Teachers experiences with teaching children with learning difficulties: A qualitative study

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Teachers Experiences with Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: A Qualitative Study

Aleesha Morton

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Science (Psychology) Honours

Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,

Edith Cowan University

Submitted: October 2007

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Dr Lynne Cohen and Julie Ann Pooley for their guidance, advice and support throughout this year enabling me to successfully complete my research. I would also like to thank Di McKillop and Carole Gamsby for their much needed support and encouragement throughout the honours process.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to those teachers who took part in this study and the principals of the participating schools as their participation allowed me to produce a body of work that is interesting and will hopefully be of some support to teachers of students with LD. I would finally like to thank my friends, family and colleagues for their unfailing support and endless words of encouragement.
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Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: The Experiences of Primary School Teachers

Aleesha Morton

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Abstract

It is estimated that 16% of Australian primary school students suffer from a learning difficulty (LD) (Rivalland, 2000). Teachers are expected to provide these students with the specialised education they need. However, teachers have reported that they face numerous challenges to provide LD students with the support needed, which may result in them experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety. These challenges include problems with identification of the specific difficulty and the most appropriate intervention programs to implement, a lack of preservice education and training, insufficient resources and funding specific to students with LD. Awareness and understanding of these challenges may help teachers to manage the associated stressors, ultimately increasing teacher well being and the standard of education received by both LD and non LD students.

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Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: The Experiences of Primary School Teachers

Introduction and Focus of the Review

Children who possessed learning difficulties in Australia were not recognised as requiring specialised education until the late 1960's (Jenkinson, 2006). These students have been described as having difficulties with school learning with no evidence of intellectual, physical or sensory problems (Jenkinson, 2006). It is currently estimated that 16% of primary school aged children in Western Australia exhibit learning difficulties (Department of Education and Training, 2006). Despite this level of prevalence, there is no widely accepted definition of what constitutes a learning difficulty (LD) (Dockrell & McShane, 1992, p 3; Louden, 2000). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) states that a learning disorder may be present “when the individual’s achievement on individually administered and standardised tests in mathematics, reading or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling and level of intelligence” (p.49). Further, the DSM-IV-TR states that for an LD to be diagnosed the problem must severely interfere with academic achievement or activities such as reading, writing and/or mathematical skills, and that an LD may be diagnosed when the problems do not result from a physical disability, genetic predisposition, perinatal injury or neurological condition.

The above description indicates that a learning difficulty is indicated by poor academic achievement as opposed to a difficulty possessed due to physical, intellectual or sensory deficits, similar to that provided by the definition posed in the 1960’s. The terms “students at risk”, “learning disabled”, and “students who are having difficulties in literacy and/or numeracy” have all been used to describe the same cohort of individuals (Rivalland, 2000). The word “disability” is being used less often to describe children with learning problems as educators and policy-making institutions have increasingly stated that the word ‘disability’ carries negative
connotations and such a label may be detrimental to the child’s overall social or academic
development (Rivalland, 2000).

Studies examining the prevalence of specific types of LD in Australian primary schools
have indicated that literacy problems are the most frequently seen learning difficulty followed by
language, numeracy and behaviour problems (Westwood & Graham, 2000). These specific
learning problems often demonstrate comorbidity with other disorders; particularly behavioural
problems (Cullinan, Epstein, & Lloyd, 1981; Rivalland, 2000). Primary school teachers
endeavour to provide their students with a high quality level of education and the necessary skills
needed for success in future schooling (Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, & McDougal, 2006). However,
teachers are often presented with issues that hinder their ability to provide effective education for
students with LD (Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, & McDougal, 2006).

The following literature review will demonstrate that teachers face numerous challenges
and barriers when teaching students with learning difficulties. The key issues in teaching children
with learning difficulties presented by the literature review include LD identification, inclusivity,
effective treatment programs for children with LD, preservice education for teachers and working
with the parents of children with LD. Each of these areas will be discussed in detail. Further, this
review will highlight the needs of teachers and their recommendations for change. The overall
purpose of this paper is to provide readers with information to increase awareness of the issues
and concerns of teachers in relation to teaching children with LD, ultimately promoting
suggestions for change to enhance teachers’ ability to provide a high level of education to their
students.

Identification of Learning Difficulties

Teachers are often expected to assess, diagnose and help students overcome their learning
difficulties in a timely fashion (Jenkinson, 2006). Given that there are many definitions of what
constitutes a learning difficulty, the identification of and provision of services for students experiencing these difficulties is likely to present problems for teachers (Milton & Rohl, 1998; Rivalland, 2000; Westwood & Graham, 2000). Furthermore, teachers of early primary classes often feel pressure to ensure that children with LD are identified in the initial years of their schooling and the problems remedied before progressing to further grades (Rivalland, 2000). The combination of pressure and absence of operational definitions is likely to present teachers with issues surrounding accurate identification.

The importance of understanding this dilemma of identification was highlighted in a study by Milton and Rohl (1998). These researchers interviewed and surveyed 230 teachers to determine their understanding regarding the identification of children with LD. The teachers were based in pre-primary, grade one and grade two classes in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Consistent with prevalence estimates presented by the Department of Education and Training of WA (2006) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (1990), teachers reported 14% of their students as possessing a learning and/or behaviour problem. Of this 14%, the majority of children had difficulties with language (65.9% of students), followed by social problems (46.6% of students) and cognitive problems (44.9%). The teachers also indicated that the children of concern often presented with more than one of the preceding problems, which was problematic when trying to develop and adapt programs to suit the varying needs of the students.

The teachers in this study were asked to describe the types and nature of the programs they wanted to see operating for the LD students. Many (78.6%) of the responses related to the desire to have access to programs which may assist in the diagnosis of the specific difficulty either through additional training or professional help. Teachers reiterated the importance of early diagnosis and the need for this additional assistance to aid early and accurate diagnosis. Given that much of the responsibility for identifying the LDs in students falls to the teachers, these
question whether the current methods used by the teachers were adequate and accurate in identifying these children. A limitation of the study was that the teaching experience of the participating teachers was not taken into account. Those teachers who had many years of experience may have been better equipped to identify children with LD than those teachers who had little or no prior teaching experience. This information would have provided valuable insight as to how experience affected the need for additional training or assistance. A further limitation was that the teachers were not asked which diagnostic methods they currently employed and therefore no comment can be made concerning their reliability and validity. Therefore, the accuracy of the numbers of children being diagnosed is questionable due to the uncertainty of the methods employed by these teachers.

Accurate prevalence rates are particularly important in relation to funding and the provision of resources and specialist support for children with LD (Rivalland, 2000; Westwood & Graham, 2000). Prevalence estimates are based on enrolment data, research surveys, information collected by state education departments and figures reported in the relevant literature. This highlights the need for accurate and valid prevalence data to be produced by studies into LD. Rivalland (2000) stated that given a lack of set definitions for LD and methods for diagnosis, schools may form their own definitions, identification measures and prevalence data which may shape the services students receive. This may be detrimental where prevalence numbers are underestimated (Rivalland, 2000).

This issue was further demonstrated in a study by Westwood and Graham (2000) who investigated the prevalence of LD in primary school classes in two Australia states (South Australia and New South Wales), as well as the provision of services they received for these children. A total of 77 teachers completed a questionnaire pertaining to the prevalence of students with special needs and the provision of funding and support services available to these students.
The South Australian (SA) teachers reported a special needs prevalence rate of 33.6% (353 of 1050); however, 36.5% of these students were not receiving any specialist or support services, as they were deemed “ineligible”. The New South Wales (NSW) teachers reported a special needs prevalence rate of 28.1% (244 of 869 students), with 24.6% of these students not receiving support. The difficulties experienced by the students not receiving support included literacy difficulties (47.3%), language difficulties (26.4%) and numeracy difficulties (11.6%).

The “ineligible” SA students did not receive additional support as they were not included or recognised under the definitions in the policy or provision of services for students with physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, and thus were not provided with specialist services or negotiated curriculum plans (NCP’s). There were no explicit reasons given for why the NSW students were ineligible for services, which demonstrated a substantial gap in the research. An interesting fact presented in this study was that some students classed as having LD were provided with additional support such as NCP’s and support teachers. There were no reasons provided for why these students received support whilst the others did not, however this may be due to the severity of the LD. By not providing reasons for the differing levels of support, the study presents further uncertainty in terms of identification, particularly in relation to which students warrant specialist support.

Despite these limitations, a key finding of the study was that the total number of students suffering from LD (those supported and those unsupported) produced a figure of 20%, higher than 10-16% estimate produced by other Australian studies (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1990; Rivalland, 2000). If the support received by the schools in this study was based on previous prevalence estimates, this may also explain why only a certain number of children were receiving specialised services, in that the funding or support may have been
limited. This may suggest the need for a review of prevalence estimates in order to provide adequate funding and/or services required to support both the students and the teachers.

A further study that demonstrates the concern of how the severity of the LD may contribute to differing levels of support was conducted by Bartak and Fry (2004). They investigated the prevalence of children with LD, and the level of support provided to these children and unlike the study by Westwood and Graham (2000), illustrated how the severity of LDs may influence funded support. A total of 60 teachers from Victorian schools completed a questionnaire eliciting information pertaining to the types of LD experienced by students, and whether these students received funded support and the type of support perceived as necessary. The results show that the teachers identified 181 (out of 1505) students as being students with special needs. Of the total number of 1505 students, 10% were identified as having LDs and 5.7% with behavioural disorders. Of these students, 20% were receiving special education funding support whilst the remaining 80% were not. The teachers were asked to indicate the extent of the difficulties (mild, moderate or severe) experienced by these students and how many were receiving funded support. The results showed that the children perceived as having moderate or severe LD were more likely to receive funded support than those with mild LD (Severe: 7.2%, moderate: 6.6%, mild: 2.8%).

