A history of Learning Difficulties Australia: part five – the journal (continued)

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Abstract

Part Five in this series on the history of Learning Difficulties Australia continues the history, begun in Part Three, of the association's journal. During this time the quality of articles in the journal came under scrutiny, and refereeing, at first only of research reports, later of all contributions, came into practice. Editorial policy continued to embrace reports of new teaching methods and therapies as a means of informing readers, but contributions also reflected changes taking place in special education and in teacher training. Articles about reading continued to dominate as the debate between whole language and phonics approaches heated up. In 1996 the name of the journal was changed to reflect the broader interests of the association in learning difficulties.

The decade spanning the five years before and after the turn of the millennium was a difficult one for AREA. The *Australian Journal of Remedial Education (AJRE)*, however, remained a stable force during a period of significant change in the association and in special education generally. During the latter half of the 1980s the journal would continue to be the major means of communication with members on remedial education issues. Over this period, it also served as a major forum for debate about methods for teaching reading, discussion of new programs and old 'fads', and incorporation of computer technology into the teaching of students with learning disabilities. The editors could rightly claim international recognition as selected *AJRE* articles were extracted and recorded on microfiche through overseas agencies, while contributions came from countries in the Pacific, Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

Yet the role of the journal as a professional publication was still not clearly defined. In addition to academic articles, contributions frequently covered more practical or transitory topics such as the role of remedial teachers or consultants in schools and private practice, case studies, reviews, news items, and in one case, an obituary.

Refereeing of articles

An ongoing issue was the independent refereeing of contributions before accepting them for publication. Chris Davidson, as editor, believed that refereeing was not appropriate, that it did not necessarily guarantee the quality of an article, that it would involve increased costs for extra postage, and that the time involved could delay publication[1]. Davidson's point about quality was later vindicated when a Council member commented that "reviewers need to go through articles more thoroughly"[2].

Moreover, refereeing of all contributions was inconsistent with editorial policy, reiterated by Davidson at a meeting of the Publications Sub-committee, which stated that the journal would continue to include articles dealing with new and untried approaches to remedial education as a means of stimulating debate[3].

Davidson's arguments were not accepted, however. Early in 1991 John Munro announced that from March 1993 the *AJRE* would be refereed and the editor would convene a committee to select referees[4]. John Elkins from the University of Queensland offered assistance with a structure for the referee process, and the new editorial board consisted of Chris Davidson as Editor, Richard Weigall as Associate Editor, six consultant editors including one to advise on computers, two review editors, and a referee panel of twelve, mostly drawn from academic institutions and including international representatives[5].

A compromise was reached following Peter Westwood's suggestion that research articles should be refereed but not reviews or articles describing classroom practice. Council reacted favourably to the idea of a separate refereed research section[6], and the journal became part-refereed from the beginning of 1993, when contributors were advised that "Authors wishing their article to be refereed must request it"[7]. By 1997, contributions were divided into 'refereed papers' and 'articles'. The last two issues of 1997 carried only refereed papers and the journal is now fully refereed.

Breaking down barriers

Policies for integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools were in full swing by the mid-1980s, and the third issue of the *AJRE* for 1985 was devoted to this topic. Professor Marie Neale, as guest editor, noted

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the unique conditions in Australia that had led to several innovations in providing support in a widely dispersed population. Dr Michael Steer, Director of the newly formed Integration Unit in the Victorian Department of Education, discussed the philosophy and principles underlying integration, and predicted that a wide range of social, educational, and vocational opportunities would be opened up for children with disabilities integrated into regular schools. Other articles presented case studies of integration[8].

Training in remedial and special education was a continuing concern. Most courses in special education were offered at graduate diploma or fourth year bachelor level, but with considerable diversity in course structure, required contact time and supervised practicum. Victoria was the only state which specifically registered qualified special education teachers for appointment to permanent positions in specialist facilities (Pickering, 1987). Of particular relevance for remedial education was the fact that, while ten courses identified by Pickering in a national survey dealt specifically with learning difficulties, resource teaching, learning disability or special assistance, there was little conscious planning in the development of courses to meet current needs.

Teacher training could influence those about to enter the profession, but the success of integration required the removal of entrenched barriers among practising teachers. A review of research on teacher attitudes to integration by Konza, Gow, Hall and Balla (1987) revealed significant stress and anxiety among classroom teachers, and a need to introduce a comprehensive range of supports. These included adequate funding, modifications to the physical environment and material resources, but also emphasised resource personnel, classroom teacher commitment, and training at both pre-service and in-service levels. The role of the integration coordinator received special attention.

