Learning disabilities, home background, and beliefs: their impact on school, learning and achievement

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Learning Disabilities, Home Background, and Beliefs: Their Impact on School, Learning and Achievement

by

Mary Elizabeth Pryce, BA, MScEd

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree Doctor of Philosophy from the

University of Wollongong Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia

Faculty of Education 1997
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Brian Cambourne for the academic guidance he has provided, for his faith in me and this research, for his commitment to education and research and for the encouragement he offered me throughout this study. It has been a privilege to work with such a dedicated and caring human being.

I am also grateful to Dr. Christine Fox for her support, and sustaining advice that she has generously given to this study. I am also glad of her friendship.

The technological support and ceaseless encouragement that have been given to me by Milton Lamb have been profuse and there are no words that can express to him my gratitude and appreciation.

To Dr. Michael Pryce for the many precious hours that he took to proof-read this thesis, and for his constant reassurances which have brought me much comfort, I am most grateful. Thank you.

My indebtedness to my dear friends Norman Carefoot and Sharron and Rod Sumner who supported me in so many ways throughout my teacher training cannot ever be erased. Without their assistance I would never have managed to reach this stage.

Thanks also to Lise MacDonald who freely gave time and knowledge to help me improve my French speaking skills which aided me in obtaining my first teaching position.

I wish to thank the staff of the Education Faculty at the University of Wollongong for their help, counsel and companionship which they generously bestowed on me during this undertaking.

Many thanks also to the NSW Department of School Education for allowing me to conduct this research in three of the State high schools. Thank you also to the staff of those schools who provided kindly support and co-operation.

I especially want to express my appreciation and thanks to the parents and the students who participated in the study. They were all so kind and enthusiastic.
. Dedication

This work is dedicated to my immediate family,
Milton, my Mother, Sam, Michael and Andrew.

Although my father is deceased, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude
the influence he had in creating in me a desire for knowledge.

I also dedicate this thesis to my extended family,
my grandchildren, their mothers, my brothers, their wives,
my nieces and nephews, my aunts and cousins
and Doris and Larry.

and to my friends of many years
Ann and Sam, Carola and Ernst and Gail and Keith
who have always been there.

I would like also to dedicate this study to Reverend, Dr. Daniel O'Leary
whose encouragement has left me with an enduring desire
to become the most competent teacher I can.
Abstract

Twenty-nine students from three State High Schools within the New South Wales Department of School Education’s South Coast Region were identified by teachers and school administrators as being ‘learning disabled’. The major defining criteria used were that the students were:

- functioning academically at least two years behind their peers,
- of normal intelligence
- free of any other emotional and/or physical disadvantages.

The study explored the nature of the relationship between home background, prior experiences of these students, their beliefs about their own learning and schooling, and the beliefs that other major stakeholders such as parents and teachers held about their educational potential.

The main data collection technique used in the study was the ‘in-depth interview’ in the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry. The interviews were conducted with the 29 students, their parents, and teachers. Using a questionnaire as an instrument, the interviews explored the memories and beliefs which the different stakeholders held.

The results of the analysis revealed several factors which are related to and impact on the ‘condition’ known as Learning Disabilities (LD). For example Grade 2 emerged as a critical year in the LD student’s academic life because this was primarily the grade level in which the students first encountered difficulties academically and with teachers.

The belief that learning disabilities are mainly due to neurological damage, genetic programming or a diet problem is not supported by the data in this study.

The learning disabilities of the kind manifested by the students who participated in this study are best explained in terms of a mismatch between the home culture and the school culture. The factors that are included in the assessment of both cultures are the values, beliefs, attitudes, habits and practices that are associated with school, education, learning and literacy and numeracy. The mismatch occurs when the values and attitudes of the home culture do not tend to lend themselves to high academic achievement and when the school culture contains beliefs and attitudes that do not lend support to those students who are without coping skills for academic achievement.

The study also showed that there are multifarious problems in the LD student’s life that contribute to the inducement of learning disabilities.
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