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**A report on the role of the Support Teacher
(Learning Difficulties) in regular schools in
Queensland in 1999**

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A report on the role of the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) in regular schools in Queensland in 1999

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a noticeable change in the focus of the role of teachers who provide support for children with learning difficulties or disabilities. This report outlines the finding of research undertaken in 1999 to clarify and document the role of the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) in regular schools in Queensland. Support teachers (N=196) responded to a postal questionnaire about a range of issues associated with their role including time allocation, training, activities required, types of provision of support, identification and assessment, and school policy. In addition, information was obtained on the demographics of their position and about students with impairments and students with special educational needs in their schools.

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Introduction

Traditionally, it has not been the role of regular class teachers in Australia to provide intervention programs within their classrooms for students with disabilities. Increasingly though, regular classrooms are becoming more diverse with the inclusion of greater numbers of children with a range of disabilities and learning difficulties. There has been considerable debate regarding the potential negative impact of teachers' beliefs on their support for including children with disabilities in regular classes (Carrington, 1996). The beliefs of teachers and their skills and practices in teaching these students have also been found to differ widely (Schumm, Vaughn, Gordon, & Rothlein 1994). It has been posited that progress towards developing schools where all children will receive their education in the regular classroom "will not continue without consideration of the beliefs that teachers have in respect to meeting the needs of students who are at-risk of failing in their classrooms" (Carrington, 1996, p. 109). The outcome of an inquiry into the status of the teaching profession in Australia (A Class Act, March 1998) reported that teachers believed that inclusion policies worked well when teachers were provided with adequate back up and support. It also found that in practice such support as was provided was rarely adequate and was declining.

Support for students with learning difficulties in Australian schools has altered considerably over the past two decades. Students with learning difficulties were traditionally placed in the regular classroom but received additional support in a resource or remedial room for part of the school day or week (van Kraayenoord, 1996). A resource teacher provided support directly to individuals or small groups of students. In the early 1990s researchers in Queensland, while beginning to promote a dual role of withdrawal support for students together with support for regular class teachers by consultation, were still advocating that direct services to children with learning difficulties must remain a key priority for consultants (Bailey & Bailey, 1993). Observation of support provided to a limited sample of Year 5 students with learning difficulties in reading in Queensland in 1994, confirmed that this was still a major focus of intervention with some support teachers working solely in withdrawal mode (van Kraayenoord, 1996). More recently, though, support teachers in Queensland appear to be increasingly encouraged to work

collaboratively with regular class teachers to provide support for students with learning difficulties within the regular classroom (Education Queensland, 1998).

This change in support mirrors similar changes occurring elsewhere. For example, in the UK, the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) has undergone a significant change since the introduction of the Code of Practice (Department of Education, 1994) that has impacted on the way in which support is provided to students (Dyson, Lin, & Millward, 1998). The Code has led to a noticeable increase in the expected role of the SENCO (Derrington, 1997). SENCOs have been required to take on more managerial roles (Lewis, Neill, & Campbell, 1996), and in many instances this has resulted in a large escalation in paperwork and the need to delegate part of their roles to others (Derrington, 1997). Support for children with disabilities and learning difficulties in the UK has seen a transition from a previous hands-on approach of working with individual children and small groups of students towards providing a more consultative and collaborative focus.

Support for students with learning difficulties in Queensland is provided at a school level by Support Teachers (Learning Difficulties) (ST(LD)s. The role of the ST(LD)s was previously outlined by Education Queensland in a draft document (15 March, 1994) and was finally formalised in a Standard Work Profile in August 1998. The position of the ST(LD) as outlined in the Standard Work Profile (Education Queensland, 1998) is founded on an advisory role that requires them to "assist classroom teachers develop and effectively implement education programs for students identified as experiencing learning difficulties". Appointees are required to possess "demonstrated successful experience as a classroom teacher". Major responsibilities are varied and are seen as in addition to those already expected for teachers outlined in the Standard Work Profile for Teacher (February, 1998). According to the Standard Work Profile for ST(LD)s their specific responsibilities include conducting diagnostic assessments, collecting data, documenting results, reporting on students' progress, and participating in ascertainment/appraisal. They are also required to work collaboratively with classroom teachers and other specialists to plan, coordinate, teach and monitor programs

for children with learning difficulties. They need to support a whole of school professional development program to address learning difficulties, skilling, and teaching practices, and to teach demonstration lessons for teachers. They have to participate in and promote networking of ST(LD)s. Finally, they need to maintain specialist teaching expertise and knowledge of effective teaching for students with learning difficulties.

In recent years many new policies and processes have impacted on the role of support teachers in Queensland Government schools. These include implementation of the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, the Year 6 test, the processes of ascertainment and appraisal, and the introduction of benchmarking of students in Years 3, 5, and 7.

This research was initiated to investigate the actual role of support teachers in Queensland with a view to determining the extent of their work and their involvement in direct teaching. It also aimed to investigate to what degree their role is changing away from direct support to students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities towards providing indirect support by consulting with regular class teachers.

Method

This Report provides the findings of research into the role of teachers who support children with learning difficulties and learning disabilities in regular Government schools in Queensland (ST(LD)s). When information was sought from ST(LD)s for this research in January 1999, few ST(LD)s reported that they were aware of the existence of the Standard Work Profile for ST(LD)s introduced in August 1998.

According to Education Queensland departmental policy "Learning difficulties and learning disabilities refer to barriers which limit some students' access to, participation in and outcomes from the curriculum" (Curriculum and Studies CS-13, 1997, p. 2). The term 'special needs' is used generically in this report to encompass students with all types of disability or learning difficulty.

The ST(LD)s were asked to respond to information regarding specific categories of students. These categories refer to groups of students who are specifically identified by Education Queensland. It is expected that the ST(LD)s would be familiar with, and have an understanding of, the meaning of these terms as applied to students in Government Schools.

An adapted version of *The Questionnaire of the Role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators in Schools* (Crowther, Dyson, Lin, & Millward, 1997) was employed. The Queensland version, *The Role of the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) in Regular Schools in Queensland*, included mainly changes of terminology to reflect practice in local schools (refer Appendix). The questionnaire consisted of seven parts that covered issues related to school information, students with an impairment, personnel, forms of provision, identification and assessment, policy and guidelines for intervention. Respondents were also asked to comment on whether they considered that the role of the ST(LD) and support for children with learning difficulties should change in the next five years, and if so how. Provision was made at the end of the questionnaire for further comments about the role of the ST(LD).