The theme of breaking down barriers posed by teacher attitudes resurfaced in a celebration of the 100th issue of the journal[9]. Fields (1995) suggested strategies for overcoming teacher resistance to integration of children with disabilities, especially in relation to working with support teachers in a consultative framework. Westwood (1995) examined teachers' locus of control in the context of dealing with learning problems, and Hay (1995) examined teacher actions in relation to student effort, self-perception and achievement.

Legal issues were also emerging. The federal *Disability Discrimination Act* and corresponding state Acts were scheduled to come into force in March 1993, with a significant impact on schools in meeting their obligations to students with disabilities. The second issue of the journal in 1996 included a lift-out supplement, originally published by Villamanta Publishing Services, *A User*

Guide to the Disability Discrimination Act. Printed on blue paper, the guide could be easily removed from the journal for a handy reference. Williams (1996) cited a case from the English legal system in which a student had been granted financial compensation on the basis of negligence when an educational authority had failed to make provision for a learning disability. The author warned that this case "at the very least puts Australian education professionals on notice, that what they do in classrooms every day when dealing with students' learning needs may well be seen as attracting a legal duty of care" (p. 13).

By the mid-1990s integration had been redefined as 'inclusion', and Westwood (1997) urged a gradual approach, especially for children with behaviour problems for whom the class teacher felt poorly equipped. Successful inclusion of these children would require a commitment to provision of appropriate funding and resources, and both pre-service and ongoing training for class teachers. Westwood also advocated the retention of special schools and classes where necessary.

Teacher training continued to be an issue, but as claims were made of falling standards of literacy and numeracy, the focus of contributions turned to preparation for reading and mathematics teaching across the whole range of students. Maglen (1997a) examined teachers' attitudes and morale in the context of literacy standards, and "their unreasonable perceptions of why students fail" (p. 2). According to Maglen, teachers attributed the failure of some children to learn, despite the use of currently "fashionable" teaching methods, to the students themselves or to their family background. It was time, Maglen concluded, that literacy teaching had highest priority and that teachers changed their approach with students who had clearly not benefited from an existing method.

Teacher attitudes were also addressed by Roll and Greaves (2005), who used several data collection techniques to examine the views of beginning and experienced teachers on pre-service preparation for teaching literacy and numeracy to students with a range of needs, including learning difficulties. Roll and Greaves concluded that most primary (but not secondary) teachers felt well-prepared to teach literacy and numeracy, although fewer teachers felt as well prepared to work with the diverse needs of students from a non-English speaking background, indigenous students, those from families with low SES, and students with disabilities.

The reading debate

Criticism of the teaching of reading in the *AJRE* frequently targeted the Whole Language, or 'language experience', approach emphasised at the time by the Victorian

Ministry for Education (Sykes, 1991). Underlying this approach was the belief that children could learn to read simply by being exposed to print, just as they learned to talk 'naturally' by hearing spoken language. The method had appeal, but, as Sykes pointed out, there was little empirical research available to support its superiority over more traditional, skills-oriented methods.

Jackson's (1986) criticism went further, claiming that reading instruction in many schools had degenerated into a "kidwatching" experience in which children were taught to read by visual rote memorisation of printed material, while teachers deplored the use of synthetic, analytic, linguistic or phonic instruction or attention to the nature of the reading process itself. Children were learning to repeat whole sentences from memory based on their own "natural language", but were unable to read the same words in a different sentence. Jackson identified a number of unjustified assumptions underlying the natural language approach, concluding:

> It is time this kind of educational dogma was relegated to its rightful place. At the moment it is demoralising and confusing the teaching profession, but above all, and much more seriously, it is denying children the right to access reading and spelling via more than one route. (Jackson, 1986, p. 10)

While Whole Language methods were still in favour, arguments for including phonics instruction gathered strength, most critics favouring a balanced approach to reading. Jorm (1986), for example, identified problems in storage and retrieval of phonological information from long-term memory as an important cognitive factor in reading difficulty, but also recognised the importance of social factors, such as encouragement to read in the home, which interacted with cognitive factors. Reviewing arguments for and against the inclusion of phonics, Westwood (1986) concluded that there was a stage in reading acquisition, as children became increasingly familiar with print, in which instruction was needed in letter-sound correspondences, especially for children having difficulty in decoding unfamiliar words which could not be predicted from context. In a guest editorial, Westwood (1994) blamed a decline in South Australian spelling standards on the Whole Language approach, in which students were taught only to spell specific words as the need arose.

