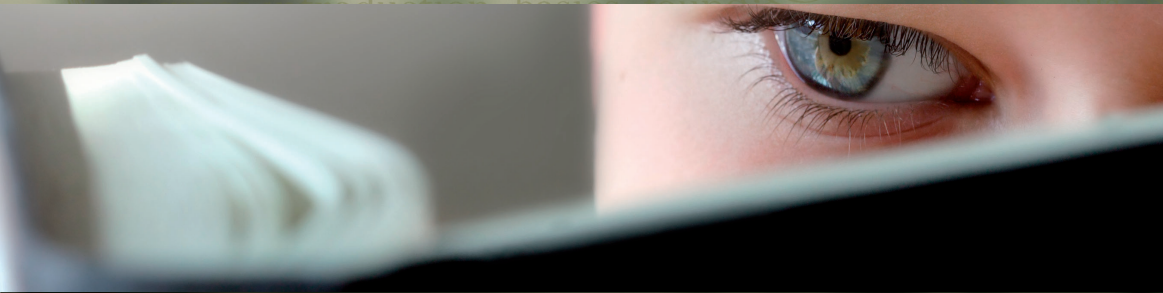


Peter Westwood

What teachers need to know about



Learning difficulties

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Preface

Students with learning difficulties comprise the largest group of students with special needs attending mainstream schools. Often our schools seem ill prepared to cater adequately for their learning needs, resulting in too many individuals leaving school without the essential literacy, numeracy and social skills they require to meet the demands of daily life. In the final report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties (*Report 30: Realising potential*) the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues (2003) stated that these students find their schooling ‘extremely alienating and dismaying’ because they often find they are unable to access the supports they need to overcome or manage their difficulty, and thereby maximise their potential. The Committee concluded that, ‘It is essential that current and future cohorts of children do not grow up feeling that the education system neither acknowledges nor addresses their learning needs’ (p. 59).

In this book I have drawn on the international literature to explore what is known about learning difficulties and how schools can address this problem most effectively. In particular, I have focused on early identification, so that intervention and support can be provided promptly to prevent or minimise the negative affective outcomes that result from persistent failure. Often these negative outcomes operate to maintain or exacerbate a learning problem for the students concerned by impairing their self-esteem and reducing their motivation to learn.

It is not unusual to find that some students with learning difficulties also have problems with socialisation; and some have problems conforming to acceptable codes of behaviour. These problems are discussed in some detail. Most attention is given to an overview of teaching methods that work effectively for these students. Brief coverage is given to students’ specific difficulties with reading and with mathematics; but this is not

in depth because other books in this series address these topics in much greater detail.

It is hoped that the links to additional sources of information, together with the comprehensive list of references, will aid teachers who wish to find solutions for their students' learning difficulties.

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PETER WESTWOOD

RESOURCES

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Readers may access the online resources mentioned throughout this book through direct links at www.acer.edu.au/need2know



Current perspectives on learning difficulties

KEY ISSUES

- ▶ Learning difficulties are not uncommon in schools. In a few cases, they may be the result of a specific learning disability; but they are much more likely to be due to environmental factors such as social disadvantage, inappropriate curriculum, inadequate teaching, or lack of positive support for learning.
- ▶ Many teachers do not feel confident or competent to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties; and they tend to blame students for problems in learning.
- ▶ Perspectives on learning difficulties and learning disabilities vary from country to country. Prevalence rates also vary, due to differing definitions of learning difficulty and disability.

According to the Queensland Studies Authority (2007, p. 1), ‘Learning difficulties refer to barriers that limit access to, participation in, and outcomes from the curriculum’. A significant number of students in our schools exhibit such difficulties for a variety of reasons. This chapter explores some of the reasons and also reports the prevalence rate for learning difficulties. In addition, several key issues associated with learning difficulties are discussed.

Defining and describing learning difficulties

Students with learning difficulties is a very general term, used widely and without much precision. Usually the term is applied to students whose learning problems in school are not directly related to any specific physical, sensory or intellectual impairment (although in some cases their intelligence may be somewhat below average). Instead, the learning difficulties may be due to external factors such as socio-cultural disadvantage, limited opportunities to learn, a lack of support from home, an inappropriate curriculum, or insufficient teaching in the early years. The learning problems these students experience are often further exacerbated by their emotional reactions to lack of success. These students, in the past, have been referred to as 'slow learners' and 'low achievers'. Badian (1996) even refers to them as having 'garden variety' learning problems, meaning that such difficulties are widespread and in no way unusual. We normally refer to these students now as having *general* learning difficulties. Their lack of success is evident across most areas of the school curriculum.

The population of students with learning difficulties also contains a very much smaller number of individuals described as having a specific learning disability (SpLD). Despite having at least average intelligence, these students experience chronic problems in learning basic literacy, numeracy and study skills. They may also have problems developing positive social relationships. The US National Center for Learning Disabilities (2001) defines a specific learning disability as:

... a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information. The term 'learning disability' is used to describe the unexplained difficulty a person of at least average intelligence has in acquiring basic academic skills ... [and] LD is not a single disorder. It is a term that refers to a group of disorders.

