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Learning support: What do students want?



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Assumptions are often made about students' needs, especially in the area of learning support. In this study 89 students were asked eight questions relating to receiving learning support. The results are presented both qualitatively and quantitatively, and indicate that all students have individual needs that cannot be assumed. The findings reveal that the most common area of perceived need was in literacy. There were some differences between primary and middle school students' responses to withdrawal from the classroom, but the majority of students in both groups indicated a preference for withdrawal because they could concentrate better in an environment that was less noisy and because they felt they might look 'stupid' if they remained in class.

Introduction

It is estimated that the number of students with learning difficulties (LD) in Australia ranges from 10 to 20% of the population (Louden et al., 2000), with considerable variation of learning support provided between the states and territories. While in Queensland the preferred school model is to include students in the classroom rather than withdraw students from it, the more popular method of learning support remains withdrawing students from the general classroom (Forlin, 2001). This practice supports Klinger, Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm and Elbaum (1998) in their claim that non-readers make little or no progress acquiring reading in whole-class, inclusion settings, even with substantial support.

The Standard Work Profile for the Support Teacher – Learning Difficulties (ST-LD) (Education Queensland, 1998) describes 11 major responsibilities for the ST-LD, with the first recommendation that ST-LDs provide direct teaching. This recommendation is contrary to the inclusive model of teaching that entails in-class support, opening the door to various interpretations of the role the ST-LD has in working with LD students. There is certainly scope for more discussion between teachers and ST-LDs as to responsibilities for teaching LD students; what also needs to occur is consultation with the students (Fielding-Barnsley, 2005). What role do students believe the ST-LD should play? How do students feel about having to meet with ST-LDs in relation to learning within the general classroom? In this study I examined what LD students felt was important with regards to their learning support delivery.

Grover (2004) suggests that taking children's perspectives into account gives "...a voice to the vulnerable" and allows for a "...separate reality" (p. 83) to that of adults. Furthermore, authentic data gathered through children's perspectives add a 'social significance' to the data that may be missing from quantitative studies alone. When data are collected to fit pre-existing adult categorisation schemes, children's perspectives can be reduced to little more than being part of a numbers game. That is not to say that quantitative measures have no value in understanding children's perspectives; they do. Comprehensive studies (Lingard, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2003) provide rich data about students and from such data researchers can target specific areas for further study. Nevertheless, a problem with students completing self-report questionnaires delivered during school time is that the

surveys may be perceived by students as just another piece of school work to be completed during a time set by the teacher (Denschombe & Aubrook, 1992). Ethically, participation in research studies may be compromised if students perceive that they have no choice but to respond to a set questionnaire, given the teacher-student power relationship of a classroom.

Interviewing students also has inherent difficulties. Children may respond to questions in different ways depending on various factors such as who is present in the interview room, the relationship between the researcher and the student, the features of the environment (i.e. the noise level) and/or a particular child's tendency to be acquiescent (Lewis, 2002). Da Silva (2003) used both questionnaires and interviews in her study of students with emotional/behavioural disturbances. Interviews were structured to meet students' needs in conjunction to the two self-report questionnaires already completed on the day of the interviews. While the questionnaires revealed much worthwhile information, the interviews exposed a general sense of student anger and resentment towards school in general, to the staff and to the students' peers, which had not manifested through the questionnaires. This result indicates that key information can be gathered by allowing students to present their views by using their own voices.

Wade and Moore (1993) had students complete open-ended questionnaires, allowing respondents the opportunity to express their thoughts outside the set response of a Likert-type questionnaire. Wade and Moore found that teachers' personalities were more important to LD students than actual teaching skills. Teachers who were friendly, had a sense of humour and who encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning were valued. Nevertheless, three-quarters of secondary teachers surveyed and two-thirds of primary school teachers did not consult students about teaching/learning issues. Teachers described such an act as time-consuming, as having no value, that decisions taken at higher levels precluded consultation with students; that a diversity of views would be difficult to cope with and that consulting with students would side-track teachers from their jobs. In effect, by not consulting with students, teachers lost valuable data that would help to improve the teaching-learning situation.

The reported research builds on Wade and Moore's (1993) study by examining students' perceptions of learning support teachers within present Queensland schooling. The role of ST-LD is under scrutiny at the policy level but students again are being left out of the decision-making process. What role do students with learning support needs consider ST-LDs play in their day-to-day education? The learner's viewpoint is essential if the support that the teacher gives is to be effective (Jones, 2005).

Method

In the present study 89 students: 31 primary (Years 4 and 5, approximately 8–10 years old) and 58 middle school students (Years 6–8, approximately 11–13 years old) were interviewed. Eighty four per cent of the primary students had been appraised, with 16% waiting for appraisal results. Thirteen per cent of the middle school students had been ascertained, with 59% appraised. Year 8 (secondary) students are not appraised. Ascertainment is a process of assessment for low incidence disabilities such as intellectual impairment and sensory impairment. Appraisal, by contrast, is conducted in primary schools to identify children with learning support needs in literacy and mathematics. With the primary school students, 48% of those identified were males, while in the middle school, 49% of those students identified were males.