This distinction between the above categories was not apparent for students with behavioural disorders. The funded support for children with these differing levels of LDs was relatively even (severe: 2.8%, moderate: 3.9%, mild: 3.3%). Whilst this study suggested that the severity of a LD or behavioural disorder may in fact influence funded support, there were no explanations for how the teachers made the distinction between categories of severity, how the level of severity specifically affected funded support or why the overall differences in funded support were apparent. This information would have been beneficial in identifying the measures used to
categorise students with differing levels of LD and/or behavioural disorders and the importance of the severity of the classification in relation to the provision of funded support.

It is worthy to note that in both the Bartak and Fry (2004) and Westwood and Graham (2000) studies, boys with LDs outnumbered the girls by approximately six to one. Milton and Rohl (1998) explained that this difference might result from boys exhibiting more overt behavioural signs of a difficulty such as frustration and impulsivity. This may also explain why boys are more frequently diagnosed with behavioural disorders than learning difficulties (Bartak & Fry, 2004). In terms of funding, the results of the Westwood and Graham (2000) study showed that more boys in SA and NSW received funded support than girls; however, these numbers were relative to the overall prevalence rates. In the Bartak and Fry (2004) study, almost an equal number of boys and girls (17 and 18 respectively) received funded support despite boys with LD and behavioural disorders outnumbering girls 151 to 30. Given that these studies were conducted in different states, these results warrant further investigation into the degree to which the allocation of funded support differs between states.

As the aforementioned studies have demonstrated, identification of LDs is difficult because of the lack of a consensus in a definition of what constitutes LDs or how to identify students with LD. Further, these difficulties with identification may in turn provide problems with producing accurate prevalence estimates, which may influence the level of funded support received. In addition, another key issue highlighted in the literature was the concept of inclusivity, which is described in the following section.

Inclusive classes

During the early 1960’s, students with LDs in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia were placed in special education classes designed to deliver the education they needed (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981; Jenkinson, 2006; Rivalland, 2000). The perceived advantages of
these segregated classes were smaller class sizes, curriculum focused on the specific needs of the students and the opportunity for teachers to provide individualised instruction (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981; Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, & McDougal, 2006). In 1975, a federal act calling for LD students to be educated in regular classrooms (the “Education for All Handicapped Children” act) was introduced in the United States of America, with other western countries such as Australia subsequently introducing similar legislation (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981; Jenkinson, 2006). This integration of LD students was known as “mainstreaming” or “inclusivity” (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981). It was believed that integrating students with LD into mainstream classes was of benefit to them both academically and socially (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Jenkinson, 2006; Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, & McDougal, 2006).

This issue was highlighted in a study by Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, and McDougal (2006) who explored the academic outcomes of American students with LDs (mean age 11.16 years) who were taught in either special education or mainstream classes. The students were required to complete achievement tests in reading and maths ability as well as general intelligence measures. The results showed that students in the mainstream setting performed better on both group and individual reading measures, however, there were no significant differences between the groups for the maths measures. A limitation of the study was that the researchers could not explain the apparent differences in maths and reading ability. This may be due to factors such as method of instruction and/or the severity or type of LD. Neither of these problems were addressed. Furthermore, students were only tested once and no reference points were available for comparison.

This controversy between whether mainstreaming or special education classes provided the best outcome for students was further investigated by Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld, and Karsten (2001). In this research, 216 students (between eight and nine years old) with learning and
behavioural difficulties from both mainstream and special education classes completed academic tests to determine their abilities in areas such as language and mathematics as well as cognitive and psychosocial development. Two beneficial features of this study were: first, the students’ teachers were interviewed concerning curriculum content, and second, the study was longitudinal with students being tested after a period of two years and then after a period of four years. The investigation of curriculum content was essential, as differentiated content is likely to influence test scores. This influencing factor was therefore taken into account when interpreting the test results, providing an accurate reflection of the academic differences between the students from each class.

The longitudinal design was beneficial as it demonstrated the long-term academic and developmental achievements of the students in each class. It would be difficult to determine which class produced better outcomes based on the results of one test only as any number of factors could influence testing on that day. By examining the results after 2 and 4 years respectively, the researchers were able to compare the achievements gained or lost in that time, allowing them to provide measured results as to which class produced better outcomes.

The results of the Peetsma et al. (2001) research showed that for the duration of the study the LD students in the mainstream class performed significantly better on the maths and language measures than their matched partners in the special education class. Further, there were no significant differences between the two groups of students in terms of psychosocial development; however, the special education students showed slightly higher motivation scores than those in the mainstream class at the end of the four-year study. These results give merit to the aforementioned claims made by researchers (e.g., Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Jenkinson, 2006) that students with LD or behavioural disorders are likely to benefit academically from inclusive schooling.
Teachers’ perceptions of children with LD were investigated in a study by Cullinan, Epstein, and Lloyd (1981). Teachers of LD and non-LD students were asked to complete scales rating the behaviour problems of both groups of students. The results showed that the LD students were perceived to show more behavioural problems than non LD students, with male LD students perceived as exhibiting more problem behaviours than female LD students, a result seen in the aforementioned studies by Westwood and Graham (2000) and Bartak and Fry (2004). The LD students were perceived as being more anxious, participated less and had poorer self-confidence than the non-LD students.

This study used teacher-rating scales to measure problem behaviours because as stated by the researchers, teacher-rating scales show high psychometric features, such as interrater agreement; they are less complex and time consuming than other methods and teacher perceptions appear to be accurate indicators of behaviour and learning problems. In this study teachers rated their own students, thus they were aware of students with LDs. This awareness may have influenced the ratings provided by the teachers in that the severity of their behaviours may have been exaggerated, reducing the accuracy of the results. This potential bias could have been overcome if rating scales were also completed by teachers who had no contact with the students and thus no awareness of whether they did or did not possess an LD. The rating scales from both teachers could have then been compared to see whether awareness of LDs influenced the results.

The development of social skills is also a necessary function of schooling (Anhalt, McNeil, & Bahl, 1998). Adequate social skills provide students with the ability to interact positively in social situations, which is important in classroom settings where students are often required to effectively interact with peers (Bryan & Pflaum, 1978). Some researchers have stated that inclusive schooling may give rise to issues such as classroom disruption by LD students resulting from behavioural deficits or differential treatment (Frederickson & Furnham, 1998). This often
results in LD students experiencing social exclusion and bullying by peers and some teachers (Anhalt, McNeil, & Bahl, 1998; Cullinan, Epstein, & Lloyd, 1981). This has been supported through research by Horowitz (1981) who conducted a study in which LD and non LD students completed tasks assessing their decentering ability, or the ability to take another person's viewpoint. The LD students performed worse on the decentering tasks than the non LD students, indicating that the LD students were less able to understand or take on viewpoints other than their own. These results provided a potential reason for why LD students often experience social difficulties as they may appear to be egocentric not being able to identify with other students.

This area has been researched by Bryan and Pflaum (1978) who conducted a study in Chicago exploring possible reasons why students with LD experience social difficulties. They hypothesised that given that a large number of LD students possess problems with language and experience social difficulties, language competency may play a large role in situations demanding interpersonal communication. The study involved fourteen LD and fourteen non-LD students matched on gender and race providing instructions for how to play a video game that they had learnt earlier that day. They individually provided instructions to classmates and to students from a kindergarten class. The LD and non-LD students were assessed for instructional accuracy, social content (e.g., positive conversation and feedback) as well as incompetence (e.g., giving misinformation or negative feedback).

The results showed that the non-LD students provided accurate information and positive social content to classmates and kindergarten students. The LD students provided positive instruction and social content to the kindergarten students only, providing classmates with complex instructions, competitive statements and incompetent actions such as awkward motor acts. These incompetent behaviours were regarded as an attempt by the LD students to engage and maintain social communication. However, given their less adequate linguistic skills, these
attempts actually resulted in high levels of frustration and a negative interaction. A factor that may have influenced the results is familiarity. The participants knew the students they would be instructing which may have provoked feelings of anxiety in the LD students, particularly if they felt unaccepted by these students. The results of this study indicated that linguistic skills might contribute to the social exclusion of LD students.

The previous studies have highlighted the perceived advantages and disadvantages of mainstreaming students with LD. Overall the research has indicated that students in mainstream classes perform better academically than those in special education classes, however, there is the potential for these students to experience social difficulties when mainstreamed. The results of the research studies have provided a need for teachers and other education specialists to provide interventions for LD students that aim to reduce the social adversities faced by these students whilst improving academic skills. It should be noted that another area of concern raised in the literature concerns the development and implementation of programs to remediate the problems experienced by children with LD.

*Intervention Programs and Preservice Education*

In school intervention programs aimed at reducing students’ learning problems usually requires the provision of specialised education over and above the normal curriculum (Dockrell & McShane, 1992). Intervention or specialised programs for students with LD have been defined as a set of actions designed to influence the course of development, with an improvement in academic ability and achievement as the main goal of the program (Dockrell & McShane, 1992). Identifying a child’s particular difficulty, how that difficulty is manifested and how to tackle these difficulties is of little avail to teachers if they are unaware of appropriate intervention programs (Dockrell & McShane, 1992).
Teachers have a difficult task identifying intervention programs to implement in order to meet the needs of LD students (Rowe, 2006; Scott & Spencer, 2006). However, research evidence based interventions are one area to consider initially (Lembke & Stormont, 2005). Many of these types of programs are available. For example, a program that has achieved international successes in literacy is the “Reading Recovery” program, currently implemented in some Australian, American, Canadian and New Zealand primary schools. The program provides individualised instruction increasing awareness of phonemes and letter sound patterns (Milton & Rohl, 1998). The program has been shown to be effective in helping younger students correct difficulties before their problems become too serious (Centre, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred & McNaughton, 1995; Shanahan & Barr, 1995). A similar program designed to improve the literacy skills of primary school students is the “Australasian Readwell Program” (Hyde & Hughes, 2000). The program focuses on students’ attention to the relationships between the written form of words and their spoken forms (Hyde & Hughes, 2000).

