still fierce debate as to whether this phonological awareness is the key explanatory factor of reading disability (Vellutino et al., 2004) and such doubts render decisions about diagnosis and labelling of a dyslexic subgroup even more problematic.

In a systematic review of dyslexia in adults, Rice & Brooks (2004, p. 11) conclude that:

“There are many definitions of dyslexia but no consensus. Some definitions are purely descriptive while others embody causal theories. It appears that ‘dyslexia’ is not one thing but many, in so far as it serves a conceptual clearing house for a number of reading skills deficits and difficulties, with a number of causes. There is no consensus either, as to whether dyslexia can be distinguished in practice from other possible causes of adults’ literacy difficulties. Many ‘signs of dyslexia’ are no less characteristic of non-dyslexic people with reading skills deficits. In our present state of knowledge, it does not seem helpful for teachers to think of some literacy learners as ‘dyslexics’ and others as ‘ordinary poor readers’.”

One way to avoid such complexities is to use the term dyslexia in a general way to describe almost all forms of reading difficulty. For example, the British Psychological Society’s Working Party Report on ‘Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment’ (1999) provides the following definition:

“Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the ‘word’ level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities” (p. 64).

While such an all-embracing definition may be attractive both to those clinicians who are sceptical about the value of more finely tuned differentiations, and also to those with such difficulties who would welcome being given the label, its very broad inclusivity is problematic for clinical purposes. Defining dyslexia in such fashion means that the construct no longer helps us to differentiate between those with reading difficulties in any way that is helpful to those who are seeking specialist insights that can inform intervention.

**Intervention**

As a teacher of children with reading disabilities in the 1970s, I had struggled to ascertain how a diagnosis of dyslexia could help me in preparing individually tailored programmes for identified children. Sensing that I had failed to grasp important issues, I hoped that my subsequent training as an educational (school) psychologist would provide the insights that I sought. I was intrigued, therefore, when a senior colleague remarked to me that he had just spent a morning trying to ascertain whether a certain child was dyslexic. When asked his conclusion, he replied that he thought that she was. When asked what his treatment recommendations had been, he replied that he had placed her on a precision teaching programme in which phonic knowledge and skills were closely assessed and a daily training schedule with weekly objectives established. I then asked him what he would have suggested if...
he had come to the conclusion that the child was not dyslexic. Grinning sheepishly, he confessed that he would have made the same treatment recommendation anyway.

In line with medical models, psychologists and educationists typically search for a diagnostic label in the belief that this will point us towards the most efficacious forms of intervention. Thus, many parents believe that if their child were to be diagnosed as dyslexic, clear ways of remediating their problems would emerge. This is a misconception, however, as there is no clear evidence that there exists a particular teaching approach that is more suitable for a dyslexic subgroup than other poor readers (Stanovich, 1991; Vellutino et al., 2000). Indeed, it is generally considered that the highly structured, phonics-based approach that is widely advocated for dyslexics is equally appropriate for other poor readers (Rice & Brooks, 2004). Many teachers and headteachers, for example, have remarked upon the British Dyslexia Association’s helpful ‘Dyslexia Friendly Schools’ initiative, in which the contribution of the whole school environment is considered, yet then go on to add that most poor readers are helped by such approaches.

In a recent web-based discussion in the UK between special needs teachers on dyslexia (SENCO-Forum, 2005), it was widely suggested that a decision to refer to specialist agencies was primarily motivated by a desire for advice on how best to help the child with reading, rather than merely obtaining a diagnostic label. However, the subsequent guidance that was received from specialists tended to be limited to recommendations for an increase in individualised teaching rather than specific teaching suggestions that might form the basis of the child’s individual education plan.

In their state of the art review, Vellutino and colleagues (2004) conclude that their findings indicate that practitioners should:

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“…shift the focus of their clinical activities away from emphasis on psychometric assessment to detect cognitive and biological causes of a child’s reading difficulties for purposes of categorical labelling in favour of assessment that would eventuate in educational and remedial activities tailored to the child’s individual needs” (p. 31).

While we don’t yet have failsafe approaches to helping young people with reading difficulties, there are some encouraging avenues. Based upon Marie Clay’s successful Reading Recovery Programme (Clay, 1987; Hurry, 1996), one scheme in the UK has drawn upon more recent research (e.g., Hatcher et al., 2004) and incorporated a greater emphasis upon phonological skills. Such programmes, however, appear not to be facilitated by any differentiation of those with reading difficulties into dyslexic/non-dyslexic camps. Our current state of knowledge now suggests that all youngsters with reading difficulties should be provided with such structured intervention programmes, initially in small groups and where necessary, individually (Hatcher et al., 2006). For this reason, there is little need to split up this population into dyslexic sheep and other poor reading goats.

