

Special Assistance Program in Victorian Primary Schools

By Henry Austen, 13 July 2012

The development and implementation of the "Special Assistance Program" in Victorian Primary Schools during the period 1979 - 1982 constituted the most significant innovation in the provision of special education services to children experiencing learning difficulties and in addressing declining literacy and numeracy standards. Up until the political directive to initiate this program was given, there had been no policy within the *Department of Education and Early Childhood Development* <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/> (previously *Education Department of Victoria*) directing Principals of Primary Schools to develop special programs for pupils at risk of illiteracy and innumeracy.¹

The core element of this substantial change in the delivery of special educational services to children was the new role of the school based *Special Assistance Resource Teacher (SART)* which was the focus of this world-first breakthrough in class room integration of pupils experiencing learning difficulties. The role incorporated all the elements of the service previously performed by external consultants visiting schools.

Declining Literacy and Numeracy Skills

From the early 1960s, the *Education Department of Victoria* (Australia), had developed an extensive range of programs in primary schools that sought to develop the individual ability of each pupil. Also, the ratio of pupils to teachers in schools had been significantly reduced over time and schools had become much more independent in the development of school based remedial programs.

In spite of this, there existed large numbers of children in Victorian primary and secondary schools urgently in need of special assistance in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy. This situation was reflected in the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives *Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties* in 1976. The committee had commissioned research by the *Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)* that found that 15% to 20% of children completing their primary education had not achieved a functional level of literacy.²

A submission to the Committee prepared by the *Australian Remedial Education Association (AREA)* stated that, in the experience of their members, the incidence of specific learning difficulties as defined by the Committee was between 20 and 25 per cent of the school population

The Victorian Education Department's submission to the Committee said that,

"there is a steady and constant stream of children entering State secondary schools, without the necessary communication skills to participate or success in secondary school curriculum."

By the late 1970s, following a nationwide ACER testing project commissioned by the Australian Government, widely felt concerns were starting to emerge publically in regard to the capacity of primary schools to deliver effective education in basic skills.

The Warnock Committee of Inquiry in the UK was to have considerable influence on thinking about special education in Australia, and especially on the Review of Special Education in Victoria. The Warnock Report,

"recommended that categories of disability should be abandoned, and that special education should embrace a much wider range of educational needs. The report had implications not only for the broad range of needs considered to come under the heading of special education, but also for the organisation of special education provision and for the training of classroom and special teachers."³

In December 1980, The Director of *Adult Education in Victoria* said,

"It is astonishing how many people in Victoria are illiterate. I mean people who might have spent 12 years at school and still can't read and write. We get young mothers coming in here whose husbands don't even know they're illiterate. If they're asked to pay a bill or get a driver's licence they manage to bluff their way through somehow."⁴

In November 1979 at a *Technical and Further Education Victoria Seminar*, Robert Fordham the State Labor Opposition's Education spokesman said,

"The other reality of life is that ... (a) proportion of young men and women (are) leaving secondary school without an acceptable and proper level of literacy and numeracy. Now, the Keeves and Bourke Study, done by ACER showed that nearly a quarter of the young men and women leaving secondary school don't have an acceptable level of literacy and numeracy. ... it's surely unacceptable to us today and in the 1980s. Whether they're unemployed or employed, young people need to be able to read to survive in our society as it's now emerging. The study points up the need for far greater endeavour in terms of remedial education, both at primary and secondary school."⁵

At the same seminar, Mr Leslie Pickett, Group Personnel Controller of Olex Cables said

"... information gleaned from industry sources indicates that a serious problem is being faced in relation to the low level of basic skills in literacy and numeracy possessed by a not insignificant portion of school leavers entering the labour force. ... some studies which have been carried out indicate ... the extent of the problem. The ACT TAFE Authority, at a meeting in May 1976, had before it ... the paper, entitled "Adult Illiteracy and Remedial Education ", (that) pointed to the following as examples of deficiencies in relation to basic literacy and numeracy skills:

- "... general findings in Victoria have indicated that 15 per cent of 12- year -olds are functionally illiterate. This reflects similar findings in Britain and the USA.
- A Victorian Department of Education survey indicated that 45 per cent of forms one and two students in some Melbourne schools were at least two years behind their chronological age in reading skills. About 25 per cent of the students surveyed were described as functionally illiterate.
- The *Victorian Federation of State School Mothers' Clubs* found that one student in six of 77,000 they surveyed needed special assistance to improve reading skills.