The effectiveness of the Readwell program in improving literacy skills was investigated by Hyde and Hughes (2000). The participants in the study were years six and seven students from a Queensland primary school with reading delays. The program was implemented for 45 minutes daily for ten weeks. The children were assessed for literacy gains at the end of the ten-week period. In addition, teachers were required to complete rating scales as to the progress of their students. The results indicated that at the completion of the ten-week program, 16 of the 17 students had made gains in literacy, with eleven increasing their reading age by up to 11.8 months and two increasing their reading age by up to 21 months. Teachers stated that these students had improved self-confidence at the completion of the study, likely due to perceived competence. This increased self-confidence may benefit students in terms of social skills. This is
shows the ability of the program to improve academic skills without jeopardising social skills which is important for LD students (Cullinan, Epstein, & Lloyd, 1981).

Despite there being effective programs and interventions available for use, studies have revealed that some teachers feel ill prepared to utilise these programs or provide any form of extra assistance to students with LD (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Milton & Rohl, 1998; Rohl & Greaves, 2005). A recent study by Rohl and Greaves (2005) investigated how teachers in Australia were being prepared to teach numeracy and literacy, particularly to those students with LD. A total of 1300 preservice and senior teachers in four states of Australia completed surveys concerning their preparedness to teach literacy and numeracy. More than one third of the preservice teachers reported that they felt ill prepared to teach any aspect of literacy and one-quarter felt ill prepared to teach any aspect of numeracy. The senior teachers reported that they were more prepared to teach both literacy and numeracy, believed to be the result of experience.

In terms of preparedness for teaching diverse students (namely those with LD), 54% of the preservice teachers surveyed felt ill prepared to teach LD students with literacy problems. Further, 45% of the preservice teachers surveyed felt ill equipped to teach LD students with numeracy problems. Of the senior staff surveyed, 17% felt ill equipped to teach LD students with literacy problems, and 18% felt unable to teach LD students with numeracy problems. Indeed the researchers cited knowledge gained from on the job experience as a reason for these differences. Given these results, the researchers investigated the education received by preservice teachers at Australian universities in relation to teaching a diverse range of students. They found that most of teacher training courses addressed the concepts and issues of LDs for one or two lectures only, and there were no specific suggestions as to how best to remediate the problems experienced by LD students.
Reasons provided by teacher trainer lecturers cited a lack of expertise in the area and did not want to misinform the trainee teachers. They also argued that it was the responsibility of lecturers teaching specialised units in special needs or learning difficulties; and that there was not enough time to prepare preservice teachers for every eventuality. Given that similar findings were identified across the four different states, it is reasonable to suggest that the results of this study may reflect the experiences of a large number of teachers across Australia. If this is the case, it indicates a need for universities to devote more time to LD education and a possible need for preservice teachers to complete clinical units or placements prior to being employed, where they are able to learn effective teaching practices for students with LD.

These results were supported by a similar study conducted in Ireland. Gash (2006) interviewed fifty preservice teachers assessing how prepared they felt to teach students with LD. The majority of teachers stated they did not feel adequately equipped to provide LD students with the differentiated education that they needed. Further, the teachers expressed that they also felt ill equipped to deal with students who exhibit difficult behaviour, which is often seen in conjunction with LD. The teachers stated that they did not possess the classroom management skills to cater to the diverse needs of every student in their class. In terms of better preparedness to teach LD students, the preservice teachers suggested that they should participate in a special school so that they might gain experience in managing a diverse classroom. Despite being a smaller study than that conducted in Australia, these results lend support to the notion that preservice teachers may not be receiving adequate information and training they may need to effectively manage diversity in student ability and suggests that the problem may be widespread.

Preservice education is important in providing teachers with the skills they need to operate their classroom effectively and provide them with the required training and education. When preservice education does not provide teachers with the necessary tools, it is the students in
the classroom who are likely to be disadvantaged. Farkota (2005) stated that many cases of LD and/or underachievement may be attributed to inappropriate or insufficient teaching, which may result from poor preservice education. These issues are likely to increase the pressure and stress felt by teachers to provide adequate support and assistance for their students. The impact of stress on teachers is addressed in the following section.

**Teacher stress**

Stress may result from difficult or excessive demands on teachers in areas where they feel they are inadequately trained. For example, such as areas which have been previously discussed including the diagnosis of children with LD and the necessity to provide differentiated education for those students (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). Bartlett (2004) stated that teaching is complex, emotional and draining work involving long hours outside of the classroom. Australian and American studies have identified work overload, role overload, insufficient resources, interpersonal relations and insufficient time for work, as potential sources of teacher stress (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Bartlett, 2004; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Milton & Rohl, 1998).

For example, Burchielli and Bartram (2006) conducted a study exploring the current sources of stress for teachers in a Victorian primary school. Teachers participated in interviews designed to identify their current issues and stressors. The stressors reported by teachers related to behaviour management, inadequate support structures, and pressure produced by demands placed on their personal and professional resources. The teachers also reported an increased workload due to trying to provide LD students with the education they need. These results are similar to those seen in studies conducted in the US, with teachers identifying work overload, job responsibility, pressures due to teacher attrition, and feeling unsupported and unprepared as key stressors (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). These results show that the stressors experienced by teachers may be seen across similar Western countries. This may be
due to similar government policy, allocation of resources and funding and factors associated with mainstream education.

Another commonly cited teacher stressor is the parents of their students, and more specifically, the parents of students with LD and/or behavioural disorders (Bailey, 2001; Burrows, 2004; Gash, 2006; Williams, 1999). The role of the parent in child learning is important in providing the child with academic support outside of school (DET, 2006). However, teachers have stated that due to previous unpleasant experiences, they often felt vulnerable and anxious about meeting the parents of students with LD or behavioural disorders (Gash, 2006). Further, there is little preservice education pertaining to parent contact (Katz, 1996; Rohl & Greaves, 2005). The parents of students with LD and/or behavioural disorders face difficulties and strong emotions when dealing with issues concerning the education of their child, and this often inhibits their ability to communicate effectively with their child’s teacher (Burrows, 2004).

Having completed numerous case studies concerning parent/teacher interactions, Burrows (2004), provided a framework for preservice and current teachers as to how they can effectively communicate with parents of children with LD and/or behavioural disorders. This framework is entitled “compassionate communication”, and adopts approaches such as; teachers assuming a more open position, as opposed to a position of professional distance, being genuine and compassionate, practicing empathic listening, and using emotional intelligence and non-violent communication. Burrows stated that parents should also adopt some of these stances to express positively their opinions and feelings, ultimately working with the teacher to form strategies aimed at helping the child overcome their difficulties. The benefit of this framework is that it can be easily accessed by teachers and the approaches can be effectively applied to other interpersonal situations such a communicating with colleagues.
Teachers are able to assist parents in providing their child with the necessary support and appropriately designed resources to continue the child's academic or behavioural development at home (Williams, 1999). These resources may include tasks, worksheets, or behavioural interventions designed to reduce aggressive behaviour. By enlisting the parent's help to provide the out of school support, the parent is likely to become aware of the abilities and needs of their child, as well as having increased responsibility for their academic and behavioural outcomes, which may reduce the demands on the teacher (Williams, 1999).

Studies have shown the common stressors experienced by teachers are that of role overload, time constraints, lack of preservice education, negative parental interaction and a lack of resources (Bartlett, 2004; Gash, 2006; Williams, 1999). Further, these stressors may be increased when teaching children with LD and/or behavioural disorders (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). Teachers have recognised that stress is unavoidable in their profession; however, increasing demands and pressures (particularly role overload) are shown to have a negative effect on their general wellbeing (Burchielli & Bartram, 2004; Huebner, 1993; Milton & Rohl, 1998).

These demands and pressures may result in the teacher experiencing "burnout", a term used to describe emotional and physical exhaustion (Huebner, 1993). Individuals who have not received adequate training to fulfil their various roles and functions are more prone to burnout (Huebner, 1993). Given that a large number of teachers throughout Australia have expressed that they feel ill prepared to educate students with LD or provide specialised interventions, it is these teachers that may experience burnout if they do not receive the support and resources they need. To reduce the likelihood of burnout, it is essential that teachers are adequately supported in both a professional and personal manner.

*Teacher support*
Many of the studies already described have commented that teachers have requested extra support in relation to teaching LD students (Milton & Rohl, 1998; Rohl & Greaves, 2005). They requested extra support/special education teachers, more funding for students with LD, improved preservice training, training programs and resource materials aimed at how to identify and instruct LD students. Whilst these requests all pertain to classroom support, social support is one area of importance that may assist teachers cope with the stressors they encounter (Sarros & Sarros, 1992). The first level of social support within a school for a teacher struggling to cope is the principal and other teachers (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). Teachers often approach principals for extra assistance and/or resources and other teachers for advice based on experience (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). Outside of school, teachers like most other professionals would likely rely on social support from family and friends to manage difficult situations (Sarros & Sarros, 1992).

Social support and burnout amongst teachers was investigated by Sarros and Sarros (1992). A total of 491 Victorian teachers completed surveys questioning the level of social support received from colleagues, friends and family. The results indicated that strong social support from the school principal resulted in reduced teacher stress and burnout. Social support from family and friends also reduced burnout, but not to the same extent as the support of the principal. The principal is able to directly alleviate the situation by providing extra resource materials. These results contradicted other studies where social support was actually seen to increase stress and the likelihood of burnout (Brenner, Sorbom, & Wallius, 1985).