Resourcing

Behind the feverish accusations that challenges to the utility of the dyslexic label are damaging lies the very real difficulty that many parents have encountered in getting additional resources and support for their children. Many of the messages that I have received from parents have pointed out that ‘the system’ has forced them to use the dyslexic label in order to access additional resources. Similarly, teachers with responsibility for special needs in schools (known in England as Special Needs Coordinators or SENCOs) also recognise that referral to dyslexia specialists can be a means of accessing additional resources (SENCO-Forum, 2005). While recognising this imperative, from the perspective of a parent desperate to secure help for their struggling child, we need to question whether operating in this way serves to prop up a system that most would argue is inefficient and inequitable. It is inefficient because it involves the use of resources for diagnosis and classification that might be better, and earlier, spent upon intervention. It is inequitable because it suggests that other poor readers, without the dyslexia diagnosis, will, in comparison, have less access to resources and support. Such a position is surely untenable?

There is also a widespread misunderstanding that access to special arrangements in public...
examinations in England requires a diagnosis of dyslexia. In reality, what must be demonstrated is a practical need in relation to actual difficulties. Thus, while the term dyslexia features in the illustrative vignettes provided by the examination boards’ Joint Council for Qualifications’, such forms of assistance as extra time, readers, scribes, and the use of laptops, are conditional upon a clear description of the individual’s needs, rather than the provision of a diagnostic label.

The media storms

After I took part in a British television documentary, *The Dyslexia Myth* in 2005, there was something of a media frenzy in which sensational headlines such as “Academic claims that dyslexia doesn’t exist” could be found on the front pages of several national newspapers. Surprisingly, the whole storm was resurrected in May 2007 during a week when there was little other news to report. Within 24 hours, I was asked for interviews from radio and television stations around the world. On this latter occasion, the media slant touched on that long-standing British obsession, social class. My argument that it was unsurprising that parents would wish to avoid any suggestion that their children’s literacy difficulties were a reflection of low intelligence, and that the ability to access private assessment was limited for the less affluent, was turned into claims that “Professor states that dyslexia is a middle class excuse for parents of unintelligent kids”.

Given such headlines, it was unsurprising that I received many messages from angry or distraught members of the public. Having worked with children with various learning difficulties for more than 30 years, I was not surprised by the strength of many reactions, nor the many stories that I have received from parents describing the suffering their children had experienced as a result of their reading difficulties. Often these messages reveal deep anger and frustration as testified by the extracts below of messages sent to me.

“Are you saying that my child is faking it?”

“Are you saying that my child doesn’t have a reading problem but, in actuality, is stupid?”

“I’ve struggled for years to get teachers to recognise that my child has a problem. Now you’ve said this, they’ll never take me seriously”

“A headteacher (principal) once told my eldest son that dyslexia existed only in the minds of the middle classes, Maybe you’re related to him!!!!”

“You are the kind of person who does untold damage to people who are dyslexic and the reason the Local Education Authority manages to fail us.”

“You are a dangerous man.”

The writers of these accounts, however, had obviously failed to grasp the key points that I and the other researchers who had also contributed to the 2005 television program were endeavouring to make. Our appeal was to identify all children with literacy difficulties at an early age, rather than concerning ourselves with dyslexic diagnoses, and to put our energies into providing to all of these children highly structured intervention programmes. In arguing for more, rather than less, assistance for such children, some of my colleagues were surprised by the strength of the negative reaction. Was it simply that they had reacted to bannerline headlines without looking more closely at what was actually being said? Given the trouble many took to write thoughtful, if often very emotionally charged, accounts it seemed as if more time had been spent responding to the headlines than examining the actual arguments presented. While it is likely that the widespread sense of grievance was triggered by superficial and inaccurate media coverage, I believe that there were also powerful psychological factors at work. It appeared that there was an element of projection operating where hurtful and misguided comments experienced in these writers’ past had become associated with this media story and were now being relived and refought anew. This might explain, for example, why so many correspondents appeared to have failed to grasp our assertions that reading disability (decoding) had very little to do with intelligence.

In responding individually to the messages I received, I have tried to address each of the concerns raised. I have pointed out that reading difficulties are all too real and no one should accuse those with such problems of faking anything. I re-emphasised my belief that social class is irrelevant: reading disabilities occur across the social class spectrum.

However, I also made the point that it is the middle classes who have traditionally been most able to ‘play the educational system’ to best help their children. Such behaviour is not a criticism of individual parents, of course, but a reminder that we must work to ensure that all parents have equal access to the support and provision that is made available to children with special needs. I restated my belief that any suggestion that an individual with reading difficulties is lacking intelligence is wholly inaccurate, and emphasised that we can make no judgements about an individual’s intellect based upon their decoding skills. (While there is an association between I.Q. and the ability to take meaning and make inferences from text, this is usually not considered to be a feature of dyslexia.) Finally, I stressed that I.Q. does not help us predict which poor readers will benefit most from structured intervention programmes as: “...there is a large body of research showing that children with I.Q. discrepant and I.Q. non-discrepant reading scores cannot be adequately differentiated in relation to instruction or prognosis” (Vellutino et al., 2004).