... the fact remains that in today's world and in the world which will exist in the foreseeable future, those who do not have an adequate command of literacy and numeracy and who do not possess the capacity to communicate effectively, are and will continue to be disadvantaged members of our society. ... it would seem that a significant portion of young Australians would fall into this disadvantaged category. ... it would seem that obviously much more emphasis within the primary and secondary system must be placed on the basics literacy and numeracy."⁶

In the closing address of the AREA National Conference in 1979, it was stated that,

"...the problem of underachievement in Australian schools does not arise from a shortage of explanations, answers or techniques. It is a product of the shortage of the will and the resources which are needed to translate explanations into actions, and to give effect to answers and techniques."⁷

Victorian Government Intervention

In late May 1979, within a month of being re-elected, the Hamer Liberal Government announced Victoria's first major review of its educational policies for more than 50 years. The review was charged with identifying the aims and objectives of education in Victoria and with determining the policies, structures and administrative changes necessary to achieve them.⁸ A consultative committee consisting of prominent educators and private sector leaders chaired by the Honourable Norman Lacy, Assistant Minister of Education was established to provide an independent view and to analyse submissions from individuals and organisations. The review resulted in an historic promulgation of a new educational policy for primary and secondary schooling in Victoria in the *White Paper on Strategies and Structures for Education in Victoria*.⁹ The policy included recommendations for changing the way support services for children experiencing learning difficulties were delivered so as to enhance their opportunities for learning and to involve parents as partners with teachers in the education of their children. The key statement that set the scene for a major historic change in the location and delivery of special education services emphasised:

"the importance of providing services for children with particular needs within the secure environment of their local schools and through easily accessible district-based multi-disciplinary centres."¹⁰

Anticipating the new direction, in July 1979 Mr Lacy established a *Ministerial Committee on Special Assistance Programs*.¹¹ The committee consisted of people drawn from school staffs, special education facilities, teacher training institutions and the Education Department administration. The committee's report was the basis upon which the *Special Assistance Program* was established. The major components recommended for the program were:

1. the designation of a *Special Assistance Resource Teacher (SART)* at 877 Primary Schools throughout Victoria (full-time at 575 schools with more than 300 pupils; and half-time at 302 schools with between 150 and 300 pupils)
2. the development of 20 day *Special Assistance In-Service Training Course* to be delivered to designated SARTs without formal training in Special Education at four teacher training colleges

3. the re-organisation of the existing special education support services into 50 state wide "Special Assistance Support Centres" to be accessed by each primary school through its SART.

The process for the establishment of the *Special Assistance Program* in Victorian Primary Schools¹² was outlined in a speech made by Mr Lacy to SARTs at a seminar on 15 December 1980. In it he announced the most significant development in remedial education in Victoria with a strategic plan for addressing falling literacy and numeracy standards. <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/29777> The totally new component of the *Special Assistance Program* was the provision of 1000 SARTs for "the delivery of services to children with special needs." These designated teachers were given "a major on-site school responsibility for facilitating a productive relationship between parents and pupils and teachers."¹³ The program involved the training of these primary teachers as SARTs and their placement in schools. Their role was the early detection and remediation of children at risk of illiteracy and innumeracy.¹⁴

The Victorian Director of Primary Education, Kevin Collins and Assistant Director, David Holloway, enthusiastically backed the *Special Assistance Program* and its concept of the SART. They devoted themselves to its implementation issuing a memorandum to all primary schools which advised that the term "special assistance" would replace "remedial teaching".¹⁵ While acknowledging that provision for children with learning difficulties remained a significant problem in primary schools, the thrust of the memorandum was that principals should "develop comprehensive educational policies related to special assistance". A senior "or otherwise qualified" teacher was to be appointed to coordinate and implement the *Special Assistance Program* within the school, with the primary responsibility of ensuring that children with learning difficulties should remain "successfully" in the classroom. In-service programs would be developed for teachers appointed to be responsible for special assistance. In schools with an enrolment of over 300 students, the SART would not have additional responsibility for a grade.¹⁶