The social support received by 72 Swedish teachers from their colleagues was investigated by Brenner, Sorbom and Wallius (1985). Interestingly, many teachers cited their principal and colleagues as being contributors to the stress they experienced, rather than acting as a provider of support. Support from family and friends was not investigated by Brenner, Sorbom
and Wallius, which was a limitation of the study. It would have been interesting to note whether the friends and family provided enough support to reduce the likelihood of burnout in those teachers who experienced stress as a result of interactions with colleagues. The results of these studies demonstrate that the level and effectiveness of social support is likely to differ from workplace to workplace. In addition, it is reasonable to suggest that the nature of the interactions between teachers and their colleagues are determined by current school issues such as funding and resource allocation and the aforementioned stressors such as time constraints and inadequate preservice education. Collectively these internal and external stressors may result in teachers interacting negatively with colleagues, increasing the prospect of burnout.

The provision of social support to teachers is not limited to that provided by colleagues, family and friends. State education departments can often provide teachers with resources and support concerning numeracy and literacy programs for children with LD, as well as definitions of LD and centres specialising in the management of LD (DET, 2006). The Education Department of Western Australia (DET, 2007) outlines a ten-point action plan aimed at improving services and resources for teachers of inclusive classrooms. Some key areas for action outlined in the plan include extra funding and resources for students with LD, improved information and support materials for teachers and parents and more effective statewide specialist services for students with LD. These areas for action target those issues frequently mentioned by teachers across Australia as problem areas or areas for improvement (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006; Milton & Rohl, 1998). This demonstrates that there is an awareness of the current issues facing teachers and appropriate steps are being taken to address their concerns.

Adequate social support is crucial for teachers to reduce stress and the likelihood of burnout. Given the various stressors experienced by teachers within their class or school, support from colleagues and senior staff such as the principal is important. These individuals are able to
provide advice as well as implement changes (particularly senior staff) to help teachers cope with the demands of their work. Adequate support from state departments is also important given that they are able to provide resources and funding that cannot be provided solely by the school and its staff.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers face a number of adversities when teaching children with learning difficulties. The current review highlighted that these may include problems with identification of LDs, inclusion, preservice education and contact with parents. Teachers need appropriate strategies to manage these challenges so they are able to provide a quality education to all their students (Bartak & Fry, 2004). Providing teachers with the resources and support they need will go some way to assist teachers to develop a sound relationship with their students, and promote positive developmental outcomes such as social, emotional and school-related adjustment (Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

Opportunities for further research in the area of teaching and LD include studies or reviews of current LD identification measures being used by teachers. This would demonstrate what and how identification measures are being implemented within schools and whether these measures are reliable and/or accurate in diagnosing LD. Accurate diagnosis and prevalence rates are important given that funding and resource allocation is dependent on these rates. Some studies identified that the prevalence rate of LD may be higher than estimated (Westwood & Graham, 2000), providing a rationale for LD prevalence rates to be reassessed to see if the frequency has increased. Furthermore, understanding the precise role and nature of social skills of LD students will help determine the diversity of interventions required by this group. Little current research in this area is available.
This review suggested that the preservice education offered by tertiary institutions in relation to education about LD needs to be examined. Teachers have expressed that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared to identify students with LD, provide them with the differentiated education they needed or were able to discuss the nature of the student's LD with their parents (Katz, 1996; Rohl & Greaves, 2005). Given the extent of LDs in Australia, it is surprising that there is little preservice education in the area (Rivalland, 2000).

Numerous studies document the negative or disadvantageous experiences of teachers, with little investigation as to the positive experiences of teachers. Only one study referred to positive experiences encountered by teachers. Teachers in the Burchielli and Bartram (2006) study expressed that they felt feelings of loyalty and attachment to their students and the school, and satisfied when they had produced positive change in children with LD and/or behavioural disorders. Teachers may overlook subtle positive experiences in the face of the more obvious negative experiences or problems. Uncovering the positive experiences encountered by teachers would provide a less biased perspective of teaching that is presented by many studies pertaining to teacher experiences.

Teachers are valuable professionals within the community as they have the ability to shape the academic and social future of their students. However, due to current issues concerning a lack of resources and underdeveloped skills, they are struggling to provide both the LD and non-LD students with the education they believe they deserve and need. In order to improve teacher well being and the education received by students, school staff and government departments should work together to address these significant issues.
References


http://ies.det.wa.edu.au/content/themes/providing-statewide-specialist-services/centre-for-inclusive-schooling


Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: The Experiences of Primary School Teachers in South West Australia

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Edith Cowan University
Abstract

The teachers of children with learning difficulties (LD) face numerous challenges when endeavouring to provide them with the specialised education that they need. This qualitative study explored the experiences of teachers of children with LD in the south west of Western Australia. Seven teachers from three primary schools in the Bunbury region were interviewed. The teachers requested a need for extra support, professional development, and resources so as to provide LD students with the individualised attention they need. A lack of preservice training in teaching students with LD often resulted in teachers developing their own strategies to enhance the learning of those students. The teachers also described a number of positives when teaching students with LD, including feelings of satisfaction and achievement when those students progressed academically. The key limitation of the study is the number of participants, with opportunities for future research in relation to the experiences of teachers of LD students in regional versus metropolitan schools.
Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: The Experiences of Primary School Teachers in Southwest Australia

It is currently estimated that 10-16% of primary school aged children in Western Australia suffer from a learning difficulty (Department of Education and Training, 2006). A learning difficulty (LD) is defined by The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) as being present when “the individual’s achievement on individually administered and standardised tests in mathematics, reading or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling and level of intelligence” (p.49). The terms “learning disability”, “special needs” and “students at risk” have also been used to describe the same cohort of individuals (van Kraayenoord & Elkins, 2004). However, the term “learning difficulties” is more commonly used to describe a broad range of individuals or groups, without labelling students as having a specific problem, which is a drawback of some of the other commonly used terms (Elkins, 2000; Rivalland, 2000).

Studies investigating the prevalence of LD in primary schools have shown literacy problems to be the most frequently occurring followed by language, numeracy and behaviour problems (Westwood & Graham, 2000). These specific learning problems often demonstrate comorbidity with other disorders, particularly behavioural problems (Cullinan, Epstein, & Lloyd, 1981; Rivalland, 2000). Children with comorbid learning and behavioural disorders are often aggressive and impulsive disrupting their ability to learn (Hammill & Bartel, 1990, Rivalland, 2000). These deficits could prove problematic where children with LD are mainstreamed into “regular” classrooms (Frederickson & Furnham, 1998). In Western Australia, children with LD have the right to inclusive (mainstreamed) schooling (DET, 2007). Children diagnosed with LDs are mainstreamed and placed in classrooms where students are taught by the education teacher, not a special education teacher (MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996).
Primary school teachers are often faced with the task of identifying those children with LD's (Lerner, 2000). There is much emphasis on early identification of LDs and the need for effective intervention programs to be put in place to overcome any difficulties before the child progresses to higher grades. A number of Australian and international studies have been conducted exploring the teaching of children with LD's (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Burchielli & Bartram, 2006; Milton & Rohl, 1998; Rohl & Greaves, 2005). These studies have provided insight into teachers' experiences in relation to the teaching of children with LD. The key themes which emerged from these studies included issues with identification of students with LDs, provision of adequate resources, support for classroom teachers, preservice training and the role of parents of the children with LD.

The accurate diagnosis of a student with LD is essential as the level of funding and/or support received by the child with the LD is often based on its type and severity (Westwood & Graham, 2000). However, the accurate diagnosis of an LD is made difficult for teachers due to differing definitions of the term "learning difficulty" and a lack of set diagnostic measures which may be used in identifying the LD (Milton & Rohl, 1998). In a study by Milton and Rohl (1998), 230 Western Australian primary school teachers were interviewed in relation to their experiences with identification and diagnosis of LD's. Many of the teachers (78%) requested a need for extra support to identify children with LD. The teachers suggested that they required additional training and expertise in LD identification via specific programs or an LD specialist would be beneficial and may result in a more accurate diagnosis.

Similarly a study by Bartak and Fry (2004) investigated the identification of children with LDs and how the perceived severity of LD's influenced funded support. A total of 60 Victorian teachers participated in the study, completing a questionnaire pertaining to the prevalence of LDs within their class, the severity of the LDs and the funded support received. It was shown that
10% of students presented with an LD, with one fifth of these students receiving funded support. The teachers were asked to indicate the severity of the LDs experienced by the students and how this affected funding. The results showed that the children diagnosed with moderate or severe LDs received more funded support than those with mild LDs. Whilst these differences suggest that the severity of an LD may influence allocation of funded support, there were no explanations for how the teachers made the distinction between categories of severity. This is concerning as some students with LDs may be failing to benefit from funding due to flaws in identification such as where severity category boundaries lie.

Along with problems with identification, several studies have also demonstrated issues with mainstreaming students with LDs (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981; Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, & McDougal, 2006). Students were placed in mainstream classes with the belief that it would of academic benefit. This was confirmed in a longitudinal study by Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld, and Karsten (2001) with 216 LD students in mainstream classes performing better in maths and language over a four year period than their matched partners in a segregated class. These findings are supported by Signor-Buhl, LeBlanc, and McDougal (2006) who reported that LD students in mainstream classes performed better on both individual and group language tasks than matched students in a segregated class.

Given results such as those presented by the two studies already described, it would appear that providing LD students with the education they need to improve their academic ability is relatively easy. However, choosing which programs to utilise in order to facilitate academic achievement has been shown to be quite challenging for teachers (Rowe, 2006). In terms of literacy development, research based programs that have produced positive results for LD students, (such as the “Reading Recovery” program which provides specialised instruction increasing awareness of phonemes and letter sound patterns), are a good starting point for
issues Experienced by Teachers of LD Students 35
teachers (Hyde & Hughes, 2000; Lembke & Stormont, 2005; Milton & Rohl, 1998). However, despite such programs being available for use, research has shown that some teachers feel ill prepared to utilise specialised programs or provide LD students with the assistance they need (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Milton & Rohl, 1998; Rohl & Greaves, 2005).