However, we must accept that the hurt and humiliation experienced by many poor readers and their families resulting from the widespread and pervasive misunderstanding that poor decoders are, in some way,

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intellectually inferior, is very real and, in some cases, cuts at the core of their sense of self. However, the way to tackle this is by ensuring that children with literacy difficulties are not underestimated or are made to feel ignorant or unintelligent. We need to ensure that such children do not necessarily find themselves in the lowest ‘ability’ sets (sadly, this can often happen when school examination results are used for the purpose of streaming or setting), or presented with learning tasks that fail to engage and challenge them cognitively (see Elliott & Place, 2004, pp. 226-231).

Concluding remarks

The question, ‘Does dyslexia exist?’ is a meaningless one. As a social construct, it exists in so far as we use the term to describe in a consistent and precise fashion a set of symptoms of behaviours. Thus, if we accept the BPS definition as outlined above, of course dyslexia exists! The difficulty here is not about existence of a condition but, rather, whether the term can be employed in a way that offers diagnostic, clinical or educational utility. While some would be happy to specify more narrow criteria than that of the BPS, this would result in vociferous protest on the part of those who would now be excluded from identification with the label (e.g., those whose difficulties are predominantly visually based; see, for example, Stein & Walsh, 1997; Congdon, 2005).

We need to ask ourselves why suggestions that dyslexia is a problematic construct are often met by such a hostile and antagonistic response. It is, surely, not because the diagnosis can make a meaningful difference in terms of remediation. Even those who argue most forcefully for the construct’s meaningfulness usually recognise the multiple misunderstandings that surround the label and its redundancy in respect of intervention. No, the power of the label is rooted in its ability to foster a more positive conception of self and its leverage with teachers and the gatekeepers to resources. While being sensitive to this, and the needs of those who struggle with literacy, one must query whether the dyslexia myth should continue and whether the amount and energy in diagnosing this condition is a sound use of time and resources.

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Report on the First Reading and Writing Conference, University of Stavanger, Norway

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The University of Stavanger held its First Reading and Writing Conference in August/September 2007. This is the first in a series of cutting edge reading and writing research conferences to be held biennially by the National Centre for Reading Education and Research at the University of Stavanger.

Stavanger is a very pretty city of 115,000 people located on the western side of Norway, on the North Sea. In 2008 it has been designated the European Capital of Culture. It is surrounded by green countryside and huge fiords. While there I noticed that most people spoke really good English, which makes it very easy for overseas visitors. I recommend the oil museum, the archaeological museum, and walking around old Stavanger.

Keynote speakers at the conference included Dr Michel Fayol, from Clermont-Ferrand in France, Professor Sven Stromqvist, from Lund University in Sweden, Professor Joe Torgesen from Florida State University, Professor Richard Olson, from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Professor Jane Oakhill, of Sussex University in the UK.

The conference was organised by Professor Victor van Daal. The themes were: reading comprehension, reading interventions, co-morbidity, genetics, writing, and phonology. It attracted high-level researchers from surrounding countries such as England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Austria, as well as researchers from the USA. My students and I were the only participants from this end of the world. A nice feature was a two-day series of workshops for doctoral students where they could get in-depth feedback on their work. My PhD students took this opportunity to present papers at the workshops.

Interesting research
Astrid Roe reported on 9th graders’ reading habits and attitudes in Norway. She found that 46 per cent of boys did not read much outside school whereas only 25 per cent of girls did not read much outside school. She reported that boys prefer fantasy and action stories like Harry Potter, and also like realistic and factual books. Students use the internet a lot but do not see this as reading. The most difficult subject areas to read for boys were Science and English.

Joe Torgesen reported that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to close the reading gap. You can narrow the gap but not close it. Their studies have been very good ones, carried out with randomised control groups, attention to treatment fidelity, and rigorous analysis of the data. These conclusions made me wonder whether in New Zealand we are trying to push a heavily loaded truck uphill when we do interventions with poor readers. Some of the largest and longest reading interventions ever done, involving years of one-to-one tutoring for poor readers, have narrowed the reading gap but could not close it. It was pointed out that we do not have any published studies as yet that show us how to close the gap. To me this is worrying. It suggests how problematic it is to let children slip through the cracks in the first years of school. We really just can’t afford to let this happen.

Another interesting theme at the conference was that reading problems are highly heritable, maybe up to 70 per cent, and that the contribution of the environment is only 10 per cent. Richard Olson has come to the conclusion from his research that because of the huge effects of genes, teacher and school effects are minimal. Poor readers can improve in reading but they can only do it by working harder than normal readers. My question is: how to you make this happen? This is a formidable task facing the reading teacher. The message was that we need to be realistic. We just cannot make everyone average. It is asking too much of teachers to try to raise the achievement levels of all pupils. There was an interesting report from Rhona Johnston on the long term effects of phonics teaching that was done in Year 1 classrooms in Clackmannshire in Scotland. Children were taught whole classrooms. The children were taught synthetic phonics for just 16 weeks. They were reassessed seven years later and were significantly ahead of their chronological age in word reading and spelling, and slightly ahead of their chronological age in comprehension. There was no difference between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in the first years of the study but the children from less well-

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off homes were behind the others by six months in word reading at Year 7. Boys in Year 7 were actually ahead of girls by eight to nine months. Only 6 per cent of the total sample were more than two years behind in word reading, 10 per cent were behind in spelling, and 14 per cent were behind in reading comprehension. This is really positive news, although to me there are still two problems with the study. First, the study did not compare phonics with Whole Language. Instead it only compared two kinds of phonics, synthetic and analytic. Second, there was no long-term control group. Third, there was quite a drop-off in numbers from Year 1 to 7. Fourth, it still leaves open the question of whether phonics can close the gap for poor readers since the children were a total age five sample rather than a sample of poor readers. Still, the study has had a major political impact in the UK and has put synthetic phonics on the map.