A total of 196 (ST(LD)s) responded to a postal distribution of the questionnaire. According to Education Queensland statistics there were approximately 619 ST(LD)s employed throughout Queensland in 1999. This gave a return rate of 32%. Although this appears to be fairly low this reflects the difficulties occurred in identifying and contacting the ST(LD)s. In addition, many of the ST(LD)s were employed only part-time and they may have, therefore, considered it inappropriate to complete the questionnaire. It should also be noted that previous use of the original questionnaire reported that their response rate of 44% was considered high for a postal distribution (Crowther et al., 1997).

The findings will be reported in seven parts that relate to school information; the number of students with special needs; personnel; forms of provision; identification and assessment; policy; and guidelines for intervention.

1. School information

Responses were received from 196 ST(LD)s across all 36 districts in Queensland. Four districts had response rates greater than 10, namely, Corinda, Darling Downs, Nambour and Fraser-Cooloola.

The majority of the ST(LD)s were responsible for providing support for only one school (73%), although 15% were involved with two schools, 6% with three schools, and a further 6% were providing services to four or five schools.

The ST(LD)s were from regular primary schools (N=170), Secondary schools (N=13), and P-10 schools (13), with school sizes ranging from one class to 46 classes. The numbers of students in each school ranged from 29 to 1252.

The location of schools relative to their nearest District Office ranged from 33% within 5km, 49% between 5-50km, 14% between 50-150km, to 5% being greater than 150km away.

Forty percent of the ST(LD)s had no other designated position in their schools. A small number were also the principal or deputy principal (3%), a further 12% were nominated 'key teachers', and 8% were also subject or class teachers.

2. Students with Special Needs

2.1 Number of students with special education needs

The ST(LD)s were asked to estimate the number of students within their schools that they considered had a range of special needs. They were asked to provide numbers for students with learning difficulties or learning disabilities, medical conditions, severe behavioural problems, ESL, cultural deprivation, and those who were considered gifted and talented. These estimates are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean and range of students indicated as having special education needs.

Reason for special needs	Total N	Students with special needs	
		<u>M</u>	Range
Learning difficulties/disabilities	179	64	1-265
Medical conditions	121	15	0-243
Severe behavioural problems	130	6	0-50
English as a second language (ESL)	114	16	0-170
Cultural deprivation	59	19	0-98
Gifted and talented	103	21	0-175
Other (mainly low SES)	25	72	0-400

Note: total numbers and means are reported per ST(LD). Mean values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

The majority of ST(LD)s (N=179) identified a fairly high number of students with learning difficulties and 130 ST(LD)s indicated severe behaviour problems in their schools. More than half of the schools had students with medical conditions, ESL, and those who were gifted and talented. Approximately one quarter of schools had students who were considered to be potentially culturally deprived, and 25 ST(LD)s reported that they had students from a low SES background. The range of student numbers reported by each ST(LD) varied considerably with some reporting numbers as high as 265 students with learning problems.

2.2 Number of students ascertained with specific disabilities

In addition, the ST(LD)s were asked to indicate the total number of students with specific disabilities within their schools. These disabilities are those that Education Queensland recognise as requiring specific support. Accordingly, children with these specific disabilities are ascertained to determine the level of support required. These children are then monitored by Advisory Visiting Teachers.

Table 2 provides a summary of students identified as having a specific disability who require limited support (Ascertainment Level 1) to those who require high levels of support (Ascertainment Level 6). While the mean number of students per school who require support for these disabilities appears quite small, overall there are a noticeable

number of students with varying disabilities included in regular schools. (Note: Ascertainment is the process employed by Education Queensland to determine the level of support required by a child with a disability)

Although there are comparatively larger numbers of students with intellectual impairments (N=261), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (N=167) and speech/language impairments (N=147), included in regular schools there are, however, relatively few students (N=8) with multiple disabilities in these schools.

Table 2
Mean and range of number of students ascertained at each level for impairment.

	Total N	Ascertainment Level						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
Intellectual Impairment	261	N	23	2	4	50	121	61
		<u>M</u>	2	2	1	1	4	2
		Range	1-4	2-2	1-1	1-3	1-15	1-11
Physical Impairment	138	N	9	12	33	32	28	24
		<u>M</u>	1	1	1	1	1	1
		Range	1-3	1-2	1-4	1-4	1-3	1-5
Visual Impairment	55	N	5	6	17	4	12	11
		<u>M</u>	1	1	1	1	1	1
		Range	1-1	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-5
Hearing Impairment	126	N	11	17	42	22	19	14
		<u>M</u>	1	3	2	1	1	2
		Range	1-3	1-20	1-15	1-3	1-4	1-8
Speech/Lang. Impairment	147	N	25	2	3	17	70	30
		<u>M</u>	2	6	5	3	2	1
		Range	1-8	2-9	1-9	1-9	1-12	1-3
Autistic Spectrum Disorder	167	N	25	3	2	25	71	41
		<u>M</u>	2	1	2	1	2	2
		Range	1-9	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-4	1-4
Multiple Disabilities	8	N	0	0	0	1	1	1
		<u>M</u>	-	-	-	1	1	6
		Range	-	-	-	1-1	1-1	6-6

Note: range indicates minimum and maximum number of students reported at each level for individual schools. Means are rounded to the nearest whole number.

These figures are not meant to provide an accurate account of the population in regular schools in Queensland but they do provide an indication of the diversity of students within these schools that teachers are required to plan for.

3. Personnel

3.1 The Support Teachers (Learning Difficulties)

3.1.1 Qualifications and Training

The majority of ST(LD)s had received training on an occasional basis (see Figure 1). Seven ST(LD)s had a certificate in the education of children with special needs and these were all primary teachers. In total 38% of ST(LD)s had a diploma in the education of children with special needs, 16% had a MEd (Special Ed) and the majority of these were teaching in P-10 schools.

