

What's in a name?

Peter Westwood argues that a name is important, especially in the field of learning difficulties. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "He who steals my purse steals trash but he who steals my good name steals everything I have."

How do tutors and support teachers in Australia think of and refer to the students they work with? Do they refer to them as a category of special need (dyslexic, ADHD, handicapped, intellectually disabled, mildly autistic, slow learners, low-achievers, Tier 3)? Or simply as Naomi or Jill or Darren or Isaac—just kids who need a bit of extra help? It is interesting to look back and observe how labels have come and gone in the field of learning difficulties, with the frequent changes reflecting a shift in community attitudes, affirmative action, or simply for political correctness.

Since the earliest days of providing assistance for students with special needs a label has inevitably been created to categorize them. Funding then became linked to the label and, before the advent of inclusion, the placement of a child in a particular class or school occurred. It also appears that as soon as a category had been created, we found it necessary to subdivide it by level of severity (borderline, mild, moderate, severe) or to create sub-types within the category (phonological dyslexia, surface dyslexia, visual dyslexia, genetic dyslexia). Even the *Diagnosics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) has had to regularly update its terminology and classifications. For example, the most recent edition (APA, 2013) found it necessary to reduce the number of sub-

categories that had developed over the years under the classification 'learning disabilities'. These sub-types had become too confusing and contributed to difficulty in diagnosis. DSM-5 now simply refers to 'specific learning disorder' and then notes the academic skill area that is affected (e.g., reading, spelling, or math).

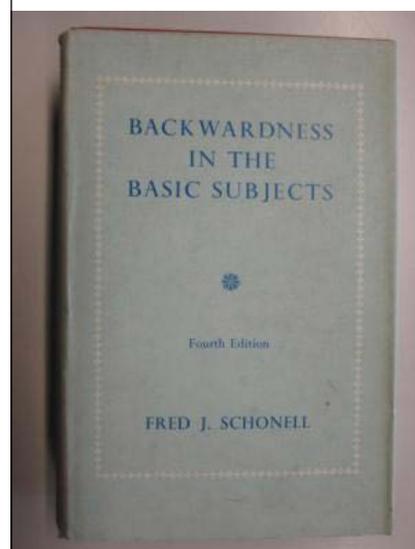
Perhaps the most awful example of sub-dividing a category that existed for many generations was in the old classification under intellectual disability (at the time called mental deficiency or mental handicap in the UK, mental retardation in the USA). This system used descending levels of cognitive competence labelled as feeble-minded, moron, imbecile and idiot (Binet, 1916). It is unbelievable today that for many years an individual could go from being labelled a moron to an imbecile based on a drop of a few IQ points! It is also hard to believe that the American Association of Mental Deficiency (now called the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) didn't officially abolish these categories and terms until 1973.

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When I began my teaching career in England in the 1950s, the popular term for the children I was teaching was 'backward'—a term that had its origins in the writings of Cyril Burt (*The Backward Child*, 1937; *The Causes and Treatment of Backwardness*, 1953) and also in Schonell's book *Backwardness in the Basic Subjects* (1948). Schonell defined a backward student as one who 'compared with other pupils of the same chronological age shows marked educational deficiency.' It didn't take long for others to adopt the term backward and apply it to specific areas of the curriculum. Vernon (1957) for example, used it in the title of her book

Backwardness in Reading. In Australia, McLeod (1960) was referring to 'educational backwardness: general and specific.' The term was still very much in use in the UK in the late 1960s. In some countries the term lives on today—for example, it is very popular in India (Aggarwal, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017).

In the 1950s and 1960s in England, a term 'dull child' also gained traction and appeared in the title of books such as *The education of dull children at the primary stage* (Cheshire Education Committee, 1956). Actually, the term 'dullard' or 'dull child' dates back to the early 1900's (Shields, 1909) and no one seems to have been uncomfortable using it. Fortunately, the term fell out of favour before 1970, but then the equally depressing term educationally subnormal (ESN) became popular. It was first used in the Education Act of 1944 and the Handicapped Pupils and School Health Service Regulations of 1945 (Farrell, 2014). ESN children were those who we would describe today as having mild to moderate intellectual disability and learning difficulties. They attended special schools designated as ESN schools, but unfortunately these schools also became populated by many students who were not intellectually disabled but simply hard to teach and manage. There was also a category in the UK called severely subnormal (SSN), signifying children with complex disabilities and high support needs. Australia had not been averse to using the term subnormal (or retarded), as for



example in the name of the old Bell Street School for Subnormal and Maladjusted Children in Fitzroy. It is interesting to note that concern was already being expressed about the stigmatizing effect of a word like subnormal. In 1967 the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) stated in the *Plowden Report* (1967): 'This term causes unnecessary distress to parents and we suggest that the term 'slow learners' is adopted instead' (p.301).

'Slow learner' was a term that originated in 1935 (Ingram & Martens, 1935) but had gained wide acceptance in the 1960s in the UK, USA and Australia, and was used frequently in book titles (e.g., *Education for slow learners*: Johnson, 1963; *The slow learner in the classroom*: Kephart, 1960; *The education of slow learning children*: Tansley & Gulliford, 1960). In Australia, the University of Queensland was producing a journal at that time called *The Slow Learning Child*—but also using the word backward in the subtitle *Australian Journal on the Education of Backward Children*.