An English educationalist agreed:

> ... we do get rather weary of all the fads that come along. The latest one in the UK – I am sure it has reached Australia as well – is that of 'real reading'. Just give a child a book that is interesting to them, and lo and behold! – they will read. Brightly coloured books with good pictures are all that are needed according to this approach. I am a firm believer that one cannot

get away from the basics, no matter how difficult, grinding and tedious it can be at times. (Thomson, 1991, pp. 2-3)

Weigall (1992, p. 2) attributed at least some of the blame to publishing houses "which advocate a non-phonic approach at junior primary level and who assume that children will learn to read through memorising the configurations of hundreds of words without the benefit of proficient decoding skills". Some of these publishers, Weigall claimed, had formed an "unholy alliance" with teaching organisations to promote the whole language approach. Council expressed concern that a proposed issue of the journal devoted to 'Whole Language' could be too general[10].

Phonemic awareness, an aspect of phonics teaching that had been neglected in the journal, although it was not new to academic research in reading, was introduced by Munro and Munro (1993). Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to analyse the sounds in words, and works reciprocally – phonemic awareness is essential in eliciting meaning from print, and in turn develops as children learn to associate sounds with letters or letter combinations. Munro and Munro (1994) also reviewed research which stressed the importance of efficient word recognition in freeing the reader's attention to focus on comprehension of text, and suggested that dyslexia could be related to an inability to use phonological knowledge to decode unfamiliar words.

In 1998 a special issue of the journal was produced which included five substantial refereed papers on the role of phonemic awareness in language acquisition. A team from Massey University, New Zealand, Tunmer, Chapman, Ryan, and Prochnow (1998) reported key findings from a six-year investigation into the role of language and motivational factors in early literacy development, concluding that knowledge of spelling-sound patterns was more effective than ability to use sentence context. Children who reported using word-level information in Year 1 also performed better on tests of reading, including comprehension, one and two years later, compared to children who reported a preference for using non-word level cues, including context. Tunmer et al. also found that use of materials and procedures to teach phonological skills significantly improved reading achievement in beginning readers.

Munro (1998) confirmed the importance of phonological knowledge in early reading, while Thomson (1998) provided a model of early reading that teachers could use to incorporate phonological skills into their teaching practice. Love and Reilly (1998) offered practical suggestions for the classroom.

Criticism of the Whole Language approach was not confined to educators. Zollner, Harrison and Magill

(1996) investigated aspects of early reading, including whole-word processing skills, letter reversals, phonic skills (letter sounds, sound blending, and blending syllables into words), and proofreading skills in 615 students who had been referred to an optometry practice with a special interest in literacy. They concluded that many males and some females were significantly disadvantaged by an early emphasis on whole-word guessing and predictive cueing, contributing to a decline in literacy levels.

Hempenstall (1996) was even stronger in his criticism of the Whole Language approach, taking education authorities to task for endorsing a method that was clearly not supported by research evidence. He called upon researchers to adopt the unaccustomed task of attempting to influence decision-makers. "For the sake of those not well served by the current system", he concluded, "... it is surely time to stop fiddling around the problem. It is time to address the core issue: the manner in which we approach beginning reading instruction" (p. 30).

A boxed quote headed 'California bans whole language' reported legislation to ban the use of (U.S.) government funds for Whole Language teaching of reading and writing, insisting that "unfamiliar words must be decoded ..."[11]. The extract referred to this move as the "phonics revolution", as though the teaching of phonics was an innovation never before tried. It is telling of the 'fad' mentality that this article did not advocate a mixed approach with a balance of strategies, which would have allowed context to confirm, if not aid, the child's efforts at decoding.

Contributors were also concerned with more general literacy issues. Results of a survey by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), which indicated that as many as one third of secondary students lacked sufficient literacy skills to cope with their curriculum, were rejected by teachers and teacher educators (Maglen, 1997b). Maglen argued that, rather than debating teaching methods, educators should be asking what society wants from schools, identifying as a major objective the acquisition of skills in literacy, numeracy and socialisation that would enable students to participate successfully in community activities and in further education:

> Those who argue that this is an impossible objective for some children need to seriously address the question about whether these children should have to attend school at all: for many of them the whole schooling experience is a relentless litany of failure and unhappiness. (Maglen, 1997b, p. 25)

Maglen criticised academics who used conferences to further their own biases in teaching methods, or simply preached to the converted. She also criticised those who blamed parents' ignorance and misunderstanding for their children's poor literacy, or who assumed that parents were competent to take on the role of reading instructor. She praised the majority of teachers who were dedicated and hard-working and had their students' interests at heart, but called for strong leadership that would get rid of the few who were "lazy, incompetent and uncaring". She abhorred the "evangelical righteousness" of opposing factions in literacy education that precluded reasoned discussion about good teaching methods, but especially those who promoted the Whole Language approach as the only way to guarantee success. Good teachers, Maglen concluded, "have always been open to new ideas and able to incorporate what is useful – many use an amalgam of methods and approaches that is constantly modified to meet individual learning styles". It was a well-reasoned article, but contained some provocative material to be heeded by both academics and practitioners.