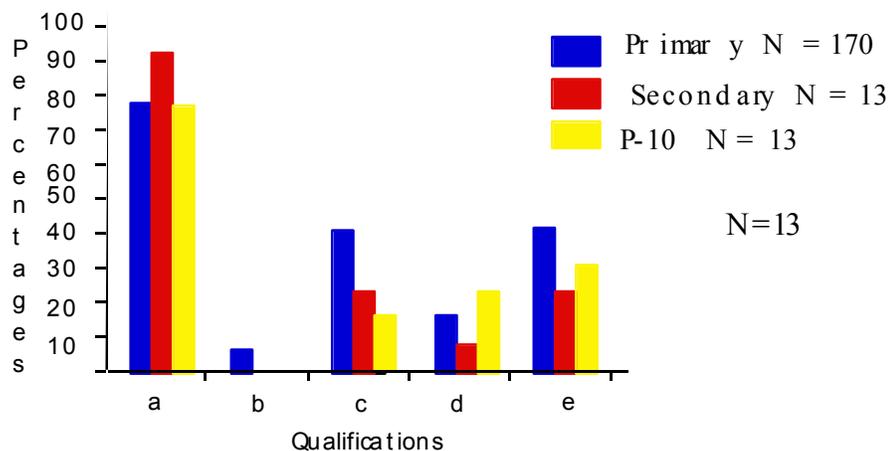


Figure 1. Training and qualifications of ST(LD)s

- a = Occasional training events
- b = Certificate in children with special needs
- c = Diploma in children with special needs
- d = MEd in children with special needs
- e = other

Approximately 39% of all ST(LD)s reported 'other' qualifications. Analysis of responses indicated that these included a range of additional qualifications involving further study. One ST(LD) had a Ph.D. and one was working to complete it. Ten ST(LD)s held a

general M.Ed. Studies qualification with a further 5 currently enrolled in this degree. Thirty-seven held a Graduate Diploma with another 6 enrolled in the course. In addition, 25 ST(LD)s reported that they held a BEd or BEd Studies degree with specialisations or majors in children with special needs. Eighteen ST(LD)s reported completion of a range of specific training courses including Reading Specialist Certificate, Reading Recovery training, Reality Therapy, First Steps Tutor, TESOL, Choice Theory, or PATCH training. In summary, approximately 46% of ST(LD)s who had recorded 'other' qualifications had undertaken some form of further study, with 22% being specifically in the area of children with special needs. A further 6% were currently enrolled in additional study.

The importance of appropriate training for ST(LD)s was continually highlighted in the written responses. It was considered that all ST(LD)s should be fully trained for their position. Typical comments regarding regular class teachers applying for support roles included issues such as they need to be "experienced teachers and receive appropriate training" (62), and that they "should be required to have a Graduate Diploma in Children with Special Needs" (51). There was concern that by using untrained specialists it "devalues the efforts some of us have put into our own professional development" (143) and that the "use of untrained ST(LD)s has put the role into some disrepute which takes a long time to rectify" (166). It was also discussed that as further training is expensive for a teacher consideration should be given to reimbursement of fees upon successful completion, or at least some other form of acknowledgment such as increased status or level of employment.

3.1.2 Weekly allocation of time

The majority of ST(LD)s had between half a week and a full week allocated to their roles (see Table 3). A small number of primary ST(LD)s (9%) received one day or less dedicated to their role and of these 5% had no timetabled time.

Table 3

Allocation of time each week to special education needs work by ST(LD)s in primary, secondary and P-10 schools.

Allocation of time	Type of School		
	Primary (%) N = 170	Secondary (%) N = 13	P-10 (%) N = 13
No timetabled time	5.3	-	-
Half a day or less	1.2	7.7	-
Between half a day and one day	2.9	-	7.7
Between one day and half a week	14.1	15.4	23.1
Between half a week and a full week	76.5	76.9	69.2

Note: values represent percentage of respondents indicating each category of time allocation

There were many written comments that pertained to the issue of time for ST(LD)s to perform their role. The issue of amount of available time to be able to perform efficiently their widening role appeared to be a real concern for the ST(LD)s. The lack of suitable time to liaise with regular class teachers often meant that this occurred over lunch or morning tea. There was frequently little or no time allowed for the increased paperwork associated with their broadening role.

The ST(LD)s were trying hard to embrace their changing role but many found that they were having to spread themselves too thinly and that they were, therefore, not making enough of a difference to the students they served. As acknowledged by one support teacher "I'm great with training programs, writing group and individual programs, creating adapted resources for classrooms, co-ordinating both human and material resources BUT ... with as heavy teaching load I'm far less effective" (100). Additional duties that occurred at certain times of the year such as testing, marking and collating results was also seen to impinge on their weekly role. A lack of time seemed even more challenging for those who served multiple school sites or were employed part-time, and for those who were working in remote areas.

Just over half of the schools, though, had other teachers on the school's staff who had some of their time also allocated exclusively to special needs teaching and

administration. Of these teachers, 50% spent less than one day per week, 31% spent between one day and half the week, and 18% spent more than half the week on special needs work.

Most ST(LD)s were also able to access non-teaching assistants to assist with special needs work. Non-teaching assistants (eg teacher aides) had who had some or all of their time dedicated to special needs work were available in 91% of schools. The number of hours varied enormously between schools, however, the mean number of hours allocated per week for flexible teacher aide support was 18 hours, and for permanent teacher aide support was 19 hours. Hours from the school's teacher support budget were averaged at 14 hours per week.

3.1.3 The Role of the ST(LD)

3.1.3.1 School activities

The number of school activities that the ST(LD)s had to undertake was quite extensive. More than 95% indicated that they were involved with each of the following:

- assessment and monitoring of students' needs;
- maintenance of records;
- writing or coordinating educational plans;
- identification of children with special needs;
- coordinating support provision;
- responding to requests for advice by other teachers; and
- liaising with external agencies and parents.

The management of a special needs program across the school was the role of 87% of ST(LD)s, and 66% were involved with whole class screening of students. Almost one half of the ST(LD)s were involved with behaviour modification programs.

3.1.3.2 Intervention programs

The intervention programs used by ST(LD)s involved a range of activities including both withdrawal and in-class support (see Table 4). Fifty-four percent of secondary ST(LD)s reported that they taught students in a special class, although only 1% of P-10 and 29% of primary ST(LD)s used this form of intervention. At least 84% of all ST(LD)s taught students individually by withdrawing them from classes. Similarly, at least 84% of ST(LD)s in primary and secondary schools also taught them in small groups by withdrawing them from classes, although only 69% did this in the P-10 schools. Teaching of students in an in-class support situation was also reported by at least 77% of all ST(LD)s.

Table 4
Intervention programs that form part of the role of the ST(LD)s in primary, secondary and P-10 schools.