Researchers such as Michel Fayol in the area of writing development have found that beginner writers pay a penalty for poor handwriting and poor spelling. These mechanical skills, or lack of them, slow down writing and interfere with getting ideas on the page by taking up too much mental energy. In contrast, good writers have automatic handwriting and spelling skills and this means that hardly any mental energy goes into the mechanics. Nearly all mental energy goes into creating ideas. Researchers reported that essays were harder to write than narratives. Essays took more time and more planning, and writing preparation time was positively correlated with quality of ideas. I guess that means that the more time you spend in planning your essay, the better it will be. Other speakers pointed out that good writers don't plan exactly what they will write. They make changes as they go.

Our presentations
My presentation reported on data from five-year-olds that students and I collected last year. The research found that children in low-income areas lagged behind peers from more affluent suburbs. The study surveyed 130 five-year-olds at schools in low and high socioeconomic areas in Auckland. It found that five-year-olds in affluent areas significantly outperformed the pupils in low-income areas in reading and spelling. In a test of their ability to read words, the pupils from the higher socioeconomic areas had a mean score of 21.95 words, or a reading age of six years and three months. Those from the lower socio-economic areas had a mean score of 6.96 words, which was closer to a reading age of five years.

In that survey I also found that pupils in the low-income areas were more likely to have emotional problems (e.g., many worries, often unhappy) and peer problems (e.g., not liked by other children, picked on or bullied) than children in the affluent areas but there was no difference in conduct problems (e.g., fighting or bullying other children), hyperactivity (e.g., easily distracted, concentration wanders), or pro-social competence (e.g., considerate, sharing). Some studies in the literature argue that low achievement in reading is caused by social, emotional, and behavioural problems but I did not find this – not in Year 1 anyway. This suggests to me that such problems among older children are a result of poor reading achievement, not a cause. The only difference I found between good and poor readers at Year 1 was that the above-average readers in the low-income areas had significantly higher pro-social skills than the above-average readers in affluent areas – that is, they were more likely to be considerate of other people's feelings and more helpful to others. This seemed to me a very good reason for trying to get children in poverty areas into reading as soon as possible since it seems to have pro-social benefits.

These data suggest there is no level playing field when children start school especially when you compare children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. It's unreasonable to expect that teachers on their own in classrooms are going to be able to close that gap. I think we need to do several things. First, we have to think outside the square to help children who get behind in reading, offer extra reading tuition after school, in summer holidays, and even at preschool for those who need it most. Second, we have to focus our minds on prevention, to level the playing fields in kindergarten or before. Third, we have to get the message across to parents in less well-off areas that they need to help their children with the basic pre-reading skills: the alphabet, learning nursery rhymes, listening to a book each night. Fourth, the media could do a lot more to help these children. Newspapers could run columns that offer advice and handy hints to parents as to how and what to read to their children, television could run Sesame Street shows that are home-grown. We seem to be more worried about obesity and what our youngsters eat than about literacy, yet parent education in both areas is equally important.

The PhD students were able to present their own research at the workshops after the main conference. Laura Tse reported on her work comparing phonics and shared book tutoring with small groups of six-year-old children in poverty areas of Auckland. Louise Turner is doing her PhD on the effects of phonics, shared book reading, and math tuition (math is the control group) for poor readers in some very low-income schools. It has taken quite a while to see any progress but we are now seeing the phonics and shared book groups move ahead of the math group, and vice versa. Perhaps the message of Louise's study is that you have to hang in there with children who are way behind in reading before you will see results. You should not go in for quick fixes. Shanti Tiruchittampalam reported on her research on the summer slide in reading. She has found that poor readers in South Auckland, if they do not get summer tuition, may fall back over summer school holidays by as much as six months in reading ability.

If anyone is interested in following up the presentations at the conference, the names of all the speakers are on the website, at http://lesesenteret.uis.no/article.php?articleID=5823.

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Report on the European Dyslexia Association Conference,
Luxembourg, 16-18 November 2007

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Last November, I was delighted to participate in the second conference organised by the European Dyslexia Association. It was held in the European Union Centre, which was apparently a great coup for the organisation as it suggested some recognition for dyslexia by the EU. One of the aims of the European Dyslexia Association (EDA) is to increase awareness and funding for dyslexia. In Europe, they have no qualms about using this term, although precise definitions of the condition were not so precise. But they were basically the same as we in Australia would accept, either for ‘dyslexia’ or the relatively synonymous ‘specific learning difficulty/disability’.