Gender differences and debate about reasons for the preponderance of males among students with reading difficulties emerged from time to time as a topic for discussion. In a survey of child and adult referrals for literacy problems, Robinson (1997) found that the gender discrepancy was much larger among children (male-female ratio of 2.2:1) compared to adults (male-female ratio of 1.2:1). Robinson suggested that the difference may be explained by a male tendency to react to learning difficulties with lowered self-esteem leading to disruptive behaviour, whereas females tend to withdraw and their problems are overlooked because they do not draw attention to themselves.

Much of this debate was concerned with general trends in literacy, rather than with the nature and causes of reading difficulties. The fourth issue of the journal in 1997, however, returned to the basics of specific learning difficulties. Bradshaw (1995) deplored the increased number of children in Australia identified as having a learning disability, a trend that followed the United States, where it was predicted that by 2000 one third of the school population would be so labelled. Bradshaw named this trend "mislabelling", and proposed four alternative explanations for failure to learn: neglect of individual differences in learning styles; differences in left-right brain dominance in a system which tended to favour left-brain functioning; lack of self-esteem; and behaviour disorders often arising from a regimented school atmosphere.

In the same issue Brock (1995) provided a clear discussion of dyslexia and its common features, also pointing out the importance of self-esteem in children who have difficulty in learning, while Young (1995) discussed a wide range of research perspectives that had influenced the teaching of students with learning disabilities, from Piaget to Vygotsky and coloured lenses.

Fads and cures

Supporters of fads and supposed cures for reading disability continued to find an outlet in the journal. The use of coloured lenses to facilitate reading was promoted in the 1980s by Helen Irlen. Lenses obtainable only from practitioners licensed by Irlen were prescribed to suit the individual according to a specific combination of tint and density determined by testing procedures. The lenses were consequently quite expensive. Stanley (1987) agreed that some aspects of reading performance, such as reading speed and reduction of glare, could be improved by the use of coloured lenses, but coloured overlays were just as effective and much less expensive. He pointed out that Irlen's claims were as yet unsupported by methodologically sound research and her methods could only be regarded as experimental. Articles which followed showed similar caution; although authors acknowledged that coloured lenses could facilitate reading by enhancing the clarity of words on the page, there was little evidence to support claims that these lenses could be a 'cure' for reading disability.

Stanley was taken to task by O'Connor and Sofo (1988) who claimed that Stanley failed to acknowledge the contribution made by clinical research in such fields as medicine and psychology. O'Connor and Sofo reviewed recent research that supported the relatively high prevalence among children with reading disabilities of Irlen's concept of 'scotopic sensitivity', or sensitivity to certain frequencies and wavelengths of the white light spectrum, on which the use of coloured lenses was based. Whiting (1988) also reported positive results from the use of coloured lenses, but acknowledged that those who participated in his study were likely to be highly motivated to show improvements.

Arguments about Irlen lenses ceased until Whiting, Robinson and Parrott (1994) followed up 267 subjects who had been using Irlen filters for at least six years. Of the 43 per cent who responded to their follow-up survey, most continued to report improvements, especially in visual perception of print and ease of reading, evident, for example, in fewer skipped lines and fewer substitution errors consisting of words of similar shape. These effects, however, were not universal, being most beneficial for students who already had some basic reading skills. Irlen and Robinson (1996) reported significant improvements in workplace productivity and satisfaction for Californian workers who used coloured lenses on the job. A team from the University of Newcastle, Robinson, Roberts, McGregor, Dunstan, and Butt (1999), described a preliminary investigation of a biochemical basis for 'Irlen syndrome' in people with chronic fatigue syndrome.

Another popular therapy in the late 1980s was conductive education, developed in Hungary. Conductive education emphasised the teaching of important life skills through intensive individual methods by a 'conductor', a dedicated specialist who was trained to teach these skills to children with motor disorders such as those associated with cerebral palsy. While significant improvements in independent movement had been claimed for children in Hungary, Silver (1987) questioned whether the system could ever be as successful in the somewhat less rigid atmosphere of Australian society.