Programs	Type of School		
	Primary (%) (N = 170)	Secondary (%) (N = 13)	P-10 (%) (N = 13)
Teaching students in a special class (other than SEU)	29	54	8
Teaching individual students by withdrawal	91	84	92
Teaching small groups of students by withdrawal	96	84	69
Teaching in an in-class support situation	84	85	77

Note: N = the number of ST(LD)s who responded to these questions. Values represent percentage of ST(LD)s in each category of school employing these forms of intervention programs.

Many written comments were received that noted the increased complexity of the role of the ST(LD) in recent years. It was posited that the diversity of the role of the ST(LD) required "far more expertise" (27), good communication and conflict-resolution skills (32), "flexibility, technology, cooperation, diplomacy" (54). It was also felt that the role was immense and that it required "more refined definition to alleviate some of the unnecessary stress and pressure that often causes dedicated teachers to "burn out" (68). Although it was considered a challenging role there were many positive comments that

indicated that the ST(LD)s found their job very rewarding. Such comments included "Very demanding but professionally rewarding" (112), "the ST(LD) role is one of the most interesting and challenging positions on a school staff" (72), "It's an exciting time to be a support teacher in a time of change" (86), and "it's a wonderful life" (158),

3.2 External service providers

3.2.1 Input and satisfaction

Support by external services is provided based on the needs of children within a specific school so will naturally vary between schools. The ST(LD)s were asked to estimate, on average, how much input their schools received from six main service providers, and how satisfied they were with this level of input. Most ST(LD)s reported that their schools had access to the full range of external services. The amount of support and degree of satisfaction with this support varied considerably (see Table 5).

Table 5

Estimated input received from various services, and mean degree of satisfaction with service.

Services	Estimated input received by schools (as a %age of ST(LD)s responding)						Satisfaction
	N	No input	1 visit / term	<1hour per week	1-5hours per week	5+hours per week	<u>M</u>
Guidance Officers	188	-	5.3	4.8	41.0	48.9	2.61
AVT's	179	5.6	26.3	26.3	32.4	9.5	2.15
Teachers from Special Ed units	161	72.7	3.1	0.6	1.9	21.7	2.67
Speech language pathologists	184	5.4	13.0	21.7	48.4	11.4	2.08
Physiotherapists	160	80.0	10.6	5.0	3.8	0.6	1.55
Occupational Therapists	196	60.4	7.1	9.6	3.0	0.5	1.50

Note: N = number of respondents reporting availability of the service.

Input values represent the percentage of ST(LD)s that indicated the amount of input.

M = Satisfaction for ST(LD)s who received the service by using a 4-point

Likert Scale (1= Not satisfied, 2=Satisfied, 3=Very satisfied, 4=Extremely Satisfied)

The most common forms of service were provided by Guidance Officers, Advisory Visiting Teachers, and Speech/Language Pathologists. Very few schools received support from physiotherapists, occupational therapists, or teachers from special education units. On average, the majority of ST(LD)s reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the amount of input that they received from Guidance Officers. Even though only a small percent of ST(LD)s indicated that they received input from teachers in special education units these also reported that they were *very satisfied* with this level of input. The ST(LD)s reported that they were *satisfied* with the level of support from AVTs and speech language pathologists. Only a small percentage of ST(LD)s reported that they received input from physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Overall, these ST(LD)s indicated that they were less satisfied with the level of input that they received from these sources.

3.2.1.1 Input related to distance from District Office

Analysis of variance was subsequently employed to identify any differences in amount of input received from these service providers according to the locality of the school (see Table 6).

Table 6

Significant ANOVA results of distance from district office and input received from various services.

Services	Distance From District Office		
	df	F value	F prob
Guidance Officers***	3,183	9.31	.0000
AVT's**	3,174	4.34	.0056
S/L Pathologists***	3,179	11.16	.0000
OT's**	3,192	4.17	.0069

It was found that level of input varied significantly ($P < .01$) depending upon the school's distance from their District Office for four of the services (see Table 7).

From Table 7 it can be seen that level of input from Guidance Officers, AVTs, Speech/Language Pathologists and occupational therapists decreased significantly as schools became more remote. Schools that were within 5 kms of their local District

Office were more likely on average to receive greater input from these services than were those schools that were further than 50 kms from their District Office. This was particularly noticeable for occupational therapists who visited schools greater than 150km away less than once per term, if at all.

Table 7
Means and standard deviations of distance from district office and input received from various services

Services	Distance from District Office							
	<5kms		5-50kms		50-150kms		>150kms	
	N=54		N=87		N=16		N=4	
	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>M</u>	SD
Guidance officers ***	3.47	0.69	3.46	0.62	2.84	1.11	2.44	1.13
AVT's **	2.38	1.06	2.16	1.07	1.96	1.06	1.00	0.76
Teachers Sp Ed Units	1.32	1.85	0.90	1.64	0.73	1.49	0.33	1.00
S/L pathologists***	2.82	0.93	2.55	0.95	1.64	0.95	1.67	1.22
Physiotherapists	0.24	0.61	0.40	0.88	0.41	0.91	0.22	0.44
OT's**	3.21	4.13	1.47	2.86	2.44	3.68	0.44	0.73

Note: *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$
 Level of input ranged from 0 = no input to 4 = 5+ hours per week.

3.2.1.1 Input related to presence of a special education unit

Analysis of variance was employed to identify any differences in amount of input received from service providers according to the presence of a special education unit (SEU) (see Table 8). If a school had a special unit or special class input from external services varied significantly ($p < .05$) for five of the services (see Table 9).

Table 8
Significant ANOVA results of presence of special unit and input received from other services

Services	Presence of SEU		
	df	F value	F prob
Guidance Officers	1,186	13.88	.0003
Teachers from Sp Ed Units	1,159	151.86	.0000
S/L Pathologists	1,182	11.92	.0007
Physiotherapists	1,158	42.06	.0000
OT's	1,194	6.07	.0146

In total, 68 ST(LD)s reported that their schools had a SEU or special class on site, whereas 128 did not. From Table 9 it is clear that the input received by schools from Guidance Officers, SEU teachers, Speech/Language Pathologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists when there was a SEU on site was greatly enhanced. There was however, no significant differences noted for input received by AVTs between schools with or without a SEU.