A study by Rohl and Greaves (2005) investigated how 1300 preservice and senior teachers across four Australian states felt about their ability to teach students with LD. A total of 54% of the preservice teachers felt unprepared to teach LD students with literacy problems, and 45% felt unprepared to teach LD students with numeracy problems. The percentage of senior teachers who felt not adequately prepared was substantially smaller than that of the preservice teachers. A total of 17% felt ill equipped to teach LD students with literacy problems and 18% felt ill equipped to teach LD students with numeracy problems. The explanation provided by the researchers for the observed differences between the preservice and senior teachers was that the senior teachers were better prepared due to the knowledge gained from in school experience throughout the years.

These feelings of inadequacy to provide LD students with the education they need adds further pressure to that already felt by teachers in relation to early identification and accurate diagnosis. The pressure of providing LD students with the education they need coupled with the everyday demands of teaching has been shown to produce high levels of stress amongst teachers (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). Studies have identified role overload, insufficient resources, interpersonal relations and insufficient time for work as potential sources of teacher stress (Bartak & Fry, 2004; Bartlett, 2004; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). Teacher stress was investigated in a study by Burchielli and Bartram (2006) with the results supporting other studies with teachers reporting stressors related to student behaviour, inadequate support structures, and an increased workload due to endeavouring to provide LD students with the education they need.
Another stressor commonly cited by teachers is the parents of their students, particularly those students with LD and/or behavioural problems (Burrows, 2004; Gash, 2006; Williams, 1999). In a study by Gash (2006) teachers stated that due to previous unpleasant experiences, they often felt vulnerable and anxious about meeting the parents of students with LD or behavioural disorders. Whilst the teachers in Gash’s study did not provide specific examples of these unpleasant experiences, Burrows (2004) stated that the parents of students with LD and/or behavioural disorders often face difficulties and strong emotions when dealing with issues concerning the education of their child. This may inhibit their ability to effectively communicate and interact with their child’s teacher, resulting in the teachers feeling stressed or vulnerable and anxious as reported by Gash. The role of the parent in child learning is important in providing the child with academic assistance outside of school and when done effectively, they act as a source of support for the teacher (DET, 2006).

Adequate support is vital in reducing the likelihood of teacher “burnout”, a term used to describe emotional and physical exhaustion usually the result of high levels of pressure and stress (Huebner, 1993). Support from the parents of students as well as from colleagues such as the principal as well as family members and friends has been shown to be effective in assisting teachers cope with the stressors they encounter (Sarros & Sarros, 1992). Colleagues are important sources of support, as unlike family and friends, they are located within the same environment and are likely to have experienced similar stressors (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006). By providing teachers with the support they need, the likelihood of burnout is greatly reduced, which may translate into more effective teaching, ultimately benefiting the students within the classroom.

The teachers of LD students face numerous issues which can challenge their ability to provide adequate education to all the students in their class (van Kraayenoord & Elkins, 2004). Identification of LD’s, resources and support, effective treatment programs for children with LD,
preservice education for teachers and working with the parents of children with LD have been shown to pose problems for teachers, sometimes resulting in burnout (Elkins, 2000; Otto, 1986). Research has indicated that teachers in regional areas of Western Australia (WA) are at a particular disadvantage in relation to teaching students with LD (Sutherland, 2001). These teachers have limited special education support due to a shortage of classroom aides, professional support and school funding (Elkins, 2000; Sutherland, 2005). The current teacher shortage in WA further disadvantages regional teachers with 60% of vacancies situated in regional areas and teachers being withdrawn from literacy and behaviour management programs to alleviate the shortage (ABC News Online, 29/1/07).

This qualitative research study will explore the experiences of teachers who teach children with LD in Bunbury, a regional area of South West WA. The aim of the proposed study is to identify any issues or problems of teaching children with LD in regional WA, and compare the results with those of previous studies to determine whether there are any identified differences as a result of being in a regional location. The research questions that this study will address are:

1) What are the experiences of teachers with teaching children with learning difficulties within Bunbury primary schools?

Method

Design

The design used in this study was qualitative with semi-structured interviews drawing upon the phenomenological approach used to obtain information from the participants. This approach studies people’s experiences throughout their daily life (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), and is an ideal approach given the nature of this study. Semi-structured interviews are well suited to the phenomenological approach as they allow participants to self-report on various issues, generating data that is at a deeper level than obtained by measures such as short-answer
questionnaires (Polkinghorne, 2005). Further, semi-structured interviews do not have a rigid format, allowing the interview to be guided by the responses of the participants (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Participants

The participants in this study were primary school teachers from primary schools in the South West region of Bunbury who were currently teaching children with learning difficulties. The participants were recruited by sending information letters to the principals of the primary schools to seek permission to conduct the study within their school. Seven teachers from three primary schools in the Bunbury region participated in the study. The grades taught by these teachers ranged from kindergarten to year four. The demographics of the seven participants are outlined in the following table.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year Level Taught</th>
<th>Educational Qualifications</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Number of Years Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching, ESL, First Steps</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Diploma of Education</td>
<td>Literacy Net</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>K-7</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>First Steps, SAER</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>Teachers Certificate</td>
<td></td>
<td>30+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching, Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>First Steps</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials
A semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A) was used to elicit information from the participants in relation to the research areas. The interview contained questions pertaining to the given areas of study such as “What are your experiences with teaching children with LD within the classroom?” and “What resources do you have available to support your teaching of these children?” Prompts such as “tell me more about...” were used to elicit more information if needed. The participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the nature of the study and were required to complete an informed consent document before the study commenced (see Appendices C and D respectively). A demographic information questionnaire (see Appendix E) was also completed by the participant prior to the commencement of the interview. All participants consented to the tape recording of the interviews.

Procedure

The principals of primary schools in the Bunbury region were sent information letters (Appendix B) outlining the nature of this study. Approximately one week later, the principals were contacted to ascertain whether they were interested in allowing the school to participate in the study. Those principals who were interested were asked to distribute information letters to all teachers within their school. Those interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher by email or telephone to arrange an interview. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted within the school where the participants were teaching and they took place at a mutually agreed time, with each individual interview taking approximately half an hour. Participants were provided with a brief overview of the details and nature of the study, how the interview would be conducted and were encouraged to ask any questions if they required clarification of any issue or any part of the process. The semi structured interview format allowed the conversation to continue in a non-specific direction which allowed the participants to elicit valuable information that may not have been obtained.
with a rigid interview structure. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Any identifying information generated by the interviews was erased at the conclusion of the interview and the consent forms were separated from the interviews so as to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis

Transcripts were alphabetically coded so as to keep the elicited information confidential. The transcribed interviews were analysed using grounded theory. Grounded theory was established by Glaser and Strauss (1968, as cited in Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and uses thematic analysis to identify and code recurring concepts. Grounded theory was an appropriate form of analysis for this research as recurring themes were presented by the participants due to the focus of the interview questions (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Rigour was maintained by providing an audit trail of the methodological, procedural and analytical processes and also of the decisions made pertaining to these processes. To show authenticity of the data, each participant was asked if they could be contacted to verify their analysed transcripts and to confirm that their views had been interpreted correctly.

Findings and Interpretations

The analysis of the information provided by the participants produced six themes relating to the teachers' experiences with teaching children with learning difficulties. The six core themes consist of minor themes or sub-themes and these are presented in Table 2.
Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Identification of LD</th>
<th>Prevalence and Identification of LD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type and Severity of LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD Testing</td>
<td>Positive Reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservice Training</td>
<td>Multiple Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Resources</td>
<td>Specific Resource Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance</td>
<td>Time / Class Size</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key Issues</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs of the Teachers</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prevalence and Identification of LD

The seven teachers that were interviewed in this study taught a total of 174 students. Of those 174 students, 30 were identified by their teacher and/or LD specialists as having a learning or behavioural difficulty. This equates to 17% and is higher than the prevalence estimates provided by the Department of Education and Training (DET, 2006) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 1990) both suggesting a range of 10-16%. A potential reason for this higher prevalence may include an indication that the numbers of children suffering from LD’s is increasing or it may be due to the identification measures used and the experience of the teachers.
Type and Severity of LD

The types of LD experienced by students and the severity of the LDs experienced were fairly consistent between teachers. Literacy difficulties were the most frequently cited LD’s, consistent with results presented by Westwood and Graham (2000). Teachers also reported a number of students with behavioural difficulties as well as learning difficulties. This confirms reports by researchers such as Rivalland (2000) that there is a high level of comorbidity between learning difficulties and behaviour problems. One teacher reported a number of children in her class experienced a diverse range of difficulties including 1 child with an intellectual disability... 4 who are at educational risk, 3 of those are across every learning area and 1 is particularly at risk socially, emotionally and with literacy. Two teachers of lower grades stated that they taught children with fine motor problems:

I've seen a lot of gross and fine motor skill problems, especially at that level (lower school) and that would be possibly the main difficulty I've seen at that level.

I've got another one in here whose fine motor control is so poor that Mum had taken him and another little girl in the class to the writing group at the community centre.

In terms of severity, teachers indicated that the difficulties experienced by the students in their class were quite varied. One teacher stated that they vary from a child I had with dyspraxia right up to children who are just two or three months behind their reading. The teacher also stated that you get that with teaching, there is always going to be someone that is having a difficulty whatever it may be. Similarly, one teacher stated that any teacher that doesn't expect to have children with large educational differences is being very naïve...they are basically part of the job. The teacher stated that the children in her current class represented a bell curve, with the students with learning difficulties making up the majority of the lower end.
A number of teachers were concerned with the severity of LDs experienced by the students in their class. A teacher of an older class commented that they *had been pretty fortunate* having *never seen two kids this bad... having two kids that are two years below where they should be*, suggesting that the problems may not have been identified accurately earlier or that remediation attempts were not successful (Jenkinson, 2006; Rivalland, 2000). One teacher said that throughout her many years of teaching *the severity has increased* also stating that *there are more kids needing assistance* and stating that it may be because *they don't develop as early at home*.