Sitting in the main EU room was interesting, wondering which excited person you were and watching the translators up in their cubicles. This was only on the first day, when they had all the keynote speakers, who were of varying quality. They had to present in English and some of them would have been better in their own language, with English translation.

For those interested in research, the speakers were: Professor Schulte-Koerne from Germany, who spoke about neuroDys – the European research perspective on dyslexia; Professor Giacomo Stella (Italy), who spoke about regular orthographies in Europe; Dr Chris Singleton (UK), who spoke about dyslexia and visual stress (evidence that supported the work of educational optometrists); Professor Dr Susanne Trautsettel-Klosinski (Germany), who spoke about what eye movements and brain activity tell us about dyslexia; Dr Eve Gyarmathy (Hungary), who shared her research on environment and dyslexia; Dr Gavin Reid (Scotland), who spoke about dyslexia: criteria for school, presenting in a lively and interactive manner; a great relief after all the day’s cerebral concentration.

The room set-up was not conducive to good communication, with the speaker at a front corner at a lectern and the screen at the far end, with audience in a big U. You could watch the speaker or the screen but not both simultaneously, and a few of us looked like the clowns at the fair. One poor speaker was holding up things that hardly anyone saw.

The rooms for the workshops were similar and presentations varied. But choice was limited unless you were familiar with other languages, especially German. Conference attendance was severely reduced because of train strikes in France and Germany and snow in Switzerland. Perhaps then it was a good thing for EDA in terms of costs, if not for hungry participants, that there was no catering for lunch on Friday and sandwiches only for the quickest on Saturday. The conference finished midway through Sunday. Some of the limitations were due to restrictions imposed by the EU Centre. I was lucky to have a reasonably big group at my workshop, probably because most of the participants speak English but not necessarily the languages of other presenters on at the same time.

Helping students with learning problems is as much an issue in Europe as here.

One particularly interesting presenter was James Bauer, from the United States, who spoke from personal experience on the seven habits of highly effective dyslexics. One of my brothers, who is also dyslexic, after reading Jim’s book, commented on how his specific difficulties varied from Jim’s, but overall, the big picture was the same. One issue that was obvious when talking to people around the coffee (and packet biscuits on Saturday at least) was the differences in schools over Europe and within countries that seemed to make a cohesive curriculum difficult. I imagine though, now that Europe is organised in terms of business, currency and so on, more like one big country with different states, that perhaps they might get things together more easily in education. Helping students with learning problems is as much an issue there as here. One issue relating to adults, was how much to reveal of one’s difficulties to a prospective employer and when, if at all. As can be expected, opinions varied.

Unlike conferences in Australia, the only information provided to participants was the program – a list of speakers and their topics. I would have liked a bit of background information on the presenters, too. No pens, paper or other resource materials saved them having to provide a holder! There was one bookseller there.

For the experience of being in the fascinating atmosphere of so many languages, learning a bit more about the focus of your work and sharing a little of what you do yourself, I can recommend that you go to the next conference to be held in 2009. But you can also appreciate how well you are catered for here in Australia!

Jan Roberts is the Director of Learning Pathways and a specialist in teaching children and adults how to learn. She is the author of various resources, including Spelling Recovery, Now I Can Spell and Read Better, Too, Comprehension Plus and Advanced Comprehension Plus. Email contact: jroberts@connexus.net.au

MARCH 2008 – BULLETIN
Reading Assistance Program: Implementing or ignoring the recommendations of the National Inquiry?

Margaret Cameron, Tabor Adelaide

Someplace in the 90’s, I made a discovery which transformed my work as a teacher and tutor for children with learning difficulties. It puzzled me to notice that of the children I was supporting for reading, the best progress was made by those who were also receiving speech therapy on a regular basis. I discovered that the secret of the therapy, far from being a scientific mystery outside of the expertise of a teacher, was that speech therapists were teaching what we schoolteachers were not: systematic, synthetic phonics. This went far beyond the rudimentary phonics I encountered in my postgraduate university studies, and I feel rather embarrassed about my ignorance at that time. I sought out further professional development to make up for the deficit, and was amazed at the difference it made to my teaching effectiveness. Why do I mention this?

The 2007 Reading Assistance Voucher Program resource materials have brought back the memories: they are so much like the teaching I thought might work, earlier in my career, but which was frustratingly slow and lacking in real substance.

What scheme?
The Reading Assistance Voucher Programme (RAVP) was an initiative of the Federal Government, announced as part of the Budget for 2006-07 and 2007-08, with $20.6 million being allocated over these two years. It followed the pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative of 2005 and preceded the announcement of ‘An Even Start’, to be introduced in 2008 (Australian Government, 2007b). The RAVP claimed to be “informed by the findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and its whole-school approach that is clearly specified in a literacy plan” (Teaching Reading, Executive Summary, p. 15). The emphasis was clearly on providing leadership and equipping and resourcing teachers in schools to deliver quality programs which would minimise the need for outside intervention.

