

Dyslexia Assessment and Support Services

Consultant: Karen Starkiss



Experience

I have been involved in education for over 30 years, mainly in England and latterly Australia. I have 30 years class teaching experience as a class teacher, Learning Difficulties Consultant, School Improvement Officer and School Principal. I have worked in inner city and rural schools; primary and secondary schools and I have taught teenage 'school refusers.' My achievements include:

- Special Needs Consultant for 3 years
- Principal for 4 years of a school recognised as one of England's best primaries even though we had the highest number of students with severe LD in our county
- Royal Society of Arts Diploma for Specific learning Difficulties (dyslexia). Qualified to carry out a full learning assessment for individual students and adults. Write, monitor and develop individual learning programs.
- Lectured teachers, ran courses and provided training, both locally and nationally, covering a number of areas connected with education
- Wrote 2 books for parents to support children at home with reading and with maths. Also established a support group for the parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN).
- Invited by an Education Authority in England to work alongside the SEN Advisor to support schools across the county in showing them how to integrate children with learning/emotional/physical and sensory difficulties into the mainstream classroom successfully.
- Have been responsible for Improving the "Quality of Teaching and Learning" projects in three schools, including two categorised as "Failing" schools, with excellent results.
- Invited to Buckingham Palace in 2007 in recognition of my "Outstanding contribution to education." for promoting inclusivity and significantly raising standards in our lowest ability students not just the ones with high ability.
- Registered teacher with the Victorian Institute of Teachers. All qualifications have been checked by them.
- Trained teachers, class assistants, psychologists and speech therapists throughout Victoria. Have trained teachers from all state schools in the ACT to be able to implement changes in their schools and become more dyslexia aware and inclusive for all students with LD. Will be working with schools in the Northern Territory during 2014

About Me

As a parent or an adult, looking for answers and support for learning difficulties, it's very important to know that you are making the correct choice. When you look online or in the phone directories very little information is given about the person you are trusting to help you; what their qualifications are, their experience, their interest and enthusiasm in helping you or your child. As a parent, myself, of children with special needs I can understand how the whole process must be very difficult and how you may be scared of making the wrong decision. That is why I feel it is important to explain who I am and what I can offer.

I had been in teaching for over 20 years until 2006 when my family and I left England to come to Australia to be with our son and our four grandchildren aged from 13 years to 2 months as I write.

During my career I have taught a significant number of students who have required considerable care and attention, many of whom struggled to succeed academically. In Devon I became principal of a primary school which was categorised as "Causing Concern." I worked with the teachers, parents and students to double the number on roll within 18 months and take it to the top of the Devon League Tables for 2 consecutive years in 2005 and 2006 and 10th out of over 17,000 schools in England for standards. This was despite the fact that my school had the largest number of children with learning difficulties in the county.

Early in my careers, for three years, I was a Special Needs Consultant and, in this role, ran support groups for parents of children with a variety of special needs and learned a lot about their general concerns and anxieties in approaching and dealing with schools. I have run courses locally and nationally about integrating children with Special Needs into Mainstream classrooms.

I have personal experience of the problems that parents face, the frustrations and successes. One of my children and two of my grandchildren were/are considered "Gifted" in reading, both had reading ages of more than 6 years above their actual age by the time they were 7 years old. Two of my children are dyslexic and have struggled with learning to read and spell. They had trouble organising themselves and as they progressed through school, the older they got the less support they received. I tried to help them and explain their problems to the teachers. Unfortunately, being in education myself, I knew there was a good chance I would be labelled an interfering mum who couldn't accept that her children were "Lazy" (a common label given to dyslexics).

As far as my experience of dyslexia is concerned, I have assessed and taught children from 5 to 12 years, teenagers and adults. It has been an extremely fulfilling experience for me, sharing their successes. But it has also been very sad to hear how their difficulties have affected not only their learning but also their confidence and self-esteem.

One of the first teenagers I worked with was a very bright girl, the youngest of a family of four children who were all excelling at school. When I asked her what she hoped to gain from me working with her; I thought she would say that she would like to be able to read the same books as her peers or write confidently but she said, "I just don't want my mates to think I'm stupid."

Many students I see are highly talented in one or more areas. They can be highly articulate, imaginative and creative, they can design and build without using plans and they appear to be able to see what the finished product should look like, they can be great at problem solving, able to think outside the box. There is nothing wrong with their intelligence, they just can't learn the way that we teach them therefore we need to teach them the way that they can learn to enable them to reach their true potential and raise their self-esteem and confidence. My role is to discover their personal strengths and weaknesses and then I can advise schools and parents/carers how to teach and support them.

*In addition to assessments I provide training courses for teachers and parents. I can also run courses for employers and advise about making the workplace Dyslexia-Friendly.