The interview schedule was presented by 16 female ST-LDs in 16 urban schools in Queensland. Interviewers were trained by the author in interviewing techniques to establish continuity of delivery. Interviews were conducted by the learning support teachers on a one-to-one basis in their withdrawal classrooms. Some of the younger children were assisted by the learning support teacher to read the questions on the questionnaires and in five cases the responses were dictated by the respondents and recorded by the teacher.

As the questionnaires were delivered in most instances by the learning support teachers, there could have been some biased responses. In particular, the first question asked the students if they liked getting help from a support

teacher. Two students who were ascertained with an intellectual impairment had to have their responses recorded by the learning support teacher. Consequently, their answers could have been misinterpreted and misquoted.

The survey questions were developed in response to the author's conception of gaps in current research regarding the individual needs of students with learning difficulties. According to May (2005, p. 31), in reference to students with learning difficulties, "There remains a shortfall of studies in the field of pupil participation that consider the ways in which pupils initiate and influence their own participation in everyday classroom activities...". May (2005) goes on to say that participators and contributors in research must take notice of students' achievements in order to balance the perceptions of professionals and to make intervention more efficient. The questionnaire was designed to allow children to elaborate on their yes/no responses with qualitative responses.

Results

See Table 1.

QUESTION 1

The trend in responding to the interview questions was consistent between the two groups of students but the reasoning behind their responses differed. For example, both groups expressed that they liked getting help from a support teacher (87% primary, 76% middle school). Primary students liked getting help because the ST-LD made the work easier. As one student said:

Yes [I like getting help] because I know that if I just stay in class and the teacher says something I don't understand I'll just stare into space, but if I come to LS I'll get extra help to help me understand what I hear in class.

The students in middle school liked getting help but some were more ambivalent:

...depends what I'm getting help with

or indicated areas where they needed specific help:

...yes, I do because they're [ST-LD] useful and they can help you with your maths...

...yes, I feel lost and not knowing what to do in the normal class without help.

QUESTIONS 2 AND 3

When asked if they preferred to stay in their regular class or go out of the class to work with the ST-LD, 90% of the primary students and 74% of the middle school students stated that they preferred to go out of the class. The main reason for wanting to work outside of the regular class for the primary students was the need for less noise and for fewer distractions:

Yes, because it's less noisier and I can't get distracted in here.

Yes, I'd rather come here because it's more quiet and I can concentrate better.

The middle school students also sought the quiet of working outside their classroom:

I prefer to come out because the other kids make loud noises and it's hard for me to concentrate.

TABLE 1: RESULTS FROM SIX OF THE EIGHT QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONS (QUALITATIVE PRESENTED BELOW)

QUESTION	YES (%)		NO (%)		OTHER (e.g. some times)	
	Primary	Middle	Primary	Middle	Primary	Middle
Do you like getting help from a support teacher?	90	81	3	8	6	2*
Do you prefer to stay in the classroom with the support teacher?	6	22	90	68	3	8*
Or do you prefer to go out of the classroom?	90	74	10	15	0	10
Do you think that the support teacher should just help the classroom teacher with all of the children?	16	22	71	62	12	15
Would you like your friends to help you with any problems that you are having?	61	62	6	29	16*	8
Do you like doing group work?	77	70	6	19	16	10

*Some missing data in these cells.

They also described more personal reasons for wanting to leave the class to get extra help with work:

Yes, because you'd feel that everyone's looking at you and you'd feel a bit stupid if you stayed in the classroom [with the support teacher].

QUESTION 4

Students were asked what sort of things the support teacher helped them with. By far the subject area most requiring help was literacy (32% for primary students, 36% for middle school students), maths came second (16% for primary students and 15% for middle school students). But students described other areas where the ST-LD helped such as explaining things that students hadn't understood during class time, helping with comprehension, playing games and having fun with learning. One student described the more relaxed atmosphere for learning created by the ST-LD as:

[the ST-LD]... do not rouse on us.

The ST-LD was described as 'talking students through' work and helping them figure things out for themselves.

QUESTION 5

Asked if the ST-LD should help all students in the class or only those with learning difficulties, the majority of students (68% primary and 47% middle school) disagreed that the support teacher should be there to help all the students. The students were conscious of the extra help they were getting and did not want that time taken away by students who they felt did not really need the extra help:

I think she should just be with the kids who need help or the other kids will think it's boring.

Not so much because then they get the feeling that the ST will help them so they'll just muck around 'til the ST comes.

No, because the ST wouldn't be able to help me.

No, because the people in the classroom are smart.

QUESTION 6

Asked if there were other specific problems the ST-LD helped students with, students described things such as anger management, being teased by other students and fighting with other students.

QUESTION 7

Nevertheless, students in the study did convey that they would ask their friends for help (61% primary and 62% middle school) but not necessarily for help with school work:

...friends can help you with some things, like if a person is bullying you, you can ask a friend for advice. But if it's [school] work, I'd rather ask a teacher.

Reasons for not wanting friends to help with school work led to the following comments:

...because they might tell me the stuff I already know or they might tell me the wrong stuff...