**LD Testing**

When teachers were asked how they identified students with LDs their responses pertained to specific identification tests and/or general experience. One teacher stated that the students with LD were *almost obvious* and that she could easily identify the students with difficulties as she *hears the kids read everyday*. Another teacher stated that she would *suss the kids out in the first few weeks of first term* through hearing them speak, read and write and that her *experience* would assist her in identifying children who were *struggling*.

The formal assessments used by teachers included reading and literacy tests as well as testing done by professionals at a local community centre. Three teachers stated using *Waddington's test* to identify children who were behind. This reflects the results of a study by Rivalland (2000) in which teachers were asked to identify the identification tools they used to students with LD. This may suggest confidence in the measure to accurately identify students at risk. Another teacher stated that she uses *WALNA* (West Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment) usually used to determine year 3 benchmarks but *we use it down in year 2 and 1 as well if we identify a child that we think is experiencing learning difficulties and may not meet that benchmark in year 3*. 
Unlike the results of Milton and Rohl’s (1998) study, the teachers in this research appeared satisfied with the measures they were using to identify students with LD. However several teachers expressed their concern with some students who had been tested outside of the school by professionals specialising in LD identification. One expressed that the screening done by these professionals was *too late for most of them* and another stated *when I read over the reports there wasn’t anything that overly surprised me about what my gut feelings were about the difficulties he was having*. This suggests that the teachers had confidence in their own ability to identify the students at risk which may be a direct result of the majority of them having a number of years experience in teaching students with LD. Experience in relation to identification and diagnosis was not taken into account in Milton and Rohl’s study, and given the results of this study, experience may be indicative of a teacher’s confidence in their ability to identify students with LD’s.

*Preservice Training*

In response to whether they had any preservice training in LD identification, the majority of teachers stated they had had little or no training. One teacher said *I think there was a time when LD’s were often associated with hearing problems, visual problems or they were your disabilities like autism and those are the ones I’m fairly equipped to identify. But the ones you can’t put a label to, they are harder to identify.* Another teacher stated that they had an autistic child a few years ago and they had to *get some PD specifically related to that child*. However, the teachers were not concerned with their level of preservice training with a number of teachers stating that there was *ongoing in-service training*. This ongoing in-service training for teachers of LD students as they need to continually access professional learning during their careers to ensure that classroom practices are effective as new successful evidence based approaches are introduced (Dockrell & McShane, 1992; Holden, 2004).
Classroom Management Strategies

The teachers reported a number of strategies or approaches they used to support the learning of their LD students. These strategies included the use of specific education programs, group work and positive reinforcement. The results were positive, with the teachers appearing confident that the adaptive strategies they were utilising to support the students with LD were working effectively, unlike the teachers in a study by Baker and Zigmond (1990) where it was reported that they were more concerned with maintaining routine than adapting the curriculum and instruction to individual differences.

Specific Programs

Contrary to the reports of teachers in the study by Rowe (2006) and Scott and Spencer (2006), the teachers in this study did not appear to have any difficulties deciding which programs to implement in order to meet the needs of LD students. The programs used by the teachers to support the students with LDs included formal differentiated programs such as the students at educational risk (SAER) program. This program was developed by the DET and was aimed at establishing school practices that support students at educational risk to develop the understandings, skills, and confidence to achieve their individual potential (DET, 2007). Teachers feelings about the SAER program were positive with one teacher stating that it was a good initiative and much needed.

Informal differentiated and outcomes oriented programs such as individualised education plans (IEP) with the basis of your IEP needs to formulating around targeting specific short term goals were also utilised by the teachers. These programs were utilised more often as they were flexible and could be tailored to the needs of the LD students. This was demonstrated by one teacher who devised an IEP with minor steps that we wanted him to achieve due to there being no specific formal program for the student because his difficulties were so severe.
Group work

The teachers reported that they often utilised group work and paired LD students with non-LD students to facilitate their learning. A key benefit of group work as stated by the teachers was that you could plan activities at different levels and for the students with LD it's at their level so I know they'll have some success... which is good for their self esteem. Another benefit was that because the group work by each teacher involved a rotational system, there was more opportunity for one on one time. One teacher also stated that our whole class will do something in order to provide that child with a learning difficulty with extra practice at that child’s point of need in order to support the students with LD.

In addition to group work, a number of teachers would pair up or buddy up their LD students with non LD students. One teacher paired the early finishers with the LD students so that they could help the LD students, an approach reported by researchers at Monash University to be beneficial to lower achieving students (Monash University Online, 2007). One teacher reported arranging the seating plan of their class, placing the star and isolate next to each other, explaining to the high achieving student that the LD students may be having problems with organisational skills so can you help them. She also stated that the seating plan would change every fortnight as the stars get sick of it. Similarly, another teacher reported that the students with LD were paired with higher achieving students particularly for language, society and environment and science as that is very difficult for them and that the person the LD student is paired with is changed... because they (the LD students) can be demanding, consistent with reports by Burchielli and Bartram (2006) in relation to teacher stress.

Positive reinforcement

Every teacher emphasised the importance of using positive reinforcement to facilitate learning not only for the LD students but for the class as a whole. This was demonstrated by one
teacher who stated that being positive and utilising positive reinforcement with the LD students has a positive impact on the tone of the classroom. There was a similar response from another teacher who stated if they (the students with LD) are happy, then it’s like a domino effect within the classroom. The teachers reported that it was important to recognise that everybody has differences and those differences need to be celebrated and promoted and acknowledging that they’re special, not special because they can’t do it but special because they’re individuals. The teachers reported that using positive reinforcement increased the self-esteem and confidence of the students with LD. One teacher provided an example of this saying:

A lot of these kids have had a lot of negative feedback as soon as you say to them “try this, that wasn’t quite right”, they immediately put up the barriers and they almost shutdown, they don’t want to listen. But as soon as you say “that was a really good effort, well done!” you can see the shoulders go back and they strut around.

Research has shown positive reinforcement to improve academic and behavioural outcomes of students as it increases motivation (Dev, 1997). This was shown to be particularly salient for students with LD as they often experience encouraging academic gains after receiving positive reinforcement (Dev, 1997).

Multiple Intelligence

Gardner (1983, as cited in Vialle, 1994) stated that each individual has strengths and weaknesses across several independent intelligence domains including logical-mathematical intelligence and musical intelligence. He further stated that each individual will have a blend of these domains ultimately resulting in differing performances across measures assessing intellectual functioning. A few of the teachers in this study reported that they focused on the tasks that the students with LD were good at as another form of reinforcement and encouragement.

One teacher stated that her whole classroom philosophy filters around multiple intelligence with
each child taken on an individual basis and that improvements will be seen when you have to be tuned into what their difficulties and strengths are at that point in time. Another teacher described finding that one multiple intelligence that they really shine at improving the self confidence of that child as it lets them know that everybody is good at something.

Resources and Assistance

The teachers all reported receiving some form of assistance and/or resources to support their teaching of students with LD, however, the general consensus was that the resources and assistance that was made available was not enough, consistent with the results seen in Burchielli and Bartram’s (2006) study.

Resource Teachers

A resource/support teacher is defined as teachers who work with classroom teachers to either provide direct support to students within the classroom or to assist teachers in developing appropriate interventions (Forlin, 2000). The teachers in this study reported having resource teachers available to assist in teaching the students with LD. Quite often this was in the form of specialised tuition outside of the mainstream classroom for a designated amount of time per week. For example:

*The resource teacher gives 1 hour a week for the 4 lower school classes. So we send our kids with learning difficulties, the more severe learning difficulties out to her for speech, phonological awareness and a writing program.*

*We currently have a very experienced teachers’ aide who has been taking kids under the CLP (Commonwealth learning program). The kids get withdrawn 3 times a week for 45 minutes with her, so they're getting small group instruction directed right at their point of need.*
One teacher reported being provided with an aide for one student with severe learning and behavioural difficulties for two hours three times a week and three hours twice a week. Another stated using a preservice teacher in the role of a resource teacher:

*I used her to take the bulk of the class and I would take the small group out for maths and then we swap over in the other ones. It was good to use her that way.*

Whilst the teachers were appreciative of the resources teachers and assistance they received, with one teacher demonstrating this when she said she (the resource teacher) is fantastic, she is worth 5 teachers. They're the sorts of people you need to be able to get, all the teachers stated the need for more assistance:

*So she (the resource teacher) takes them out for an hour a week, but the maximum we can send out is maybe two kids from a class, and I have got eight kids on SAER so most of them miss out.*

One teacher reported having no resource teachers at the school where she worked stating we don't have a SAER program so basically it's up to the teacher in the classroom to cope with the children at educational risk and that if she had a choice she would have them doing an aural program called Rosner. The teachers expressed their concern that due to the lack of assistance many kids were disadvantaged because the teachers were focusing on one or two children within the classroom. As one teacher stated, *it is hard to justify pouring everything into just two kids when there are 30 others that need you too.* This was also a key issue identified by the teachers interviewed in Milton and Rohl's (1998) study with teachers commenting that the children who were of concern needed more one-on-one time than they were able to provide given that they also needed to provide education to the other students in the class.
External Resources and Assistance

Some of teachers reported exploring external services to assist them in providing the education and support necessary for their students with LDs. A commonly cited source for external education was a community centre. One teacher stated that the deputy principal at her school often arranged for students to visit the speech pathologist at the centre with a lot of the kids sent there for different bits and pieces. A teacher from another school also stated that they utilised the services of this centre for children having difficulties with speech, however she also stated that like in school programs run by resource teachers the number of kids needing assistance is huge, there aren't enough places and there isn't enough time to run enough sessions.

Overall, the use of the centre as a source of support was evident with the teachers willing to utilise the service when they were unable to provide students with the assistance they needed within the school. This reflects results obtained in Rivalland's (2000) study where teachers often referred students for assessments and treatment that they themselves were unable to provide, which was ultimately of benefit to the students.