Table 9
Means and standard deviations of presence of a special unit and input
Received from various services

Services	Input received			
	With SEU		Without SEU	
	N=68		N=128	
	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>M</u>	SD
Guidance Officers	3.62***	0.63	3.18	0.84
AVT's	2.34	1.09	2.03	1.07
Teachers from Sp Ed Units	2.58***	1.90	0.13	0.55
S/L pathologists	2.84**	1.00	2.29	1.00
Physiotherapists	0.85***	1.16	0.08	0.28
OT's	2.90*	3.56	1.64	3.30

Note: *** p < .001 ** p < .01 * p < .05
 Level of input ranged from 0 = no input to 4 = 5+ hours per week.

4. General Forms of Provision for Students with Special Needs

4.1 Organisation of classes within the school

Organisation of classes within the schools included single grade classes (89%), composite classes containing two different grade levels (66%), and multi-age classes containing three or more grade levels (23%). There was a significant decrease in the number of schools using single grade classes as schools became situated further away from their local District Office.

4.2 Special units or special classes

Thirty-five percent of ST(LD)s reported that they worked in a school that had a special unit or class. Of these, 48 indicated that between 2 and 40 students were catered for on a

full-time basis in the SEU. In addition, 29 ST(LD)s reported that these units catered for between 1 and 70 students on a part-time basis.

4.3 Teaching approaches in the school for students with special needs

The ST(LD)s were asked to identify which teaching approaches featured regularly in the current provision that their schools made for children with special needs. Figure 2 reports the results for each of the school types.

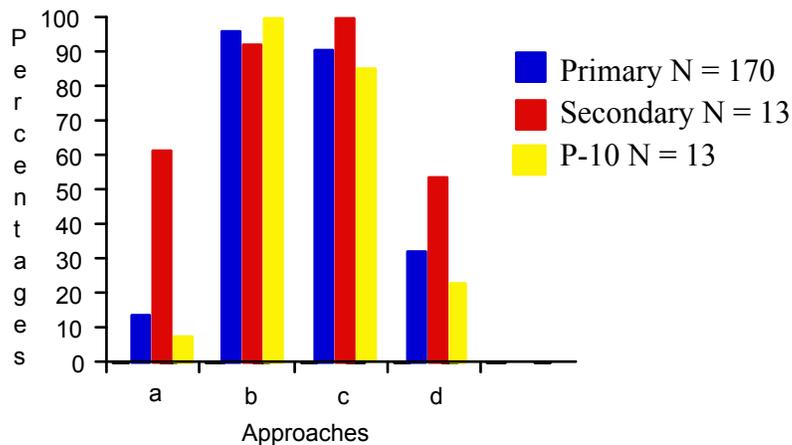


Figure 2. Principal forms of provisions for children with special needs.

- a = Teaching in special class (other than a designated SEU)
- b = Individual or group withdrawal
- c = In class support
- d = Ability groupings

Although only relatively small numbers of primary school ST(LD)s reported that students were taught in a special class other than a designated SEU, 61% of secondary ST(LD)s indicated that this approach was used within their schools. The vast majority of ST(LD)s indicated that their schools used both withdrawal and in-class support. The use of ability groupings for specialised subjects was again used more frequently at secondary level than at primary or P-10.

5. Identification and Assessment of Students with Special Needs

5.1 Methods used to identify students with special needs on entry into school

In most instances schools employed a variety of methods to identify students with special needs on entry (see Figure 3). The majority of primary, secondary, and P-10 schools utilised information from previous schools, and relied on teacher or parent referral. Information from external agencies was used frequently by the primary and P-10 schools but less often by the secondary schools. Standardised or whole school screening tests were used by 65% of the primary schools but only by 54% of P-10 schools and 45% of secondary schools.

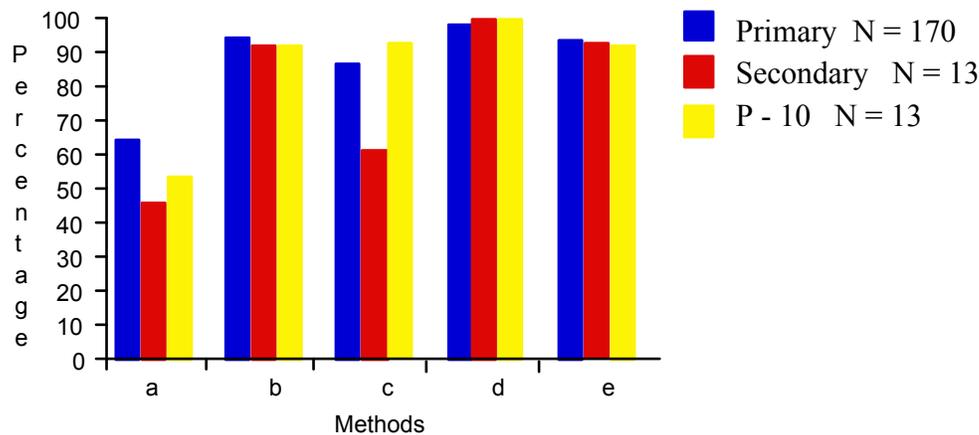


Figure 3. Methods for identification of students with special needs

- a = Standardised/whole school screening tests
- b = Information from previous schools
- c = Information from external agencies
- d = Teacher referral
- e = Parent referral

5.2 Documentation maintained by the school

5.2.1 General documentation

Documentation was kept by 99% of all schools on students who were believed to have a special need.

5.2.2 Individual education plans

Individual education plans (IEP)s were produced by 96% of schools. The average number of students with an IEP for Level 6 reported by 97 ST(LD)s ranged from 1 – 4 students. The average number of students with an IEP for Level 5 reported by 138 ST(LD)s ranged from 1 - 6 students. The average number of students with an IEP for Level 4 reported by 97 ST(LD)s ranged from 1 – 3 students.

6. Policy regarding children with special needs

6.1 School policy

Approximately three-quarters of all schools had a written special needs policy.

6.2 Determining and reviewing policy

The ST(LD)s were asked to identify the ways in which schools currently determine and review their special needs policy. In all school types, special needs policies were most likely to be determined and reviewed by a subcommittee (see Table 10). In 50% of secondary schools an individual was designated to take the lead but this was lower in primary schools.

Approximately only one quarter of primary ST(LD)s reported that the principal's report included a regular section on special needs matters, and this was only undertaken in 8% of secondary schools. In 42% percent of secondary and P-10 schools the person who was responsible for special needs reported regularly to the school, although this only occurred in 35% of primary schools.