Karande et al. (2005, p. 1029) provide a rather more detailed definition, very close to the wording of the official definition adopted in the United States of America:

Specific learning disabilities (SpLD) is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significantly unexpected specific and persistent difficulties in the acquisition and use of efficient

reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia) or mathematical (dyscalculia) abilities despite conventional instruction, intact senses, normal intelligence, proper motivation, and adequate socio-cultural opportunity. The term SpLD does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of subnormal intelligence, of emotional disturbance, or of socio-cultural disadvantage.

The most obvious characteristic of students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities is their failure to acquire adequate proficiency in reading and writing. Indeed, it is their problem with literacy that most commonly brings these students to the attention of teachers and parents. Very often the students' weaknesses in literacy are accompanied by similar difficulties with basic mathematics. These problems in literacy and numeracy have a negative impact on the students' progress in almost all areas of the school curriculum. Individuals with learning difficulties also seem to lack effective learning strategies for coping with the work that teachers set for them, resulting in persistently low achievement. All three areas of weakness are acknowledged in the definition of students with learning difficulties currently used in Queensland: '... those whose access to the curriculum is limited because of short-term or persistent problems with literacy, numeracy, or learning how to learn' (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2002a, p. 1).

In describing the typical classroom response of these students, Twomey (2006, p. 93) states:

Many of these students avoid participating verbally during lessons, do not appear to take an interest in the subject matter, and do not perceive class discussions as learning opportunities. Their attitude serves as a defense mechanism which protects them from possible humiliation from giving the wrong answer and exposing their academic inadequacies.

According to Chan and van Kraayenoord (1998, p. 21):

Fundamental to an understanding of learning difficulties from an information-processing perspective is the view that these students often have difficulties with collecting, interpreting, storing, modifying and retrieving information. Specifically, they fail to spontaneously activate learning strategies or previously learned information during these cognitive operations.

There is no valid behavioural or achievement checklist that helps differentiate students with general learning difficulties from those with specific learning disability. Nor need there be such a list, because all students with classroom learning problems tend to exhibit the same range of characteristics (Kavale et al., 2005). Among the most frequently identified problems are:

- ▶ poor attention to task and to teacher's instructions, resulting in greatly reduced time spent engaged in active learning (Whedon & Bakken, 1999)
- ▶ disengagement (Rowe, 2006a)
- ▶ low self-esteem (Lerner & Kline, 2006; McCowen, 1998; Zafiriadis et al., 2005)
- ▶ dysfunctional attitude (Rowe, 2006a)
- ▶ negative behaviours (Rowe, 2006a; Zafiriadis et al., 2005)
- ▶ lack of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to promote learning (Chan & van Kraayenoord, 1998; Margolis & McCabe, 2003)
- ▶ memory and organisational problems (Hay et al., 2005)
- ▶ diminished self-efficacy (Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Lancaster, 2005; Margolis & McCabe, 2003)
- ▶ passivity and avoidance of risk-taking (Chan & van Kraayenoord, 1998; Twomey, 2006)
- ▶ learned helplessness and external locus of control (Firth et al., 2007; McCowen, 1998)
- ▶ frustration (Watson, 2005)
- ▶ loss of motivation (Watson, 2005)
- ▶ depressive tendencies (Sideridis, 2007; Zafiriadis et al., 2005).

Gifted students with a learning disability

Liddle and Porath (2002, p. 13) state that, 'The idea that a child can be both gifted and learning disabled strikes some as a paradox'. But it is clear that some students with high intellectual potential do experience significant problems with learning basic academic skills, and can be said to have 'dual exceptionalities' (giftedness and learning disability). For example, Munro (2002) suggests that up to 30 per cent of gifted students may have problems with reading such that their attainment level is several years below expectation. Other writers have focused on their chronic difficulties in writing (e.g., Milton & Lewis, 2005).

Concern has been voiced in recent years over the plight of such students, because often they are overlooked and under-served by the system (Riggs, 1999; Stewart, 2002). In addition, students of high ability are often very acutely aware of and distressed by their difficulties, leading to secondary emotional, motivational and behavioural problems. Identification of these gifted students is essential, followed by effective remedial intervention for basic skills, and coupled with personal counselling if necessary (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006). Stewart (2002) suggests that electronic assistive technology can be one helpful way of bypassing some of the students' problems, also enabling them to achieve some success and reveal their true abilities. Basically, these students require the same intensive and effective teaching methods recommended for use with other students with learning problems. These methods are described fully in later chapters.

Potential causes of a learning difficulty

Regardless of whether a learning difficulty is general or specific, and regardless of whether a student is gifted or average, several factors can cause difficulties in learning. Twomey (2006) suggests that there are three perspectives on learning difficulties and their underlying causes, each focusing on rather different factors and highlighting different characteristics in the students. These perspectives are referred to as (a) the *deficit model*, (b) the *inefficient learner model*, and (c) the *environment factors model*. It is probable that all three models are valid, and they are not mutually exclusive. In all three models, learning failure severely undermines a learner's self-esteem and confidence, and leads to secondary affective and motivational problems, as described in the next chapter.

Under the deficit model, it is assumed that learning difficulties are caused by cognitive and perceptual weaknesses within the student. These supposed cognitive deficits include below average intelligence, poor attention to task, visual and auditory processing difficulties, weak memory capacity and inadequate comprehension of the complex language used in instructional contexts. In addition, under the deficit model, disadvantages in the student's cultural or home background, such as a dysfunctional family situation, problems associated with English as a second language, low expectations, lack of support, health problems and poverty may also contribute to difficulties in learning (Abosi, 2007).