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The term 'learning disability' has an interesting history. It began life as 'word-blindness' in Germany in the late 1800s (Kusssmaul, 1877) and this label was later adopted in Britain by Hinshelwood (1917). In the USA, Orton was still using it in 1925 to describe what we would now term dyslexia. It wasn't until 1963 in the USA that Kirk coined the term 'learning disability' in a conference paper. At the time other categories such as 'perceptual handicap' and 'minimal neurological dysfunction' were also doing the rounds in that country. In the UK, the term 'specific reading retardation' enjoyed a brief shelf-life (Rutter & Yule, 1975). Elsewhere, learning disability gradually evolved into *specific* learning disability (SpLD) and most recently to 'learning disorder' (APA, 2013). Much later, writers in the UK managed to confuse international readers of research by deciding that the words 'learning disability' (LD) were to be used for describing those with an intellectual disability. Up to that time LD had only ever been applied to classify students of good intelligence but with a chronic difficulty learning to read, write

and spell. That is certainly how it is used currently in Australia.

The term 'handicapped children' was used very widely and over a long period of time in English-speaking countries, but eventually it too came under scrutiny. The Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People in the UK decided to introduce the term 'children with special educational needs' (SEN) in the Warnock Report (1978). The committee defined this term as applying to 'children with learning problems or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children the same age.' Australia was very happy to adopt this SEN term almost immediately, and it remains in popular use. The term 'special needs' has not been viewed positively by all stakeholders, some criticizing it as unnecessarily stigmatizing a particular population of children (Snow, 2016). The latest term used in the UK is Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This change occurred as a result of Part 3 of the Children and Families Act (Government of UK, 2014) and the *Special Educational Needs & Disability Code of Practice* (Department of Education/Department of Health, 2015).

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The Disability Rights Movement in the 1970s saw the beginnings of what is known as 'person-first language' in writing about disability—we should say a student with autism, not an autistic student, or persons with a disability, not the disabled. It was claimed that placing the disability label first unjustifiably separates a person from the normal population by highlighting a difference. Tobin (2011) has even suggested that, 'Society at large has used these labels as a way of marginalizing others' potential and fitting them into a neat little box from which they will never break free.' It is interesting to note that in 1981 the United Nations seemed to overlook the person-first trend when it proclaimed the International Year of Disabled Persons. Eventually someone must have asked, 'What's in a name?' because by 1992 the person-first

principle was at last recognized when UN declared an International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

I am sure that we have not seen the last changes to terminology, but some recent descriptors seem to be bowing down a little too far to political correctness. For example, is it really helpful to refer to a person with a disability as 'differently abled'? And are gifted children with a reading problem really 'twice-exceptional'? One can be forgiven for asking, 'What on earth is in these names?'

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A new name for LDA?

Members of LDA will be aware that the Association is currently considering a change of name.

One of the issues considered by the recent review of LDA was the option of seeking to expand its membership to a wider group of members, including classroom teachers, with a view to promoting effective evidence-based instruction for all students. In considering this option LDA identified the name of the organisation as a potentially limiting factor in the growth of our association. It was felt that our current name does not reflect LDA's broader aim of ensuring that all students have access to an effective instructional program that is preventative in terms of reducing the likelihood of learning difficulties that arise from poor or ineffective teaching, as for example in those cases that have been described as 'teaching casualties', in the sense that their problems result from ineffective teaching rather than any fundamental problem in their ability to learn, given appropriate instruction. It was felt that a new name that better expresses the broader aims of the association would attract more members and raise the profile of the organisation. Hence the search for a new name.

At the same time changing the name could alienate many of our current members who see themselves as committed to supporting the needs of students with learning difficulties, and feel that a change in name may bring with it a change in focus, and perhaps a rejection of their core commitment to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties.

This poses something of a dilemma for LDA. In seeking to expand our membership to include a wider range of teachers whose role involves teaching initial skills in a regular classroom rather than providing intervention support in a small group or on a one-to-one basis, are we going to lose our core group of members? And is a change in name really going to attract a whole lot of new members to LDA?

A number of potential new names have already been suggested. These include *Australian Association for Effective Teaching*, *Australian Association for Effective Instruction*, *Learn Australia*, *The Learning League*, *Learning Science Australia*, *Learning Scientists Australia*, *Australian Science of Learning Association*, and others.

This is not the first time that LDA has gone through a name change.

It started off in Victoria in 1965 as the *Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria*, but when it became a national organisation a new name was necessary, and in 1987 it became the *Australian Remedial Education Association*. However, in the 1990s, as the term 'remedial' fell into disfavour, the name was changed again to *Australian Resource Educators Association*. The name *Learning Difficulties Australia* was adopted in 2001.

So is it time for a new name for LDA? Or are we better off with our current name?

What attracts, and keeps, new members?

Is it a name? Or is it the quality and the nature of the services we provide?

This is a decision that our members will be asked to make at a Special General Meeting of the Association scheduled for Saturday 9 May in Melbourne. Further details of this meeting will be provided in due course. In the meantime members are encouraged to respond to President Lorraine Hammond's invitation for members to contribute alternative names to her by email at enquiries@ldaustralia.org prior to the next LDA Council meeting on 14 April, or to seek further information about the proposed change of name from her or other members of LDA Council.