



**The Education
Institute is
Committed to
Supporting Students
with Learning
Problems and
Specific Learning
Difficulties**



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One of the main priorities for the Education Institute is the support of students with additional educational support needs (learning problems, specific learning difficulties and disabilities). The main focus of attention during 2007 - 2008 was in relation to the needs of students with learning problems and specific learning difficulties.

In order to ensure that the needs of young people are met, the Education Institute launched a pilot program in eight Independent Schools during 2007 - 2008 with the goal of providing support to all primary schools in 2008 - 2009, and to preparatory and secondary schools in subsequent years. Other important initiatives focus on the needs of students with disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual and autism spectrum disorder).

Traditional responses to students with Learning Difficulties (learning problems and specific learning difficulties) have been to find the fault within the child and then attempt to fix the fault. Fortunately, those days are over. Today, experts understand that students with learning difficulties sit in all classrooms, and it is within this context that change must take place – with quality support from an effective classroom teacher, as well as additional specialist support as appropriate.

The intent of the pilot program was to enhance educational provision for students with Learning Difficulties and ensure that they had appropriate levels of support and access to the full range of educational experiences and opportunities. The pilot project emphasized the development of knowledge about students with learning difficulties and how to respond to their needs within the classroom. The Education Institute team, supported by a contracted team of experts from Education Queensland International (EQI), worked with principals and staff to help them understand the need for a coordinated approach to help students with learning difficulties – within the classroom program, not through a separate, unique curriculum program. The team focused on working with Learning Difficulties Coordinators, subject coordinators and teachers within English, mathematics and science departments, as well as with entire staff groups in the areas of classroom management and learning engagement. Although the effort was launched in the eight pilot schools, general information meetings were held for all schools.

The program's philosophy is driven by the research-based Response to Intervention approach, delivered through the Three Tiered Model of support:

Tier 1 focuses entirely on the practices of the classroom teacher and the classroom program, with some input from the role of the Learning Difficulties Coordinator.

Tier 2 involves the classroom teacher and the Learning Difficulties Coordinator working together to plan and teach to scaffold students who require greater support than Tier 1.

Tier 3 support involves intensive pedagogy, often involving specialists, beyond the first and second layers of scaffolded teaching.

During the pilot project, the team focused on Tiers 1 and 2 because subject coordinators, class teachers and Learning Difficulties Coordinators have the potential to most powerfully improve the school experience for students with Learning Difficulties. Obtaining quality results requires shared knowledge and a commitment to quality curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices.

Through the process, team members detailed extensive observations, as well as school-requested professional development and coaching support, to cement real change in practice. The driving force behind the project was to ensure that all students received an appropriate level of support to ensure that they were able to fully realize their potential.

A paradigm shift in thinking was required in achieving success. The pilot project's emphasis was on the classroom teacher and classroom teaching and learning practices. For some schools this approach was a challenge; many people adhered to the belief that the team should work with individual students on a set of specialized skills separate and different from the core business of the classroom teacher. However, over time, school staff understood that a coordinated

approach to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties, centred on the classroom program, was the most effective and efficient way forward.

There was also a greater awareness of the need to focus on the entitlement of students to a quality educational experience, as opposed to making specialist provision that was different from the experience of most students. The schools began to place greater emphasis on the need for teachers to identify effective strategies for ensuring that students had full access to educational opportunities.

In addition to the role of the classroom teacher as a key factor in successful outcomes, the complementary role of the learner must also be addressed. Because the team found that some classrooms still have a tendency to be teacher-centered, rather than student-centered, the group sought to foster active engagement in thinking and problem solving in the classroom. The eight pilot schools are now at different stages in their journey toward meeting the needs of all students; in particular, those experiencing difficulties.

In order to ensure the schools' sustainability and a clear way forward for the incoming team, the project team members have left very detailed, user-friendly documentation that will allow schools to continue to nurture professional growth. All strategies were recorded with detailed facilitators' notes as well as resources and presenters' notes for participants to use in their classrooms. These will be part of the orientation for the incoming team and will be distributed to schools in electronic formats when translation is complete.

The Education Institute recognizes that schools still need intensive preparation and support in this field in order to be fully qualified to meet the needs of those students.