Who needs this type of programme?
The children who are eligible for the RAVP are those who failed to reach the 2006 Year 3 reading benchmark (and 2008’s ‘An Even Start’ will extend to both literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9).

The reading tests which children failed included stimulus texts of various genres, followed by multiple-choice comprehension questions designed to show if they could identify the main purpose of the text, identify a sequence of events, find directly stated information, make links between ideas stated in the text and illustrations, and work out the meaning of some unfamiliar phrases or words (Curriculum Corporation, 2007). Thus the children who qualify for assistance have failed to comprehend either the initial text, or the questions, or the multiple choice process, or a combination of these. In this type of test, there is little possibility of obtaining precise diagnostic information; it would be reasonable to assume that diagnosis (of the specific difficulties and perhaps what causes these) is a function to be fulfilled in intervention.

What were the findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, as they relate to the Reading Assistance Voucher Program?

1. There is strong evidence that “direct systematic phonics instruction during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read” (Teaching Reading, Executive Summary, p. 11). A closer reading of the Literature Review (2005) emphasises that such teaching is useful for all children in the beginning stages of learning to read (the first two years of school) and also for remediation of reading difficulties. The inquiry also found that an integrated approach to language and literacy teaching, in an intellectually challenging classroom environment, was very important. The skills to be integrated included phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension (Teaching Reading, Executive Summary, p. 12).

2. The Inquiry strongly advocated for “a consistent and comprehensive approach to reading” (Teaching Reading, Executive Summary, p. 15). The emphasis was clearly on providing leadership and equipping and resourcing teachers in schools to deliver quality programs which would minimise the need for outside intervention.

3. The Inquiry recommended the use of (nationally consistent) diagnostic assessments which include specific skills such as decoding and word reading accuracy, along with careful monitoring of each individual child’s development of reading.
Does the program deliver on its promises?

This review will focus on the quality of the Reading Assistance Kit, the mandatory program provided to tutors delivering intervention in 2007. It is not clear from the websites viewed whether these materials will continue to be mandated or recommended as resources for ‘An Even Start’ in 2008.

An integrated approach

The Reading Assistance Kit has certainly grasped the National Inquiry recommendation that literacy skills be taught in an integrated way. There is an effort to include, under separate headings, the essential elements of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension. What is missing is a clear scope and sequence for developing these skills. While successful early readers often develop all of these skills together in the context of speaking, reading and writing, those who are failing often need more explicit, sequenced instruction which is then practised in context. There is a progression of difficulty to be considered in developing skills of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness. Phonics is more than a cursory glance at an interesting sound; there is a set of letter-sound relationships to be learned, and for the failing reader, this is more effective if taught systematically and in isolation (synthetic phonics) before embedding in context. A number of published synthetic phonics programmes provide ways of systematically working through the necessary letters and sounds, but the RAVP explores a letter or sound in each module without an obvious progression of skill or opportunity to systematically assess which sounds are already known, and which the child needs to learn. Moreover, the analytic phonics approach taken is one which the National Inquiry found to be much less effective than synthetic phonics (Teaching Reading, Literature Review, p. 23).

Assessment

The National Inquiry recommendations for assessment of reading include “monitoring of decoding skills and word reading accuracy using objective testing of specific skills” (Executive Summary, p. 18).

The Assessment Materials in this program consist of more items that are similar to the Benchmark Test which eligible children have already failed, that is, passages to read silently then answer questions, including multiple choice. The stated aim of the pre-test is simply to choose the starting-point module for the tutoring programme. There is no reading aloud to allow the tutor to analyse word recognition and decoding skills and strategies and no way to check whether the answers were considered or guessed. The student is required to work silently for 30 or 40 minutes without interacting with the tutor. Experienced teachers of failing Year 3 students know how difficult this can be for such children.

A table is given for diagnosing the reading skills of a child on the basis of the number of items answered correctly. This is a leap of logic that cannot be justified without a diagnostic interview with the child. This approach appears to be similar to the table of comprehension skills provided with the TORCH test (Leila Mossenson et al., 2003). Such a scale works well when children are beyond the initial stages of learning to decode, but its reliability for failing beginning readers is highly questionable. It is designed as a statistical predictor of likely skills: it cannot be used as a precise diagnostic instrument for an individual as it does not clearly show what one child does and does not know about reading. Such information can only be obtained interactively, listening to the child read aloud, probing their understanding further when a question is answered, and through specific checklists to check their alphabetic knowledge, automatic recognition of high frequency words, ability to decode unfamiliar words and analysis of errors to determine attempted strategies. It is to be hoped that ‘An Even Start’ prescribes more thorough assessment.