Special Assistance Resource Teachers

Concept

The concept of a school based resource teacher identifying deficits in literacy and numeracy in individual children and providing assistance and resources to classroom teachers to address those deficits through special programs had been supported by the findings of numerous major committees of inquiry. Reports such as:

- the Report of the UK *Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science* (the Bullock Report, 1975)
- the Report of the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives *Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties* (the Cadman Report, 1976)
- the Report of the *Working Party on Provisions for Children with Special Needs* (ACT, 1977)
- the Report of the UK *Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People* (the Warnock Report, 1978)
- the Report of *Task Force 8 to the Victorian State Council for Special Education* (1979)
- the Report of the *Victorian Ministerial Committee on Special Assistance Programs* (1980)

The educational philosophy that was the foundation upon which the *Special Assistance Program* was built had its origins in these reports. That philosophy recognises the profound influence that a child's learning environment has on his behaviour and learning. It also acknowledges the right of children to have their learning needs met in common structural and social conditions. Arising from this philosophical perspective emerges the inescapable proposition that special assistance for children at risk of illiteracy and innumeracy (over and above the normal learning provisions available to all children) is an essential part of a school's functioning and that the designation of a specially trained resource teacher to provide that assistance to children, their classroom teachers and their parents is an integral part of a team approach to curriculum development, teaching and all other aspects of schooling. This position was strongly supported by both the Australian Schools Commission's *Report for the Triennium 1976-78*¹⁷ and the Warnock Report, which went further to assert that if ordinary schools are to improve in their efforts for children with special needs they will require special support from within their organisation.

Functions

The role and functions of the SARTs were specifically prescribed by the Government after extensive consultation with the *Victorian Teachers Union* (VTU) and the *Victorian Primary Principals Association* (VPPA). They were:

- To advise and assist classroom teachers in respect to: - the identification of children in need of special assistance, - the diagnosis of the learning problems being experienced by such children, - the prescription of appropriate programs of special assistance which may be necessary to treat such problems, - the implementation of such programs
- To consult with and assist parents in respect to their role in the implementation of any program of special assistance which has been prescribed for their children
- To identify and recommend for referral children in need of psychological guidance, speech therapy or other specialist services
- To ensure that children needing special assistance continue to participate in appropriate programs throughout their primary school life.¹⁸

Appointment

The implementation of the first stage of the *Special Assistance Program* was only possible after further consultation and a signed agreement with the VTU and the VPPA.

As a result, from the beginning of the 1981 school year SARTs were designated by their schools and appointed to the 575 primary schools with enrolments of greater than 300 pupils. They were mandated to establish the *Special Assistance Program* in their schools. The Education Department's Special Services Division and the Primary Division monitored the progress of the implementation and produced a number of evaluative reports that were presented to the Minister.¹⁹

From the beginning of the 1982 school year, schools with an enrolment of between 150 and 300 pupils designated and appointed a SART to carry out the role on a half-time basis. This resulted in an additional 302 primary schools in Victoria having a school based resource teacher, bringing the total to 877 schools. It was not planned to designate a SART at schools with less than 150 pupils. At such schools it was planned that the Principal or an appointed staff member would access services

from the Special Assistance Resource Centres for children at these schools in need of such services.
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In-Service Training Courses for SARTs

A major component of stage one was the in-service education component for the SARTs designated by their schools for the new role. A survey of the qualifications and experience of the 575 designated SARTs was undertaken to assess their training requirements. The responses indicated that 200 of the designated teachers had already completed special education training courses. Of these 102 were also experienced in special education teaching. As well 28 of the 375 remaining designated teachers were experienced special education teachers.