An American contributor, Carla Hannaford (1994), introduced the concept of 'brain gym', also referred to as 'educational kinesiology'. Brain gym, developed by American educator Paul Dennison, was described as "a series of specific brain integrative movements designed to bring attention and fully activate the neo-cortex of the brain ... and activate visual, auditory and kinaesthetic functioning for ease of learning" (p. 25). Hannaford used case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of her methods in improving behaviour and learning.

Hannah (1994) described a brain gym program in a Queensland school, but her claims about the program were not supported by objective evidence. A problem common to most of these articles on specific methods and strategies was their authorship by people who were actually engaged in using the method, and so had a vested interest in demonstrating its effectiveness. There was a notable absence of independent research in supporting specific programs or instructional methods in special and remedial education.

Greaves (1994) defended the journal for raising awareness of new programs, arguing that remedial education has no single set of commonly agreed principles:

A rationale for the existence of this journal is to inform its readers of methods and strategies which are appropriate for children with learning difficulties, on the basis that this group appears to have needs in addition to the classroom approaches which are generally available. This premise creates the scene for a debate on the choice of the most appropriate method or strategy. Recent articles in this journal (1994, nos. 1-3) inform readers of this debate. Should the teacher spend his/her limited time with the child on phonics, Distar, meta-cognitive strategies, brain gym, Irlen coloured filters and/or use a sloped desk top? (p. 2)

But Greaves also urged caution in the adoption of new methods:

... Faith in a theory is insufficient justification for its implementation. Innovations for their own sake ... may lack substance, and usually do lack unbiased evidence to substantiate their use. Even published

research may be no better than suggestive of support for a new theory because of measurement and other methodological problems. (Greaves, 1994, p. 2)

Dykes (1997) called for educators to get rid of "fads" based on false assumptions about the teaching of literacy, and for State education authorities to stop indiscriminately importing overseas ideas and materials. "For years Australia has blindly followed the lead of other western countries and of the U.S. in particular," she wrote. "The time lag ensures that we introduce new systems just as other countries are realising their flaws." (p. 30)

Learner characteristics

A more promising direction came from contributions that focused attention on the learner. In an inspiring editorial entitled 'Wonderful Willy' (a reference to a current concern for preserving whales), Weigall (1995) urged educators to become involved in the interests of children to engage them in learning, rather than attempting to impose adult interests.

Several contributors added a new dimension to learning disability by exploring individual differences in learning style. Knight (1993) discussed research which showed that internal locus of control (the belief that one has control over the outcomes of one's actions) promotes active involvement and independence in learning, and its relevance for teachers in promoting children's learning. Recent research on learning styles and motivational aspects suggested that children with learning disabilities tended to be passive learners who lacked a motivational orientation to learning and thus failed to employ effective learning strategies (Chan, 1993). According to Chan, a more active, self-directed pattern of learning could be fostered with a supportive atmosphere and classroom practices such as self-instruction, goal-setting, self-monitoring and self-reinforcement, which would help to prevent expectation of failure among many learning disabled students.

The 'whole school' approach to literacy

Such strategies could be incorporated into a 'whole school' approach to literacy, which was the focus of a special issue edited by Greaves (1999) in response to questions about the priority given to literacy within the school program. The thrust of contributions to this issue was that a structured literacy program, with adequate, regular time commitment and continual monitoring of students' progress, was crucial for the successful teaching of reading.

Hill and Crevola (1999) described one example. A daily literacy block of two hours, incorporating both whole-class 'shared reading' and small group teaching, was timetabled for every class in a school. Instead of expecting that some children would fail to acquire adequate literacy skills, the school adopted an attitude that all children were capable of achieving. Rigorous performance standards were set. Ongoing assessment of students and professional development were other key features of this approach that produced more effective teaching outcomes.

In an epilogue to the issue, Munro (1999) identified several trends in the programs described. Consistent with concepts of school effectiveness, each of the schools took responsibility for acquisition of literacy within the school. Support programs were an integral part of the curriculum and involved the whole school, not just the early years. Systematic and structured learning was emphasised, with monitoring of individual and school literacy outcomes a crucial component. Students were encouraged to be active participants in the learning process. Finally, professional development of teachers was integrated into the program.