Funding

Funding for resources and assistance within the schools was seen by the teachers to be insufficient. When talking about IEP’s, one teacher stated that there is no extra funding for that, we find the time to sit down and write out the plan, we find the time to resource it, the money to resource it within the school and we run the show. Similarly, another teacher reported using her own time to assist a student who spoke English as a second language as they (the school) couldn’t get funding for assistance as it was something to do with the VISA so I just continued to do it for the kid in my own time.
One teacher expressed her concern with what appeared to be a decrease in funding, stating *there isn’t a lot of funding for additional support programs, our funding has been cut in half so programs are halved in time and it (funding) is reducing year by year.* In the study by Bartak and Fry (2004) teachers reported that the students with more severe LD’s received specialised services due to funding from the education department. In contrast, one teacher in this study described how one of her students has mild autism, is two points off special school material and the education department have funded her with an aide that is coming for 5 weeks and after 5 weeks he is supposedly going to be miraculously cured. Another teacher expressed her frustration stating:

*If you look at the number of children that get aides and how difficult it is to get an aide because of the paperwork and the time that goes into putting in an application... it is really hard.*

Students with LD need ongoing support but their teachers are limited in their ability to provide them with the programs and materials they need. Policies intended to support students with LD and their teachers need to be realistic and easy to access in order to meet their intended purpose (Holden, 2004).

**Key Issues**

The teachers reported a number of other issues that hindered their ability to provide LD students with the education they required. These included time management, class sizes, concern with the parents of LD students, and were consistent with the reports of other teachers in studies by Gash (2006) and Burchielli and Bartram (2006). Some teachers also reported concern with being located in a regional area.

*Time / Class Size*
It was evident from the reports of the teachers that the time and class size issues were overlapping. Research has shown smaller class sizes to have a positive affect on student achievement, due to the teacher's ability to provide more individualised education (Buckingham, 2003). The teachers all expressed the desire to provide LD students with one on one time as they were aware that students with learning difficulties do better in a very small, one on one situation. One teacher stated:

...we are trying to provide good education but you can not give them one on one. There is no time. Even if you get everyone else going and you go over to be one on one with them, 90% of your brain is still thinking about what everybody else is doing so they only get a few minutes.

A couple of the teachers expressed that they felt bad for the non LD students in the class. As one teacher described it, it always comes down to a time thing because you've got 22 children in your class. You can't always give your time to that group of eight LD students. Likewise, another said the students need equal time and are deserving of that time and that's very hard when your actual teaching time a lot of it is taken away by looking after 1 child.

The teachers of the lower primary classes agreed that it was very hard to provide one on one support to the LD students because the remaining students can't stay on task and they are unable to work independently because they can't read or write. The inability of teachers to provide LD students with the one-on-one education is therefore a potential disadvantage in mainstream classes. It is suggested that integrating students with LDs into mainstream classes would benefit them academically, (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Jenkinson, 2006), however this is likely to be jeopardised if teachers are unable to provide the time needed.

Parents of Students
Whilst some of the teachers described working with the parents of students with LDs as relatively easy, the majority reported difficulties working with them to remediate the difficulties their child was experiencing. Parents can play a constructive role in child learning as encouragement received at home can impact positively on children's attitudes and belief in themselves as learners (Playford, 2002). However when a student is not achieving, parent-teacher relationships take on new forms (Nichols, 2000). As stated by Burrows (2004), the parents of LD students often have difficulties working effectively with teachers as LD can be a sensitive topic, with the one teacher in this study finding that the stigma associated with learning difficulties was an issue for most parents. In line with this, other teachers stated that the parents didn't want to know, wouldn't acknowledge that their children had problems and that they refused to have the child tested. Further, one teacher described one parent being worried that the child's going to be diagnosed ADD and need medication and be bullied.

Research has shown that home environment can be a causal factor for learning difficulties when there are problems at home and low parental expectation (Nichols, 2000). This may have been a contributing factor for some of the students with LD mentioned by the teachers in this study. Some teachers reported acting as marriage counsellors with parents of LD students coming in to offload. One teacher recalled one parent meeting where she sat with a parent for 20 minutes and we didn't talk about the child or the academics, we spoke about parenting. The same teacher also stated that she and the other teachers within the school felt as if they were taking on almost DCD stuff.

Teachers were not blind to the potential effects of a problematic background with one teacher stating that they questioned how much control and influence they had when some LD students would bring so much baggage to school from their home life. Similarly one teacher described how one particular mother could not get out of the rut she was in and that there was no
example being set at home in relation to appropriate behaviour and thus her son had severe
behavioural problems. The teachers acknowledged that it was imperative to have support from
the parents as anything less will affect the kids and their learning.

Regional Location

One of the key aims of this study was to identify the experiences of teachers of LD
students in a regional location as recent studies have shown teachers in regional areas of WA to
be at a great disadvantage in relation to teaching children with LD due to limited special
education support and school funding (Elkins, 2000; Sutherland, 2005). In addition to these
reported disadvantages, current teacher shortages have produced a number of vacancies situated
in regional areas (ABC News Online, 29/1/07).

Most of teachers interviewed had taught in and around Bunbury for the majority of their
teaching careers and thus some had difficulty describing the potential advantages or
disadvantages of teaching in the area as they did not know any different. There were no perceived
advantages of the regional location with all the responses focusing on the disadvantages of being
located in a regional area. The cited disadvantages were varied. One teacher stated that as the
majority of the professional development she undertook was conducted in Perth when school had
finished (3 pm). She stated that this was of disadvantage to regional teachers as they had to spend
time travelling and had to find money for both the course and a relief teacher in order attend.

Another teacher stated that regional teachers were disadvantaged in terms of support for
ESL students. She described having one gorgeous little girl from the Phillipines who is ESL and
has a language difficulty and speculated that if the girl was in Perth there would more stuff for
her than there is down here, we don’t have the resources. Similarly, another teacher stated that
there was a lot on offer in Perth especially for things like dyslexia and ADD and those sorts of
things which weren’t available in Bunbury.
The teachers did not seem to be affected by the teacher shortage as not one mentioned it in their interviews. For most, things had stayed relatively the same in terms of staffing and support. One teacher stated that they had been in Bunbury the *whole time* and that there had *always not really been much around in terms of support so it hasn’t really been a problem.*

**Needs of the Teachers**

The needs that teachers reported largely stemmed from the areas they believed to be lacking. The most commonly requested need was *support* and it was used by teachers as a blanket term to describe everything from *extra hands* and *materials.* More *professional development* was also requested to help them cater to the needs of the LD students more effectively. This is consistent with the results of studies by both Milton and Rohl (1998) and Rohl and Greaves (2005) with the teachers in those studies requesting extra resource teachers, programs, funding and identification measures.

**Support**

It is imperative that teachers receive the support they need as it reduces the likelihood of them experiencing “burnout” (Huebner, 1993), allowing them to provide a better quality education to their students. The study by Sarros and Sarros (1992) found that adequate social support from the principal and fellow teachers reduced the likelihood of teacher burnout. Some teachers in the present study reported that they received a lot of *support* from colleagues, whilst one teacher reported that they did not receive *a lot of support* from their colleagues, particularly the principal. As a result the latter teacher reported feeling *stressed* and wanted to *quit,* confirming the results seen in Sarros and Sarros’ study that lack of principal support can increase the likelihood of teacher burnout.

Some teachers requested support to ensure quick identification of LDs, which has been shown to be beneficial to students as it provides more time for the problem to be remediated.
The teachers expressed their concerns with the time taken when testing was done outside of the classroom. One teacher requested that children of concern be tested within a couple of weeks and the results given back almost after the same time so that she could then get to work. This was also echoed by another teacher who appealed for better detection methods as it had taken three terms to identify the difficulties of one student.

Many teachers spoke of difficulties with being the only source of support for the LD students. One teacher stated that whilst she was able to identify the students at risk, it was difficult to meet so many varied needs when she didn’t have any assistance. Another stated the reality is you can’t split yourself in enough directions and that they do the very best that we can with what we’ve got... but we definitely need aides. One teacher requested support in many areas, including support staff, designated programs, money, books and equipment, emphasising that it would not just benefit the students at the low end but at the top end as well.

Professional Development

Some teachers requested professional development focused on LD and how they can better assist those students. Professional development is vital for teachers as it allows them to increase their knowledge of current theory and programs which is of great benefit to themselves and their students (O’Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003). One teacher requested that they be provided with greater awareness of what’s happening at other schools and what’s available, like specialised program or classes. Another participant suggested that it would be beneficial to network with other teachers in the South West to share experiences and strategies. She stated that other teachers would:

...probably have fantastic ideas on how to move kids along... If one day a week teachers left at two o’clock and went to a school and networked with other year level teachers that would be awesome.
One teacher reported that she found that support from my colleagues was more beneficial because teachers have a wonderful range of experiences. This suggests that professional development consisting of both theory and the opportunity to share experiences would be beneficial for teachers of students with LD.

Positive Experiences

Past studies investigating teachers' experiences with teaching students with LD have largely focused on the negative aspects (Cullinan, Epstein & Lloyd, 1981; Huebner, 1993). In the present study, teachers reported their positive experiences teaching students with LD. All participants reported that despite the job being challenging, the reason they teach is because it is so rewarding, particularly when the students with LD achieve.

Achievement

The teachers described a sense of pride when their LD students had progressed academically. One teacher described the achievement of students with LD as just wonderful...to see the look in their eyes... they know they are worthy. Another teacher reported that she loved seeing their faces when you can see that the light's gone on and they've got it. Whilst the achievements of non LD students did not go unnoticed or unrewarded, one teacher stated that:

Although you might have the same activities being done throughout the whole class, you'll expect totally different things from the students with LD and the ones without and each child has to work for a different amount in order to get praise. So your child with learning difficulty might get the biggest pat on the back because he has managed to write a three letter word even though others have already done it.