Using the assessment results

Only two uses for the pretest are given: placement of the student on a starting point module, and a score for comparison with the post-test. The tutor’s professional judgement is required for “choosing which modules to work on as well as the suitability of activities within them”; also, “modules or activities within them may be skipped if they are too difficult, or too easy, for the student” (Reading Assistance Voucher Programme, p. 105). There is no mention of professional judgement to diagnose why a module may be too difficult, or how to teach the child the skills they need in order to be able to do the activity, other than a generalised list of activities to supplement the modules. Post-tutoring assessment provides...
...continued from page 19

a score which may be compared to initial testing (though not measuring specific skills) and other “assessments” are based on the subjective observation notes of the teacher, without specific checklists of what the child does or does not know.

What is missing?
The tutoring program ignores the findings of eminent writers in the field of teaching children with learning difficulties – the children who fail to reach the benchmark.

Some of the principles include:

Teach in small, sequenced steps, and reinforce learning
Learning needs to be sequential, reinforcing earlier steps, and linking new information to prior knowledge. The child with learning difficulties requires “abundant opportunities for practice and application of newly acquired knowledge and skills” (Westwood, 2007, p. 15). This applies to the various subskills of the program (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, text comprehension, vocabulary knowledge). Since the Assessment phase of the program does not analyse what the child does and does not know, the tutor has no guidance as to what should be prioritised, and the materials supply an arbitrary assortment of skills, arranged in no particular sequence. This program frequently introduces a concept but does not expect the child to learn it. For example, the many spellings of particular sounds (eg., /or/oar/ore/oor/aw/our/ure in Module 4B) are too much to learn from a single introduction; the value of introducing a complex concept without teaching the child how to use the information, and retain it, is highly questionable. Tutors are encouraged to use their discretion to modify the program as they discover strengths and weaknesses while teaching, and considerable skill and resources beyond the given modules would be needed. There is still a risk of a piecemeal rather than systematic approach.

Sound theoretical basis for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics
Errors in the text indicate that the writers did not use accurate theory consistently. For example, in Module 5B, the student is asked to identify “the two sounds in the word ‘thing’… th-ing”. There are, in fact, three phonemes in thing: th-i-ng. In Module 2B, the student is advised to break the word ‘spider’ into syllables: ‘sp-id-er’. There are only 2 syllables in ‘spider’: spi-der. A consonant cluster, by definition, cannot be a syllable.

The way in which phonemic awareness and phonics are ‘integrated’ into the program, focusing on a sound that happens to come up in the text (after reading, and presumably using the phonics in context) does not fit well with research into how children learn to recognise words. It is a whole language approach and not the direct, explicit, synthetic phonics that was recommended in the National Inquiry, and further explained by Coltheart and Prior in the article ‘Learning to Read in Australia’ (2006). Westwood (2007, p.126) mentions the need to teach writing with reading, as phonic knowledge is further developed through the need to work out spelling. There is a small amount of this in the worksheets but more intensive work relies on tutor judgement.

Use texts of ‘instructional level’ of difficulty
The texts chosen for the program provide no rationale for grading in difficulty. There is some mention of the sequence being arbitrary, and tutors are invited to skip texts that are either too difficult or too easy for the student. Of course it is nigh impossible to grade texts that are chosen mainly on a basis of theme. Readability of texts for beginning readers is affected by prior knowledge and interest, but is also (and importantly) linked to the child’s repertoire of phonic and word knowledge. It is notable in the program that the tutor is invited to read the text to the child first, if the text is difficult. One of the principles of Guided Reading (and in the Reading Recovery intervention program) is that the student should be given texts which they CAN read at 90-95 per cent accuracy (Annandale et al., 2004, pp. 20, 49). This is the cutting edge of learning for the child, where they are challenged but not overwhelmed. If the child needs the tutor to read the text first, then the text is too difficult to be used for instructional purposes, and the child is likely to learn unhelpful strategies such as relying on memory of the text rather than learning to decode the few unknown words they encounter.

Conclusions

Compared with other resources commonly used by tutors and learning support teachers, these materials are seriously lacking in diagnostic assessment, individualisation of learning programs on the basis of assessed learning needs, sequencing of concepts and the difficulty of texts, reinforcement and consistent practice of new skills. There are some worrying errors that hint that the writers of the program have not yet mastered the essential principles of systematic synthetic phonics. The integration of skills into a meaningful context has been given priority, to the extent that ‘integration’ is given more emphasis than ‘skills’. When this happens, it is possible that the skills won’t develop at all. A great deal rests on the skills of the tutor to modify the program and provide additional alternative resources in order to achieve any significant growth in the child’s reading development. It is to be hoped that the approach taken by ‘An Even Start’ will address these shortcomings.

Endnotes

Programme – the spelling used in the title. My preferred spelling is the older ‘program’ which I will use in this article.
MUSEC Briefing No 13: Book Levelling

Alison Madelaine

Statement of the Problem
In order to maximise the reading progress of their students, teachers need to provide reading material at an appropriate instructional level. If this does not happen, students may be reading texts that are either too easy or too difficult. Often, students are required to read material at their grade level, and this may not be appropriate. If students are reading material that is too easy, they have little or no opportunity to learn. If, on the other hand, the material is too difficult, students may experience frustration.