This approach represented a marked change from earlier programs for students with learning difficulties:

The earlier paradigm was characterised by an approach that saw these students as 'defective' ... Their approach to learning was diagnosed by 'experts' and they were frequently involved in learning support programs away from their regular classroom ... The present paradigm, with its focus on inclusion, sees all learners moving along a developmental continuum in literacy development. (Munro, 1999, p. 39)

The role of remedial consultants was being challenged, with consultants in private practice feeling less than welcome in schools, tolerated only to meet parents' wishes:

The school perspective is that the private practitioner's work is ... a direct criticism of their literacy provision for the student with learning difficulties. This perception is further reinforced when the private practitioner recommends or uses assessments not available in the school and implements approaches which contrast sharply with school literacy practices and policies. (Greaves, 1999, p. 2)

The private practitioner, on the other hand, perceived that the school's methods had not succeeded in teaching students with learning difficulties, and instead implemented methods which he or she had found successful with other students.

The inclusive approach, however, made certain assumptions about the nature of reading difficulties, to which educational consultants had not yet adapted:

Without the opportunity to negotiate a role for themselves within the changed context [educational

consultants] ... continue to operate largely in ways that they did earlier and assess the educational provision in terms of the earlier paradigm ... In order to work within the recast model, consultants need to align their professional knowledge with the changed directions. They need to identify the contributions their areas of expertise can make to overall understanding of a child's learning needs. They need to recognize their roles in an essential partnership that is based on mutual respect and valuing. (Munro, 1999, p. 39)

It was a far cry from perceptual-motor programs, Irlen lenses, kinesiology and the many other 'cures' for learning difficulties that had been debated for three decades in the pages of the journal.

Computer education

Computers made strong inroads in remedial education in the 1980s, and in 1984 a computer section was introduced into the *AJRE*, edited by Gerry Kennedy. Negotiations with the Computer Education Group of Victoria resulted in joint production of an issue on 'Computing and Special Education' in 1986[12]. Contributors discussed the uses of computer technology in the classroom, for analysing teaching material, for educational diagnosis, in interactive programs for children with language problems, and in facilitating remedial reading, maths and writing instruction. Colbourn and McLeod (1986) outlined a model of computer-guided educational diagnosis that could be used by the classroom teacher.

Another special publication on computers and education, combining two issues, celebrated AREA's Silver Jubilee in 1990. Contributors provided further examples of computer use in remedial and special education, using a word processor to help language disordered children and adults to write, computer-assisted learning for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and as a resource in integration, the computer as a focus for group interaction, fostering computer literacy, and integrating computer technology into the classroom.

As technology became more widespread, creative and varied, a further issue published articles on the use of reactive toys and switches to teach a range of skills, including cause and effect relationships, guidelines for software to teach spelling, hardware and software for computer-assisted communication, and keyboard strategies for children with poor handwriting skills[13]. With increasing numbers of computers in schools, many more typefaces became available for presentation of printed texts and work sheets, and another special issue, sub-titled 'Words, graphics and symbols: A new literacy ... using computers', dealt with typography[14], including the suitability of typography for children learning to read (Sassoon, 1993).

Kennedy (1992) cautioned against use of technology for its own sake without relating it to the needs of the child, but also claimed that, compared to society generally, schools lagged far behind in cutting-edge technology, largely because of lack of funding (Kennedy, 1993). This lack was exacerbated by teachers not having the technical expertise to prepare submissions for available funds. Even if they did succeed in obtaining funds from philanthropic or other sources, teachers often did not have the time to learn to use new equipment at a level at which they could feel comfortable working with a child. In the context of integration funding, new equipment was not in itself sufficient to ensure that it could be used to the benefit of the child.

The *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*

The *AJRE* celebrated its 100th issue in 1995 and the following year was renamed the *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities (AJLD)*, with numbering starting from Volume 1 Number 1. There was little change, however, in the style or content of the journal and authors could still choose whether or not to have their contributions refereed. The issue began with a guest editorial written by Fay Maglen, literacy coordinator at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, on declining literacy skills, questioning why the amount of time spent in training teachers in literacy education should be decreasing when pre-service teacher training courses had increased to four years. Two articles dealt with left-right confusion, others with classroom conflict, the teaching of spelling, and teaching strategies for children with short-term memory problems. There were the usual notices and information about forthcoming events.

During the last years of the millennium much thought was given to the future of AREA. The president, Darryl Greaves, was clearly looking ahead on a range of issues as he drew on keynote addresses from a recent AREA conference held in Melbourne to consider the future role of the consultant:

... AREA members will need to be identified as specialist practitioners with a specific set of teaching and assessment skills. One of the identifying characteristics of a specialist is their ability to accurately assess a problematic situation in order to provide appropriate interventions. (Greaves, 1996, p. 2)

This focus on individual differences would require a significant shift from the emphasis over the previous decade on curriculum "as the panacea for a child's lack of educational progress".

