Engaging and Empowering Students With Learning Disabilities

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Background to the program

■ ARC-funded three-year partnership research project:
  □ Swinburne Learning Disabilities Research Project
  □ Victorian Department Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)
Defining Learning Disabilities

- There is a mismatch between ability and achievement for individuals with LD
- Low achievement despite at least average cognitive ability
- LD is a permanent processing problem that is neurologically based
- Students typically have problems in reading, spelling, writing and mathematics

Horowitz, S. H. (2007); Hoeft, F. et al. (2007)

Definition of Exclusion

NOT

- Intellectually disabled
- Visual or hearing impaired
- Emotionally disturbed
Prevalence and Potential Consequences

- Prevalence about 10%
- LD is a major source of stress from childhood to adulthood
- Effects on school attrition, employment opportunity, mental health, juvenile delinquency and criminal conviction


Policy and practice

Victorian *Blueprint for Education* (2003) expectations for schools:
- use diverse approaches to facilitate different ways of learning & knowing
- use a range of strategies in response to individual & cultural needs
- identify & support students of differing abilities; promote strengths
- build positive relationships and embrace student differences
- structure learning experiences to support student choice and control of their learning
- model cooperation and independent learning
- build an environment where students feel comfortable to pursue inquiries and to express themselves
Policy and practice – avoiding discontinuity

Education policy goals—inaclusiveness and excellence, but:

- Students with learning disabilities often miss out
- Education systems responsible for identifying and meeting needs of all students, including those with LD
- Need for better mainstream teacher skills and knowledge to achieve this.

Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Disabilities: Program Overview

- **Module 1** Learning disabilities/dyslexia (LD) - definitions and individual differences
- **Module 2** Identifying LD – how do we know?
- **Module 3** Listening to people who have LD
- **Module 4** Building inclusive class environments and coping skills
- **Module 5** Instructional strategies and curriculum differentiation
- **Module 6** Inclusive technologies
Identifying LD – how do we know?

- Identification brings understanding, enables appropriate learning accommodations
- Informal screening/educational assessments
- Formal assessment where needed


Listening to people who have LD

- Speaking for themselves
- Positive self concept
- Self advocacy
- Outcomes of the learning disabilities/dyslexia experience
Creating inclusive school and classroom learning environments

- The school learning environment can strongly affect lifelong outcomes for students with LD
- The quality of relationships with teachers and other students is fundamental to learning
- A sense of belonging and a sense of control are key resources for students with LD

Zins et al. (2004)

Instructional Strategies and Curriculum Differentiation

- Accommodations
- Effective teaching styles
- Inclusive technologies
- Resources
Program outcomes to date

- Teacher ‘hunger’ for information and strategies
- Professional engagement with research-based ideas
- Uptake and trialling of strategies and tools to identify students with LD and offer more varied and appropriate learning options
- Collegiate sharing and whole school perspective
- Program potential for systemic application

Implications for the future

- Need for better policy - practice match:
  - Pre-service training to include LD
  - Ongoing teacher professional learning in LD
  - Improved resource provision for identification and curriculum adjustment for classroom practice
  - *Engaging & Empowering Students with Learning* Disabilities – an example of how to address LD as a mainstream school responsibility