Table 10
Current methods used to determine and review special needs policies.

Method	Type of School		
	Primary (%) N = 169	Secondary (%) N = 12	P-10 (%) N = 12
A subcommittee takes the lead in special needs matters	85	67	83
An individual has been designated to take the lead in special needs matters	30	50	42
Principal's reports include a regular section on special needs matters	25	8	25
The person responsible for special needs reports regularly to the school	35	42	42

Note: values represent the percentage of respondents indicating each method.

6.2.1 Determining and reviewing policy related to distance from District Office

Analysis of variance was employed to identify any differences in method used to determine and review policy in relation to distance from District Office (see Table 11). Significant differences were found in three areas (see Table 12).

The more isolated a school was from their District Office the more likely they were to rely on the person responsible for special needs to report regularly to the school. These remote schools were less likely to have a subcommittee to take the lead in special needs matters and the principal's report did not include a section on special needs matters.

Table 11
Significant ANOVA results of distance from district office and methods used to determine and review special needs.

Methods	Distance From District Office (df = 3,189)	
	Fvalue	F prob
Subcommittee takes lead**	7.00	.0002
Principal reports in special needs section*	2.66	.0494
SN person reports to school**	6.54	.0003

Table 12

Means and Standard Deviations of distance from district office and methods used to determine and review special needs.

Methods	Distance From District Office							
	<5kms		5-50kms		50-150kms		>150kms	
	N=54		N=87		N=16		N=4	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Subcommittee takes lead**	1.14	0.35	1.10	0.29	1.38	0.50	1.50	0.53
Individual takes lead	1.67	0.48	1.68	0.47	1.81	0.40	1.50	0.53
Principal reports in special needs section*	1.75	0.44	1.71	0.46	1.92	0.27	2.00	0.00
SN person reports to school**	1.81	0.40	1.54	0.50	1.73	0.45	1.25	0.46

Note: ** p < .001 * p < .05

Range 1=method applies; 2=method does not apply

6.3 Publicising policy

In the last 12 months 50% of schools had produced an Annual Report to parents that included one or more sections relating to its special needs policy. Schools that were situated the furthest away from District Offices, though, did not report to parents in their Annual Report on their special needs policy.

Schools tended to publicise their special needs policy in their school brochure (43%) although this was less likely to occur if the school had a special unit or special class attached to it. Approximately one third of the schools produced a separate document relating to special needs and 14% reported using 'other' means to publicise their special needs policy.

6.4 Annual operational plan

The schools' current annual operational plans included a separate section on children with special needs in 95% of cases.

6.5 School's professional development program

During the last 12 months 79% of schools included elements on special educational needs in their professional development programs.

6.6 Communication with parents of students with special needs

Communication with parents of students with special needs most frequently occurred during one-to-one meetings with particular parents in school or by phone calls to individual parents (see Table 13).

While primary and P-10 schools used letters from the school to communicate with parents this occurred less frequently at the secondary schools. Communication via a book or journal occurred only occasionally and rarely did home visits take place with students in the primary or secondary schools.

Table 13
Mean frequency of use of methods to communicate with parents of students with special needs.

Method of Communication	Type of School					
	Primary		Secondary		P - 10	
	N	<u>M</u>	N	<u>M</u>	N	<u>M</u>
Letters from the school	158	1.48	12	1.08	12	1.41
Home visits	129	0.30	10	0.60	12	1.00
Parents' evenings/open days	132	0.89	10	1.30	11	1.09
One-to-one meetings with particular parents in school	167	1.73	13	1.77	13	1.62
Phone calls	165	1.61	13	1.85	13	1.46
Communication book/log/journal	130	0.82	10	0.80	12	0.92

Note: frequency of use of method was reported on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = never, 1=occasionally, 2=regularly).

7. Guidelines for intervention

7.1 Difficulty in Organising Support

Support for students with special needs in schools is organised in a number of ways. The ST(LD)s were asked to respond to the level of difficulty they anticipated that a range of tasks would cause them (see Table 14).

While securing the involvement of parents was predicted to cause a few difficulties for the ST(LD)s, overall, most tasks were not seen to be too difficult to undertake. The

production of IEPs was potentially problematic for the primary schools. Involvement in ascertainment and provision of special education programs were rated more difficult by the primary and P-10 schools than by the secondary schools who considered more difficulties were apparent with the formulation of a written school policy for students with special educational needs. All schools anticipated little difficulty in securing the involvement of their school council.

Table 14

The mean anticipated level of difficulty that particular tasks are likely to cause the ST(LD).

Tasks	Overall Mean	Type of School					
		N	Primary M	N	Secondary M	N	P - 10 M
Formulation of a written school policy for students with special education	1.29	165	1.32	13	1.46	12	0.92
Appointment & mode of operation of a ST(LD)	1.23	163	1.27	11	1.18	12	0.83
Involvement in ascertainment and provision of special education programs	1.34	167	1.38	13	1.15	12	1.42
Maintenance of records of student with special educational needs	1.08	167	1.13	13	0.92	12	0.58
Production of IEP's	1.45	167	1.52	13	1.08	12	0.92
Securing the involvement of parents	1.54	168	1.54	13	1.54	12	1.42
Securing the involvement of students	1.14	164	1.15	13	1.15	13	1.00
Securing the involvement of the school council	0.89	129	0.90	8	0.88	10	0.80

Note: Difficulty was reported on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = No difficulties, 2 = Few difficulties, 3 = Some difficulties, 4 = Many difficulties).

7.2 Written comments from ST(LD)s

7.2.1 Should the role of the ST(LD) change in the next five years?

The ST(LD)s proposed the following issues that were already impacting on their role and were likely to continue to do so:

- current role was in a state of flux;
- the role is continuing to change and evolve;

- technology, resources, expectations will all impact on role in immediate future;
- changes in policy will lead away from teaching to administration & advisory role;
- accountability for programs will be strengthened and
- appraisalment.

There were four key issues that underpinned the future role of ST(LD)s.

1. Their role should continue to remain flexible
2. They are currently in a transition phase being required to continue with face-to-face teaching while also taking on additional duties of supporting staff, developing programs and coordinating implementation by other support staff – resulting in work overload
3. The uncertainty about the direction of the changes in their role – a lack of training or explanation about proposed changes
4. The need to ensure that the role of the ST(LD) is adequately acknowledged. As a managerial role this should be recognised and given higher status.