Four teacher training colleges (Melbourne, Burwood, Bendigo and Warrnambool) were chosen to provide the training programs. A course planning committee was established and drew up a set of principles and a course content outline for a 20-day, one day per week special assistance training course. The course content dealt with approaches to language teaching (especially reading), mathematics teaching, and identification of learning problems. The focus of the course was to enable SARTs to devise and implement programs of special assistance in their own schools. An invitation to enrol in the course was sent to all designated SARTs by the Acting Director of Teacher Education on 29 January 1981. They were told that attendance at the courses was voluntary. The responses received by the colleges overwhelmed them. Very few SARTs did not enrol in the course and many teachers from schools of less than 300 pupils were voluntarily designated by their Principals as SARTs and also sought enrolment in the training course. As a result not all requests for the in-service training course in the *Special Assistance Program* could be met in the first year of its availability. During 1981, 290 SARTs undertook the course.

The response from schools to the in-service training course was way beyond the Education Department's expectations and reflected the extent of expressed and latent concerns schools had for children at risk of illiteracy and innumeracy. A survey of 160 teachers who had completed this course found that, despite initial concerns, there was a good deal of support from school principals and teachers for the SART concept. However, most SARTs felt they needed more in-service training or further training in special education before they felt competent to fulfil their roles.²¹ AREA shared a concern that teachers undertaking SART duties were not qualified in special education, but their proposals to the course committee were rejected.²²

Special Assistance Resource Centres

The Report of the *Victorian Ministerial Committee on Special Assistance Programs* (1980), in one of its major recommendations, identified the need to reorganise and integrate the range of specialist professional services available (external to the school) into a single co-ordinated service. To implement this recommendation, Norman Lacy established a Working Party within the Victorian Education Department to examine and report on the means to achieve this objective.

The report of the Working Party was completed in December 1980. It recognised that:

"...from the points of view of some parents, and of some schools, there would appear to exist an array of uncoordinated and seemingly unattainable services."

Accordingly, it recommended

"...for a school requiring a service in respect to a child's difficulties, there should be a single point of reference to all services in that area"

and further that there was a need

"to locate services so that they are readily available, to schools having regard to distances and transport, and to the concentration and co-ordination of the various disciplines of the support services, and so that they reflect the distribution and the needs of the school population."

Early in 1981, work began on planning for the reorganisation all the relevant special education services provided by the Education Department into a single co-ordinated service delivery system under the *Special Assistance Program*. Included in the integration were:

- Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services Centres
- Special Education Units
- Administrative Units
- Remedial Gymnasium Centres
- Speech Therapy Centres
- the Reading Treatment and Research Centre

As a result, a reorganised multi-disciplinary service was created on a "one stop" referral basis through 50 state-wide *Special Assistance Resource Centres* allocated one to each Primary Education Inspectorial District throughout Victoria. The professional disciplines offered at each centre included: educational psychology, social work, speech therapy and special education. The availability of these services to primary schools was accessed and co-ordinated by the designated SART within each school and in schools with less than 150 pupils by the Principal.

Assessment of the Special Assistance Program

Mr George Cook, Vice-Chairman of the Warnock Committee (UK) after visiting Victoria twice to assess the progress of the *Special Assistance Program*, concluded that,

"the Victorian Government is grappling with the issues raised in the Warnock Committee at a level not yet achieved anywhere else in the world"²³

On 9 September 1981, Norman Lacy, told the Legislative Assembly of the Victorian Parliament,

"Although the Special Assistance Program is still in its infancy, the progress of the first stage has been quite remarkable. There is no doubt that it has the positive support of the parents, teachers and principals of the State's primary schools. In my view, it is one of the most significant directions undertaken in co-operative educational planning in this country and deserves the unreserved support of everyone who is genuinely committed to improving the

quality of educational outcomes particularly for those children whom the school system has been failing.”²⁴

During 1982, a study was undertaken at Monash University that analysed the *Special Assistance Program* within the theoretical framework of innovation and change. It provided practical recommendations for the introduction of the educational innovation into Victorian primary schools. A needs assessment technique was employed to enable principals, SARTs, class teachers and *Special Assistance Resource Centre* consultants to articulate their needs in terms that would enable the *Special Assistance Program* to be planned and implemented effectively. The results of the study indicated that there was unanimous agreement amongst principals, teachers and consultants that it is important to introduce the *Special Assistance Program* to Victorian primary school children. The data suggested that all respondent groups perceived the new role of the SART as an appropriate innovation in the provision of specialised educational assistance for children. The necessity for a close working liaison between the *Special Assistance Resource Centre* consultant and the SART, and between the Principal and the class teachers, was highlighted in the findings.²⁵

Demise of the Special Assistance Program

In April 1982, the Cain Labor Government was elected with commitments to the VTU including the reduction of class sizes in primary schools by redeploying SARTs back to class teaching roles.