Proposed Solution/Intervention
Reading text at the right level of difficulty is particularly important for beginning readers and students with reading problems, as it provides them with a manageable challenge. In order to achieve this, students should be matched to instructionally appropriate text. It is important to be able to match students to books in both basal reading series’ and ‘real’ books so as to provide a balanced reading program.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?
A system of levelled books works on the assumption that as students’ reading improves, they are able to read progressively more difficult text. In order to match students to texts at the right level, the difficulty level of texts must be estimated. There are many levelling procedures available, for example, Reading Recovery Book Levels, MULTILIT Book Levels, and The Lexile Framework for Reading. Within a system of levelled texts, initial matching of students to levelled texts can be done using the results of reading tests or Informal Reading Inventories. This can then be confirmed and monitored by having students read a 100-word sample of text and calculating their level of accuracy. Instructional level text is that which a student can read with 90-95 per cent accuracy. The level at which students should be reading for teaching purposes (i.e., with support). If accuracy is below 90 per cent, the text is said to be at frustration level, and is considered to be too difficult. If accuracy is above 95 per cent, the text is said to be at independent level. This is the level at which students should be reading for recreational purposes (i.e., with no support).

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?
Although there is much information available on how to employ levelling procedures, empirical research supporting their reliability and validity is scarce.

Conclusions
Although some preliminary evidence exists, more research examining the reliability and validity of book levelling procedures is needed, but this is a promising procedure.

The MUSEC Verdict: Worth a try.

Note: The Reading Assistance Kit has also been reviewed by Georgina Reynhout and Sally Pearce, see the LDA Bulletin, Volume 39, No 1, May 2007.

Margaret Cameron is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Tabor Adelaide. She has worked as a classroom teacher, Learning Support Teacher, school Literacy Co-ordinator and tutor for children with Learning Difficulties. Her current passion is to pass on to student and practising teachers an understanding of effective literacy teaching, including phonic, in accordance with the recommendations of the National Inquiry. Margaret’s email contact is: mcameron@adelaide.tabor.edu.au

References

This Briefing has been reprinted, with permission, from the Macquarie University Special Education Centre series of Briefings. See http://www.aces.mq.edu.au/musec_co_brief.aspx for key references.

MARCH 2008 – BULLETIN
Consultants’ Corner

A first-term greeting to all Consultant Members! I hope you have all returned refreshed and eager for the year ahead. My summer break was less than joyful, but I am looking forward to brighter times.

Over the past year we welcomed 13 new Consultant Members (all in Victoria), which is a little lower than in most recent years. We would be pleased to welcome Consultant Members from other states, especially Queensland, to swell the ranks in the Referral Register. I’m sure Jan would welcome you warmly. Perhaps you can persuade some of your successful colleagues to apply for LDA Consultant Membership.

Apart from the newly admitted Consultants, I have had very few copies of Police Checks come in, so I am asking again for all Consultants to check their position on this issue. This is an essential aspect of your registration with the Referral Services. Referral Officers may not refer to anyone who is without this cover and it must be current. I must say that I found the form-filling for the Working with Children Card rather tiresome, but when I reflected that it lasts for five years rather than the two years for the police check, I felt better.

Some Consultants have requested that the insurance policy that many of us will be taking out this year should be more closely scrutinised to ensure that it covers our needs. I will therefore raise this issue at the next Council meeting so that expert advice can be obtained. The premiums have so far been very reasonable in comparison with those in other situations, but we must be sure that what we get fits our needs.

Here in Victoria we are begging for rain, whilst you in the north wish equally fervently that it would stop. May all our wishes come to pass!

Rosemary Carter
Convenor, Consultants’ Committee
Email: orcarter@bigpond.com

Tribute to Owen Carter

Friends and colleagues of Rosemary will have been saddened to hear the news of her husband Owen’s death at the end of December. The following tribute to Owen has been prepared by Jan Roberts, to express our sympathy to Rosemary and our appreciation of Owen’s longtime support for LDA.

Owen Alfred Carter passed away on 31 December 2007. During the many years that Rosemary Carter has been the telephone contact for LDA, and in all her associated activities on LDA Council and numerous LDA committees, her husband Owen was a stalwart supporter. LDA pays tribute to Owen for supporting Rosemary over the decades and helping in the background, and our members would like to express our heartfelt sympathy to Rosemary at this difficult time.

Report from Victorian Referral Officer: October to December 2007

Requests for referrals in the last quarter of 2007 were slightly above the average of the five years shown on the table. The total for the year 2007 was 56 below the average total of the five years shown. This represents a decline of roughly 8 per cent of the average total.

SPELL was the main source of referrals in the December quarter followed closely by independent schools and Consultants.

I hope all Consultants enjoyed a break during the holidays although I know some continued to work with students in holiday programs. Please keep me updated about when you have vacancies or not and when you take up a new referral through me.

Elaine McLeish
Referral Officer, Victoria
Phone: 03 9482 1031

Summary of Referrals October to December 2003-2007

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## Source of Referrals: January to December 2007

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