7.2.1.1 Appraisalment

Some ST(LD)s felt that with the recent introduction of appraisalment and the new work profile (Standard Work Profile for Support Teachers (Learning Difficulties), Education Queensland 1998), that this would give greater definition, some parameters and consistency to the role of the support teacher. It was also proposed that the introduction of formal appraisalment for children with learning difficulties would allow support to be "more equitable, accountable and continuous across schools and regions" (53). The desire for a more standardised role was concomitant with the need to retain flexibility to be able to meet the varied needs of individual schools. Some ST(LD)s voiced concerns about appraisalment that focused on two main issues:

1. That by limiting input to only those students who had been appraised as requiring additional support this would no longer allow ST(LD)s to provide services to other students who may benefit from intensive short-term programs.

2. There was uncertainty regarding how extensive and time consuming the process might be.

7.2.1.2 Future changes

Although some ST(LD)s wanted their role to return to more direct teaching, this tended to be voiced mainly by the more experienced teachers. The majority of ST(LD)s seemed prepared to accept or at least acknowledge a system wide change in their role. The following changes that they would like to see occur within the next five years were proposed:

- clearly define the population to receive support;
- allocate more time for the writing of programs, the tracking of student profiles, record keeping, and collaboration with teachers, aides, and tutors;
- realistically consider the number of students that can be adequately serviced by each ST(LD);
- place more emphasis on curriculum modification and working with class teachers in classrooms;
- the agreement of guidelines and expectations of ST(LD)s at a school level;
- the earlier identification of children with learning difficulties and implementation of interventions and
- place more emphasis on preventative innovations.

Many commented on the current differing expectations of ST(LD)s. This was summed by one ST(LD) as "... it seems currently that each ST(LD) is 'doing their own thing' to a great extent" (52). It was proposed that the outcome of support also needed to be better defined. As posited by one support teacher "As the very foundation of our work is to devise/adopt best practices for the best outcomes for the children in our care, maybe there is some way of determining state-wide what these outcomes should be – in SPECIFIC terms – not just 'improved literacy skills' etc" (52).

7.2.2 Should the provision of support for children with learning difficulties change in the next five years?

There were many suggestions made regarding future provision of support for children with learning difficulties including the need to focus on all children, changes in curricula, better resourcing and professional training, time, early intervention, involvement of regular class teachers and accountability.

7.2.2.1 Support should focus on all children

It was suggested that there needed to be a continuation of the movement away from trying to provide traditional types of support that were directed only at those students having specific difficulties. By restructuring the curriculum and reworking pedagogy it was argued that support could be focused towards the needs of all children. In this way greater emphasis could be placed on what program best meets each child's needs within the regular classroom. This was not seen as an intentional watering down of support as it was still considered important to provide individually tailored programs to meet the specific needs of students with learning difficulties. It was considered more relevant, though, that support for students should be determined on a needs basis rather than on overall school numbers. The focus should be on the needs of all children rather than just those identified as having a learning difficulty. One suggestion for addressing this was that "Multi-age classes and negotiated curriculum approaches would accommodate and enhance all students learning" (77).

7.2.2.2 Changes in curricula

Particular changes were promoted for the curriculum in Years 8 – 10. It was suggested that the curriculum should provide increased opportunities for students with learning difficulties to achieve academic success. This was particularly promising with the perceived current change in direction towards a greater emphasis on differing modes of presentation utilising a range of multi-media. Students with learning difficulties were seen to "flourish with alternative presentations other than pages of written text" (54). The outcome of this was seen as a potential increase in retention rates of students with learning difficulties beyond the age of 15 years.

7.2.2.3 Better resourcing and professional training

The whole issue of better resourcing and improved professional training was consistently raised. There appeared a need for an increase in both material and human resources. The following suggestions were made:

- increase material resources included technology, books, and programs, to support the ST(LD)s and regular class teachers in developing and administering individualised programs;
- increase human resources including more support teachers, aides and specialist staff;
- more aide time is required to assist teachers implement the modifications that are deemed necessary for children with learning difficulties;
- smaller class sizes are needed that will allow class teachers to cater for individual student needs. This was particularly important as it was considered that "integrated children with special needs are taking up more and more of the class teachers class time and preparation time" (78) and
- more speech/language therapists are required to meet the growing numbers of students with language problems.

7.2.2.4 Time

A major issue that continued to be espoused was the apparent desperate need for more hours so that the ST(LD)s could undertake their role effectively and consult and plan with class teachers. Many ST(LD)s reported that they had far too many students to be able to provide the type of support that was needed, for example "I am supposed to cater for 65 students in 1 1/2 days a week" (29), and "In two of my schools I worked with over one-third of the students and felt like a dog chasing its tail during Term 1 particularly" (168). Some considered that they were "spread too thinly to have any real impact" (44), and that "we all have enormous caseloads leaving too much to do and not enough time to do it in" (97).

7.2.2.5 Early intervention

Earlier intervention was consistently promoted so that support could focus on preventative measures as well as remediation. As suggested by one support teacher "At the moment I seem to be cleaning up after the problem rather than having the time to work in the lower school to prevent the problem in the first place" (65). An additional advantage of this was seen to be that students in early primary years were most keen to learn and were "not yet caught in the 'failure cycle'" (68).

7.2.2.6 Involvement of regular class teachers

The importance of increasing the involvement of regular class teachers in planning for students with learning difficulties was seen as an important goal.

It was felt that as regular class teachers became more involved in collaborative decision making regarding curriculum adaptations and programming for children requiring support they were more likely to accept greater responsibility for meeting their needs within the regular classroom. As detailed by one support teacher "With the introduction of appraisal and general inservice, staff will become more aware of 'learning difficulties' and 'learning disabilities', therefore, within own classrooms the level of support for these students should become 'more appropriate'"(17). The need for appropriate training for classroom teachers to ensure that this occurred was of paramount importance, as suggested by another ST(LD), "Teachers need to be made aware of what LD is and how to support a child who possesses it. Extra training for classroom teachers as well as teacher aides in this respect would help" (39)

7.2.2.7 Accountability

The outcome of increased emphasis on accountability in schools was seen to have the potential to change the type of support provided to students even further. It was suggested that the provision of ongoing measurement of students would be delegated to the ST(LD), Societal demands to meet literacy and numeracy standards would also become part of their role. There was concern that if ST(LD)s were required to take on this type of additional responsibility then "who will provide the support to the students?" (109). The expectation that there would be a lack of funding to support the changing role of the

ST(LD) was voiced by several support teachers. It was considered that "learning support is expensive and needs well trained people" (152).