The journal was reaching another crossroad. Greaves (1997) predicted that the entire contents of the *AJLD* would soon be available on AREA's newly created website, with subscribers choosing to receive a printed copy or having a pin number to download articles as they wished. Harking back to changes since the first issue had been produced on a Gestetner machine using stencils cut with a typewriter, Greaves urged the association to keep up with new methods of communication to ensure its viability. "At this point in the history of the AREA organisation," he wrote, "the potential of its world presence and the ease of international communication for this journal is quite amazing."

Editorial policy, though, showed little change, unless it was towards even greater eclecticism:

> The Journal aims to provide relevant, current information to a wide audience including special educators, teachers in training, school administrators, parents, and other professionals ... The Editors promote effective teaching approaches in the basic subjects including systematic multisensory instruction in reading, writing, and spelling which recognises the importance of phonemic awareness and the structure of language and related clinical educational intervention strategies for individuals with learning disabilities.

> The Editors are committed to the wide distribution of interdisciplinary, research-based knowledge and effective practice approaches regarding learning disabilities, including Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia). Other subject areas include mathematics, dysgraphia, metacognition, self-esteem, [and] social issues such as 'tolerance' ...

> The Journal is truly international, welcoming well-written articles in English from writers around the world. The Editors strive for a balance between practical articles and research-based papers for each issue. Special issues dealing with a specific topic such as *Computers in Special Education* are a feature of our publishing programme. From time to time the Editors include articles of a potentially controversial nature, for example papers dealing with [a] new form of instruction, treatment or therapy. The Editors publish these in order to keep our readers informed and stimulate productive debate ...[15].

Learning difficulties: definitions and identification

The Federal Government had commissioned an investigation into learning difficulties in Australia, which formed the theme for a special issue of the *AJLD*. In an overview of the history of learning difficulties in Australia, Elkins (2000) defined Australian use of the term 'learning difficulties' as signifying students with academic and related school problems in the absence of an underlying impairment. He noted the implications of this situation for recognition and funding, and confusion about whether learning difficulties constituted a disability for the purpose of disability discrimination legislation at both school and tertiary levels of education.

Contributions by academic staff from Edith Cowan University, who were also involved in the federal project, dealt with research, definitions, school provisions and programs, and parental involvement. The issue concluded with a discussion by Greaves (2000) of the range of non-government services available for students with learning difficulties. These included SPELD, the Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW, AREA, and various franchised services promoting specific methods or programs. In addition there were private practitioners in various professions, including teachers, speech pathologists, psychologists, optometrists, special educators in private practice and other specialists largely based on specific practices such as kinesiology and neuro-linguistic programming. It was a useful overview of the wide – perhaps for parents, bewildering – range of provisions and methods of practice for students with learning difficulties.

Chan and Dally (2001) summarised literature reviewed for the DETYA Report[16]. They contrasted definitions of learning difficulties common in the literature with the constructivist, or sociocultural, approach to defining learning difficulties which shifted the focus "from the individual nature of a learning disability to the embedded nature of an individual's actions within social contexts" (p. 13) – in this case the context of the classroom. The proponents of this approach argued for special educators to focus on the "sophisticated use and application" of basic skills, not just the acquisition of those skills. As the authors pointed out, confusion over the definition of learning difficulties added to problems in identifying students and estimating prevalence.

The impact of learning problems on parents gained attention with a report of an investigation into learning disabilities and parental stress. Bock and Shute (2001) found high levels of stress among parents of children with learning disabilities as a result of child and school factors, but excluding poor coping strategies. Nevertheless, a skill-based intervention program was effective in helping to reduce stress.

In 2001 a special issue was produced on assessment, now re-emerging as a controversial topic[17]. As Greaves (2001) pointed out, some educators believed that assessment gave a child a label, or argued that assessment rarely provided a basis for further instruction. Although authors in this issue generally favoured assessment, their contributions

contained a common thread that assessment should lead to an intervention that is beneficial to the student.

Between 2002 and 2004 articles continued to represent a variety of topics and viewpoints. In 2002 a special issue on giftedness focused on gifted students who had a learning disability. Munro (2002a) discussed the difficulties in identifying these children because they do not fit stereotyped notions of giftedness, and advocated teacher training in both giftedness and learning disabilities. In a study of gifted students with a reading disability, Munro (2002b) identified two groups: one showing superiority in both verbal comprehension and perceptual organisation, and one showing superiority only in perceptual organisation, but concluded that literacy disability in both groups could be attributed to a preference for the use of global rather than analytic information strategies.