I do like my friends helping me but my parents think that maybe it's a bad idea.

...my friends aren't the best at supporting. They like to have a joke around and don't care about my education.

...because they might teach you the wrong thing.

Thus students are clear that their friends could help them with social relationships with peers but that teachers could help them with their school work.

QUESTION 8

In relation to having supportive classmates, the students were asked if they liked participating in group work. On the whole, they agreed that they did (77% primary and 78% middle school) but stipulated conditions:

It's O.K. but not when everyone misbehaves and doesn't listen to each other.

Not [group work] with the class because they're loud and sometimes they're very rude to each other. I like reading groups though because they are more quiet.

Reasons for not wanting to participate in group work were contingent upon the strength of friendships:

...it's stressing. If you're with friends, you stuff around and if you're with people who are not your friends, you fight.

Some children were very specific about group size:

Yes, but only in a group of three.

Only four people because you get distracted.

Discussion

These findings contradict those of Peters, Klein and Shadwick (1998), who suggest that students with learning difficulties hate to be identified and labelled because they feel that others look down on them and marginalise them, and that they spend most of their time trying to hide their LD label from their friends. This statement is very ambiguous and it requires further analysis to really understand the feelings of students regarding their difficulties. Not one of the respondents in this study mentioned that they were embarrassed to leave the classroom

for assistance with their learning difficulty. In fact, McCray, Vaughn and Neal (2001) make the point in their research that children with LD are more embarrassed to stay in class and show up their inadequacies than to be pulled out for assistance, as one girl states, "Pull me out and teach me using a tutor" (p. 27). Similarly in the current study, one Year 8 girl responded that she would prefer to go out of the classroom for assistance because:

You'd feel that everyone's looking at you and you'd feel a bit stupid if you stayed in the classroom.

All the students in the McCray et al. (2001) study called for high quality individualised reading instruction in ways that would not cause students embarrassment in front of their peers. Similar comments were made by students involved in this study.

The findings from this study support the work of Burden and Burdett (2005) in that a label of LD does not predispose students to feelings of learned helplessness. In their sample of 50 students diagnosed with dyslexia, there were no students who responded 'yes' to 'My dyslexia makes it impossible for me to do really well at school.' (p. 101). What we need to do for these students is to recognise their disability, as they themselves do, and to offer them the support that they need. To offer effective support we must value students' input and not make assumptions about their apparent needs. The current findings do not support those of Gorman (2001), who suggests that even the teachers' best intentions in helping children with LD can result in stigmatising the child and undermining their self-confidence, and that remedial intervention in the form of in-class support or group withdrawal can result in the child feeling degraded and different.

Peter Westwood (2004) is a proponent of withdrawal for students with LD and states, "It is difficult to meet all the requirements (of intervention) through an in-class support model alone, so an essential place still remains for remedial tuition in a withdrawal setting for students with learning difficulties" (p. 97). Westwood quotes Mather and Roberts (1994), Pikulski (1994) and Pinnell (1997), as they all support distraction free, one-to-one and small group teaching for the best outcome measures for students with reading problems. Student responses to the questions posed in this study also revealed preference for an environment that was noise or distraction free and enabled individualised support. These students also liked small group learning, but only under certain circumstances.

It is clear that students in special education programs have strong perceptions and attitudes about participating in decision processes affecting their schooling, and the majority of students value the opportunity to participate in making decisions about school placements and programs (Taylor, Adelman, Nelson, Smith & Phares, 1989). In this study we have heard the voices of 89 children in support of withdrawal from the classroom for individualised instruction. They recognise their needs and they have individual needs that we must respect. However, these findings in no way condone classroom teachers abrogating their responsibilities for the effective teaching of students with learning difficulties. There should be close liaison between classroom teachers and specialist teachers (Fielding-Barnsley, 2005) and mutual respect for all concerned including, of course, the students themselves.

Conclusion

Provision of quality support to students identified as having a learning disability is critical to achieving the aims of inclusive education in Queensland (Education Queensland, 2005). Two aspects of this framework are student voice and enabling students to participate in decision making about their schooling. In this study the voices of 89 students in the primary and middle years of their schooling who had been identified as having a learning disability were heard. These students expressed a clear preference for being withdrawn from the classroom to receive individualised help. Their reasons included reduced noise level, being provided with individualised help and that their learning disability was not continually displayed in class. As one student stated, 'You'd feel that everyone's looking at you and you'd feel a bit stupid if you stayed in the classroom'. These students' preferences run counter to the assumption in inclusive education that it is better for students to receive help within the classroom. Although this result could have been biased by the questions being given by the learning support teachers; that a clear majority of students from both groups expressed a preference for being withdrawn is a significant finding. This result does not condone classroom teachers abrogating their responsibilities for the effective teaching of students with learning difficulties. Rather it highlights the need for close liaison between classroom teachers and specialist teachers (Fielding-Barnsley, 2005), and for respect among teachers and students. The voices of students receiving learning support need to be included in decision making about the services that they are provided with to ensure that "outcomes [are] maximised for educationally disadvantaged students" (Education Queensland, 2005).

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