Other teachers provided similar responses reporting that the achievement of LD students was particularly rewarding because they tried so hard and put the hard yards in because they were desperate to get it right. These responses are of contrast to reports by the teachers in the Cullinan,
Epstein and Lloyd (1981) study where LD students were described as being disruptive and unwilling to participate in class work.

_Satisfaction_

All of the teachers reported feeling a sense of satisfaction teaching their LD students, with one stating that it was a form of _intrinsic motivation_. One teacher described feeling _content_ when thinking that _you’ve made a difference in a child’s life_. Another teacher stated that was _one of the reasons why I teach year 1_ because the differences seen at the beginning of the year and the end of the year are _massive_ and that it felt _good knowing that I’ve helped them do that_. Therefore these responses suggest that the positives of teaching students with LD are worthwhile despite their being many barriers and challenges to overcome before the positives can be seen. This was touched on by Heubner (1993) in a study investigating teacher burnout. Huebner stated that for teachers, stress and difficulties are inherent of their profession and well-being is easy to maintain as long as the negatives do not outweigh the positives. Thus it is important for teachers of LD students to find positives as burnout is particularly prevalent for these teachers (Burchielli & Bartram, 2006).

_Discussion_

_Summary_

The teachers in this study requested that extra resources (i.e., support teachers, specific education programs), support and professional development be provided to enhance their teaching of students with LD. All of the teachers expressed a need for more one-on-one time with the students with LD as they responded better to individualised education. Large class sizes were reported as being the key contributor to the teachers’ inability to provide the one-on-one time deemed necessary to support those students with LD. Thus, the teachers suggested that class sizes
should be limited to a smaller number and/or more resource teachers should be made available for those students with LD.

Support from colleagues was seen to be vital in maintaining teacher well-being. Those teachers who described having strong peer support reported that the benefits included the sharing of experiences and strategies in relation to teaching students with LD. Those teachers who received little support from colleagues reported feeling highly stressed and worn out. This demonstrates the importance of peer support, particularly in a challenging profession such as teaching. Further, given the current trend of declining teacher numbers throughout Australia, adequate support from peers may play an essential role in encouraging teachers to remain within the field.

All of the teachers reported having some difficulties with the parents of the students with LD. Some parents were described as having no interest in the learning of the child or refused to accept that their child may have had an LD. Parental support is crucial for both the teacher and the student as the parents are able to fulfil the role of educator outside of the school, thus contributing to the academic achievement of their child. The teachers requested a need for parents to have access to education and training in relation to LD’s to dispel the stigma surrounding LD’s, which ultimately is of great benefit to their child.

Unlike other studies, this study investigated the positive experiences of the teachers in relation to teaching students with LD. All of the teachers found teaching students with LD to be rewarding, with many reporting feelings of satisfaction and achievement when those students progressed academically. The teachers reported that those students with LD were the reason they continued to teach, despite the associated challenges.

Limitations
The key limitation in this study was the small sample size. The suggested number of participants for a qualitative study such as this is between eight and ten as it is believed that saturation would be achieved at that point (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). It was extremely difficult to recruit participants as a number of teachers from a number of primary schools reported being unable to find the time to participate given the pressures of their teaching duties, statements that were confirmed by those teachers who did participate.

*Practical and Research Implications*

There are several practical implications that have materialised from the results of this study. Ongoing support at peer level is likely to be of great benefit to the teachers of students with LD, reducing the likelihood of burnout and/or role overload (Huebner, 1993). Ongoing professional development in relation to new advances in LD education is also important as it provides teachers with strategies and knowledge that they can effectively utilise within their classroom to enhance the teaching of those students. Increasing parental knowledge of LDs is also likely to be of benefit to the teachers as it may facilitate better communication between the parties, ultimately benefiting the students.

The results of this study have also provided opportunities for further research in the field of LDs. The teachers in this study reported that a number of students with LDs often came from families where there was a lack of parental support and guidance due to factors such as divorce, blended families and substance abuse. It would be interesting to investigate on a larger scale the prevalence of LDs in children from a variety of familial backgrounds to see whether family environment may be a contributing factor.

Another area for future investigation is the availability of resources to regional teachers compared with the resources available to metropolitan. This study briefly investigated the advantages and/or disadvantages related to being located in a regional area. The teachers did not
report any major advantages or disadvantages, however it was suggested that metropolitan teachers may have better access to professional development courses. Comparisons could be conducted between schools with similar demographics (e.g., State Primary Schools or Independent Primary Schools, similar class sizes, similar prevalence of LD’s) in both regional areas and metropolitan areas to discern whether there are any distinct differences in relation to resources/support received for students with LD.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What are your experiences with teaching children with learning difficulties?
2. What preservice training did you receive in the identification of children with learning difficulties?
3. What resources do you have available to support your teaching of these children?
4. What assistance do you have available to help support these children?
5. Are there any issues that impact on you in the classroom?
6. What support do you receive to teach the children with LD?
7. What are the positive aspects of teaching children with learning difficulties?

Prompts

1. Can you describe any experiences where you believed your regional location to be an advantage or disadvantage in relation to teaching and providing support for these children?
2. Describe any particular strategies you utilise to within your classroom to manage teaching children with LD.
3. Outline some things that could enhance your role as a teacher teaching children with learning difficulties.
Dear Principal,

My name is Aleesha Morton and I am currently undertaking a Bachelor of Science Honours Psychology degree at Edith Cowan University. As part of my course I am required to carry out a research project. Research has indicated that sixteen percent of primary school children in Western Australia experience learning difficulties.

The aim of my study is to explore the experiences of teachers who teach children with learning difficulties. I have chosen to focus my research on the Bunbury region to understand the experiences of teachers working in the southwest of WA. My study will involve interviewing primary school teachers who teach children with learning difficulties.

I will contact you to discuss whether you are interested in the teachers at your school participating in the study. If so, I would appreciate it if participant information letters and consent forms which I will provide could be distributed to teachers within the school. Teachers interested in participating can then contact me to make arrangements for the interviews. If you have any queries please don’t hesitate to contact me (Aleesha Morton on 0417 960 307) or my supervisors Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr Julie Ann Pooley on 6304 5591. If you want to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact the university research officer Dianne McKillop on 6304 5736.

Thankyou for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to speaking with you further.

Aleesha Morton

Researcher

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Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Aleesha Morton and I am a student at Edith Cowan University in Joondalup. I am currently undertaking a Bachelor of Science Honours degree in Psychology. As part of my course I am required to carry out a research project. Research has indicated that sixteen percent of primary school children in Western Australia experience learning difficulties. I am currently conducting the study at your school with the co-operation of your principal.

The aim of my study is to explore the experiences of teachers who teach children with learning difficulties. My study will involve interviewing a sample of teachers who are currently working with children with learning difficulties. I am conducting the research in the Bunbury region as little research of this topic exists in this region. This research will enhance our understanding of the views of teachers in relation to teaching children with learning difficulties.

Participation in this study will involve an audiotaped interview lasting approximately half an hour. I will travel to the school at a mutually agreed time to conduct the interview at no cost to anybody. No identifying information will be required and all your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. The audiotaped interview will be transcribed verbatim for analysis. Once the data has been analysed I would appreciate it if you would verify the emerging information. The results of the study may be published but no individual participant will be identified in any publication.

If you are willing to participate in this study, or you have any questions or require clarification on any issue, please contact me on 0417 960 307 or by email at almorton@student.ecu.edu.au. In order to participate in the study you are requested to complete the attached consent form. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at anytime without any adverse consequences. If you have any queries please don’t hesitate to contact myself or my supervisors Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr Julie Ann Pooley on 6304 5591. If you wish to speak to someone independent of the research, please contact the university research officer Dianne McKillop on 6304 5736.
Thankyou for your interest.

Kind regards,
Aleesha Morton

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Appendix D

Consent Form

I ___________________________ consent to participate in the research project entitled

"Teaching Children with Learning Difficulties: The Experiences of Government and Independent Primary School Teachers".

I understand that;

1. The study is investigating the experiences of teachers who teach children with learning difficulties;
2. Any data collected in this study will be confidential and will only be discussed with the supervisors involved in the study;
3. My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at anytime;
4. The researcher (Aleesha) will travel to the school or a convenient location to conduct the interview at no expense to anyone;
5. The interview will take approximately half an hour;
6. The consent form will be kept separate from the interviews and no identifying information will be used in the tape recordings;
7. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed for data analysis;
8. The researcher may contact me after the interview to verify the results.

Signed: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________
Appendix E
Demographic Information

Gender: M / F
Number of years teaching:
Educational qualifications achieved:
Training:
Grade taught:
Current number of students:
Number with learning difficulties:
NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Manuscripts, ideally between 2000 and 8000 words (research notes up to 2000 words), should be sent to: Prof. Kevin Wheldall, Editor, Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, Macquarie University Special Education Centre, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia. Articles should be double spaced, with ample margins adhering to the style guide of the American Psychological Association (APA) (fifth edition). A cover sheet should bear the title of the contribution, name(s) of the author(s) and the address where the work was carried out. A second sheet should again give the title article (without the name(s) of the author(s), to facilitate ‘blind’ refereeing), together with an abstract of 100-150 words. The full postal address, telephone and fax numbers, and email address of the author who will check proofs and receive correspondence, should also be included. All pages should be numbered. Footnotes to the text should be avoided.

Contributors should preferably e-mail their articles to Prof. Kevin Wheldall: ajld@speced.sed.mq.edu.au. File ('soft') copies of articles, produced in recent (post-2000) versions of Microsoft Word for Mac or PC, should be attached as an enclosure to the e-mailed standard submission letter.

Statistics. Given the nature of this journal, it is expected that indications of effect size will be included by authors, where possible, so as to allow readers to form a judgement as to the importance of any findings reported.

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