Conclusion

Similar to the role of support teachers in the UK, the role of the ST(LD) in Queensland appears to be changing towards providing a more consultative role to teachers. It would seem that the role of the ST(LD) is now moving rapidly towards a more managerial, co-ordinating, training, and consultative role. There is a tendency in such moves to underestimate the impact that this may have on personnel. A timely caution by one ST(LD) reminds employers that they chose their job as support teachers because they wanted to work with children with learning difficulties, "Give us more time to work with the children. If we wanted to be administrators we would be working as Deputy Principals or Principals" (89).

At the same time in Queensland, ST(LD)s report that there has been a large increase in the number of support programs, particularly in primary schools, that rely on a withdrawal mode focusing on one-on-one intervention. These include programs such as Reading Recovery, Support-A-Reader, and Support-A-Writer. In many instances these programs are being provided by either specifically trained teachers or by volunteers. This would seem to support the proposal by various organisations in Queensland (Battams, 1998) that suggest that support for students with learning difficulties should continue to include access to a continuum of service provision options ranging from providing advice to teachers to direct teaching of students.

It would seem that by supporting these programs Education Queensland has acknowledged that there still exists the need to provide withdrawal one-to-one or small group programs for a number of children with learning difficulties or disabilities. Concomitantly, though, there also exists a new type of role that requires a specialist teacher to be able to oversee the increasingly complex range of support programs that are being implemented in schools. This new role requires teachers trained in management and consultation in addition to expertise in programming for children with learning

difficulties. It seems quite clear from the comments made by the ST(LD)s that the workload involved in undertaking both of these roles is far too much for one person. A change in role requires specific re-training of ST(LD)s if they are to be expected to perform it effectively. As has been seen in the UK when role descriptions become too large and unmanageable individual schools become selective and either delegate parts of the role to several staff members or limit the aspects that they actually implement (Derrington, 1997). It is important to be cautious of this tendency in order to ensure that a similar situation does not occur in Queensland.

In the light of such dramatic changes to the role of the ST(LD) in recent years it would be opportune to reconsider the role that support teachers would like to have. It would seem that there is an opportunity here for support teachers to identify which of these roles they feel they would be most comfortable with and to be trained accordingly. The offering of options to either take on a more managerial and organisational role with the relevant acknowledgement of status and appropriate commensurate salary, or to remain working directly with students, might give ST(LD)s greater ownership of their role and choice over where they consider they can make the best impact. Assuming that all current ST(LD)s would be content with a complete change in focus of their role, without giving them viable options to consider, does not auger well for continued job satisfaction. This is particularly pertinent as the ST(LD)s indicated that by early 1999 they had not received training in the administration of their new roles as outlined in the Standard Work Profile for ST(LD)s (Education Queensland) introduced in August 1998. In addition, at that stage many ST(LD)s did not appear to even be aware of the introduction of the new Work Profile.

The ST(LD)s identified a range of issues that they proposed needed consideration regarding the future of their role. While a number of these pertained specifically to issues surrounding administrative tasks several focused directly on the needs of students. The most pertinent administrative changes revolved around the perceived importance of defining the population that the ST(LD)s were to serve and then realistically appraising the amount of time allocated to achieving this.

The ST(LD)s also proposed that greater emphasis should be placed on preventative measures together with the implementation of appropriate services to allow for earlier identification of students who are likely to be at risk. Many of the ST(LD)s considered that their current role was only one of maintenance. Earlier identification of students and subsequent implementation of appropriate intervention has the potential to not only provide more suitable support for students but to reduce the on-going workload of the ST(LD)s in the long term. It would seem illogical to wait until students' learning difficulties have become firmly entrenched. This not only makes intervention more difficult it also has the tendency to trigger associated social and emotional problems thus requiring greater support over a longer period of time. The role of the ST(LD)s appears to be far too encompassing at present. One way of addressing this could be a change in support. An emphasis on working with class teachers in the first few years of school would allow for a more diagnostic and focussed approach to be taken. By identifying the specific learning problems of students at an early enough stage, intervention can be implemented and monitoring procedures firmly established, thus for many students reducing the risk of extended learning problems throughout their primary and even secondary school years.

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Glossary

Ascertainment

Ascertainment is the process used to recommend the level of specialist educational support needed by students with disabilities. The ascertainment process recommends one of six levels of specialist support which may be provided for students with disabilities, ranging from Level 1 (minimal support) to Level 6 (high support) (*Student management SM-15, Ascertainment procedures for students with disabilities, Education Queensland, 1998*).

Appraisalment

Appraisalment for individual programs for students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities is a school-based process employed to manage the identification of student needs and to determine the appropriate responses in the form of an individual learning program and management plan. The process is managed in a school context through appropriate internal structures (Turnbull, 1999, Darling Downs District Office, Education Queensland).

Disabilities

Education Queensland (*Student management SM-15, Ascertainment procedures for students with disabilities, Education Queensland, 1998*), identify students with disabilities to include those with:

- (a) autistic spectrum disorder;
- (b) hearing impairment;
- (c) intellectual impairment;
- (d) physical impairment;
- (e) vision impairment;
- (f) speech-language impairment; or
- (g) a combination of these.

IEP

An **Individual Education Plan** is negotiated and developed by a team which includes the student (if possible), parents and caregivers, teacher and significant stakeholders. The plan documents the agreed learning outcomes for a student for the next six-month period (*Student management SM-15, Ascertainment procedures for students with disabilities*, Education Queensland, 1998).

Learning Difficulties & Learning Disabilities

Learning difficulties and learning disabilities refer to barriers which limit some students' access to, participation in and outcomes from the curriculum. Students with **learning difficulties** are those whose access to the curriculum is limited because of short-term or persistent problems in one or more areas of literacy, numeracy, and learning how to learn. Students with **learning disabilities** are one small group of students with learning difficulties who because of the neurological basis of their difficulties have persistent long-term problems and high support needs (*Curriculum and Studies CS-13*, Education Queensland, 1997, p. 2).

Special Needs

The term 'special needs' is used generically in this report to encompass all students with any type of disability or learning difficulty.

APPENDIX

The Role of the Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) in Regular Schools in Queensland

A research project conducted by

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