Despite the exclusion of other disabilities from popular definitions of learning disability, there was considerable interest in disabilities that are often accompanied by learning difficulties, including attention deficit disorder and Asperger's syndrome. In a special issue on difficulties in mathematics, Munro (2003) defined and described dyscalculia. Phonemic awareness and other phonological processes, spelling, writing and written expression, support for children with special needs, self-concept and reading, computer literacy, and learning difficulties among university students were just some examples of the range of topics covered in the journal.

In around 150 issues of the journal, first the *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, later the *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, many thousands of words had been written about learning difficulties. How far had knowledge about the subject advanced? In a guest editorial, Weeks (2002) summarised what was known about dyslexia and reading difficulties, concluding that there was plenty of evidence to support the existence of dyslexia, and that it had a biological basis. Research could not provide a cure, but it did give some guidance on minimising the effects of dyslexia through phonological awareness programs and environmental enrichment, while also drawing attention to the inadequacy of teacher training in the area. Weeks believed that Australia was lagging behind both the UK and the USA in providing support for students with reading difficulties: although there were some good programs in individual schools, these were implemented on a 'piecemeal' basis. What was needed was a systematic approach to identification and support, which would include screening at preschool level and the routine development of phonological awareness as part of language programs: "In the primary school years we need mandated time spent on the explicit teaching of basic literacy skills which includes the teaching of phonics and an understanding of the English language as part of a balanced literacy program," Weeks wrote (2002, p. 3). Essential to this requirement would be recognition of the existence of dyslexia so that its impact could be better understood by teachers and appropriately addressed in schools.

Conclusion

Over almost four decades of editorship by Chris Davidson, assisted by Richard Weigall, the journal had evolved into an increasingly professional publication. Notices about current events and conferences were no longer included, although the emphasis was still on maintaining a balance between theoretical and practical content. Indeed, the editor was still wary of including too many "esoteric" papers, and categories were established to ensure that refereed papers would include not only articles discussing new practices, but "would meet the criteria of action research or more qualitative criteria, review articles and case studies"[18]. Articles that examined new strategies and methods or suggested new ways of looking at factors contributing to learning difficulties were acceptable, as were "creative articles that may provide new directions for research". Davidson's 37 years of editorship, during which he edited a total of 141 editions, has been suitably acknowledged following his retirement (Byers, 2005). Kevin Wheldall, of Macquarie University, NSW, replaced Chris Davidson as editor from the beginning of 2006, and will be joined by Alison Madelaine as co-editor in 2007.

The journal's flavour is perhaps less international than it was, but it can be argued that quality and relevance are more important than where contributions come from. However, the exclusion of news items and the publication of non-refereed papers in the *LDA Bulletin* have made it difficult at times to fill the journal. This difficulty may reflect an increasingly academic orientation that makes articles seem less relevant to classroom practice, an issue that needs to be resolved not just in relation to the journal, but within the association as a whole. It is also due to pressure on academics to publish in internationally recognised journals rather than in Australian journals, regardless of the quality of the publication.

The difficulty of filling the journal has prompted Council to reduce the number of issues per year, at least for the present, from four to two. In the meantime, Council is exploring the possibility of having the journal published by a well-respected international publishing house to make it more attractive as an avenue for publication, while essentially keeping its Australian character.

Endnotes

1. AREA Council Minutes, 5 September 1991.
2. AREA Council Minutes, 4 December 1994.
3. Minutes of Publications Sub-committee, 21 August 1991.
4. *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 23 No 4, 1991.
5. AREA Council Minutes, 10 October 1992.
6. AREA Council Minutes, 5 December 1991; 6 February 1992.
7. Advice to contributors, *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 25 No 1, 1993.
8. *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 17 No 3, 1985.
9. *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 27, 1995.
10. AREA Council Minutes, 5 November 1992.
11. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol 2 No 3, 1997, p. 6, reprinted from *Educational Alternatives*, Issue 4, June 1997.
12. AREA Council Minutes, 17 February 1986; issued as *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 18 No 4, 1986.
13. *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 24 No 4, 1992.
14. *Australian Journal of Remedial Education*, Vol 25 No 3, 1993.
15. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol 3 No 1, 1998.
16. DETYA Report: *Mapping the Territory: Primary students with learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy.*
17. *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol 6 No 2, 2001.
18. Editor's note, *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol 7 No 4, 2002, p. 2.

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