AREA reported that "the SART concept would eventually give way to new policies under the Department of Education integration program. By 1982 SAR teachers were no longer being appointed to primary schools, leaving individual schools to decide whether to appoint a SAR teacher from their staffing allocation. There was no indication of what curriculum and in-service support would be provided for schools conducting a special assistance program..."²⁶

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- ¹ Newton, H. F. (1982) "The Development of the Role of Special Assistance Resource Teacher in Primary Schools: the Utilisation of a Needs Assessment Technique to Identify and Assess the Requirements of Personnel in the Implementation of the Special Assistance Program in Schools" Monash University, M.Ed Minor thesis. p.xiii
- ² Parliament of Australia, Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties 1974-76 (14 October 1976) "Learning Difficulties in Children and Adults"
- ³ Warnock, M. (1978). "Special Educational Needs: a Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young people". London: HMSO
- ⁴ Delves, Tony, Director of Adult Education, Victoria, (9 December 1980), "The Sun Newspaper"
- ⁵ Fordham, Mr Robert C, (15 November 1979) Deputy Leader of the State Opposition and Shadow Minister for Education, Speech at a seminar organised by Technical and Further Education Victoria TAFE
- ⁶ Pickett, Mr Leslie (15 November 1979) Group Personnel Controller, Olex Cables Limited, Speech at a seminar organised by Victorian TAFE
- ⁷ Matthews, R. (1979). Closing Address, AREA National Conference. Australian Journal of Remedial Education, 12 (2), 4.
- ⁸ Hunt, A.J. Ministerial Statement on the Aims and Objectives of Education in Victoria. In "Victoria Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid", 1980, 80, 2, pp.64-66
- ⁹ Hunt, A.J. and Lacy, N.H, *White Paper on Strategies and Structures for Education in Victoria*. Melbourne, The Victorian Government Printer, 1980
- ¹⁰ Hunt, A.J. and Lacy, N.H., 1980, p.23
- ¹¹ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, Minister of Educational Services (9 September 1981) *The Special Assistance Program - A Ministerial Statement on New Directions in Literacy and Numeracy*, Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria
- ¹² Letters to the Editor, (10 July 1980) "The Age Newspaper", Melbourne
- ¹³ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, Assistant Minister of Education (15 December 1980), *The Special Assistance Program - a speech at the Opening of the Seminar of Special Assistance Resource Teachers at the Hawthorn State College*
- ¹⁴ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (9 September 1981)
- ¹⁵ Collins, M. K. (1980). "Memorandum to Heads of Schools and District Inspectors on Special Assistance Programs in Primary Schools", Reprinted in Australian Journal of Remedial Education, 12 (4), 2-3.
- ¹⁶ Jenkinson, Josephine C. (2006)"A History of Learning Difficulties Australia: part three – the Journal", Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities Volume 11, Number 2, 2006, pp. 73-81
- ¹⁷ Australian Schools Commission, *Report for the Triennium 1976-78* (p.241) "The main emphasis in ordinary schools should be on adapting the procedures in the ordinary classroom to individual differences among a wider range of children. This will often involve substantial organisational changes which ... allow specialists to assist ordinary ones in the normal learning setting."
- ¹⁸ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (15 December 1980)
- ¹⁹ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (15 December 1980)
- ²⁰ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (15 December 1980)
- ²¹ Wishart, L. (1983). *SART Program*, AREA Bulletin, 15 (3), 12-15.
- ²² Jenkinson, Josephine C. (2006)
- ²³ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (15 December 1980)
- ²⁴ Lacy, The Hon. Norman MP, (9 September 1981)
- ²⁵ Newton, H. F. (1982) p.xiii-xiv
- ²⁶ AREA Bulletin, March 1983Vol 15 No 1