



History of Conductive Education in Western Australia

As in many parts of the world, the present Conductive Education (CE) movement in Western Australia (WA) has grown out of the persistence of individual families who believed there must be a better system of intervention for their children with motor disabilities.

In the early days (circa 1990) the discovery of conductive education methods, either through overseas travel or through engaging the services of a conductor to work with their child privately, gave families an insight into the benefits of early intervention programmes.

Having experienced improvements in their child's development, the families began to request that mainstream service providers here in WA look to offer conductive education within the range of interventions. In order to lobby more effectively, they established the Western Australian chapter of the National Association for Conductive Education of WA (NACE WA), a parent led member group with a small number of supportive educational, medical, and allied health professionals.

Ultimately, the aim was to make conductive education available in early Intervention and school aged children, no matter where the child received their education. Working towards this aim was a long, hard road (as indeed it continues to be!) but even early on, as they worked to raise awareness of conductive education, significant wins were achieved.

A number of attempts were made in the 1980s and 1990s to establish Conductive Education programs by different organisations including Princess Margaret Hospital, the Centre for Cerebral Palsy (or the Cerebral Palsy Association of Western Australia as it was known at the time) and at least two special schools. None of these early programs employed qualified Conductors however and ultimately each of these attempts folded.

It was not until the start of 2000 that a Conductor was contracted to provide Western Australia's first conductive education holiday programmes and parent-and-child groups, funded by charitable donations and not by individual families.

This was an extremely positive step opening up conductive education to a wider group of children.

A breakthrough came in 2001 with the Department of Education's working reference group. Pioneered by the Principal of Carson Street School (East Victoria Park, Perth, WA) and keen supporter of the fledgling CE movement, John Exeter was granted a guarantee from the Department of Education that they could employ a conductor with recognised teaching qualifications. As part of this achievement, John gained approval to run a trial early intervention pilot project for two years with above staffing formula funding. This was crucial to being

able to recruit a specialist teacher-conductor from overseas and pivotal in the implementation of conductive education programmes in main stream schools.

Finally, in 2004, the first conductive education programmes run by a qualified conductor was established within a mainstream service provider – Carson Street School – and the pilot CE early intervention project, the only education support primary school available in Western Australia, began.

This project was led by Teacher Conductor Laura Jones and independently evaluated by Curtin University's Associate Professor Heather Jenkins. The outcomes of the project were extremely positive and the evaluation report made clear, exciting recommendations for conductive education to be continued as an educational option for children with motor disorders.

In 2005, following a CE conference in Adelaide, NACE invited the Cerebral Palsy Centre in Melbourne (Garry Prigg from CPEC) to Perth. Garry would conduct a workshop to determine the vision of families, resulting in the plan for establishing the Conductive Education Centre of Excellence in Western Australia. Garry Prigg and Laura Jones presented this plan to Ljiljana Ravlich, then Minister for Education, resulting in a three-year, \$200,000 per annum funding package being announced for the development of CE early intervention programmes.

The three-year funding package secured the recruitment of a second Teacher Conductor from the UK by Carson Street School. This would expand the CE services on offer in 2006.

Despite the growth in programmes, concerns were being raised about the availability of space and the suitability of the existing facilities. It was proposed that NACE establish a new incorporated association - the Conductive Education Charity of Western Australia Inc. (CECWA) and undertake a more direct role in supporting the provision of services and purpose-built facilities. An inaugural Board was established and a Statement of Purpose and Rules of Association drafted.

In 2007, demand for conductive education required the appointment of a third teacher-conductor, Laura Donnelly and, through the additional funding, a speech pathologist Yvette Theodorsen also joined the CE team at Carson Street School. The school took its first steps towards creating a trans-disciplinary model of CE services, recognising that the programs were growing at an unsustainable rate without increased professional level support for the conductors.

Carson Street School opened two new classrooms for designed specifically for the delivery of conductive education in 2008 with the official opening of a purpose built covered play area dedicated to support conductive education programmes - the first Conductive Education Centre in Western Australia.

This was a very exciting time, but, countered with the loss of one of the teacher conductors, some programs had to be cancelled whilst others were taken on by the remaining two conductors. Consequently, with the loss of key personnel, this put an enormous amount of pressure on the remaining conductors.

The Conductive Education Charity of WA (CECWA) organized a CE forum in August 2008, attended by members of more than 50 families.

The main aims of the Forum were to highlight the precarious nature of the CE programmes and to galvanise action with the CECWA Management Committee significantly expanded following the Forum to bring much needed drive and expertise with a number of specialist teams established.

An immediate outcome was the financial approval to immediately recruit two additional teacher-conductors and place them into the CE programmes in Carson Street School.

This recruitment process remains far from straightforward and difficulties faced included the fact that there were no 'home-grown' conductors due to no conductor training being available in the Asia-Pacific area. Thus, conductors can only be recruited from overseas currently. Additionally, no relocation package is available through the Department of Education and the WA College of Teaching (WACOT) does not recognise the teaching qualifications of Hungarian-trained Teacher-Conductors. As an interim measure, this would be funded in the short-term with the employment of a teacher-conductor to provide a 10-week block of CE programmes at Carson Street for students from other mainstream schools.

Since then, the CECWA Management Committee has had considerable success in fundraising, in the provision of equipment and in raising the profile of Conductive Education.

NACE WA merged with CECWA, with CECWA agreeing to make use of its fundraising achievements to support the programs at Carson Street School and offered \$10,000 relocation packages to successful teacher-conductor applicants. This made the positions at Carson Street School more competitive in the global CE market and, as a result, three new teacher-conductors joined the CE team during 2009/10.

Whilst this was the quickest growth in teacher-conductors ever in Western Australia, it coincided with staffing changes with the original two teacher-conductors and the ability to provide CE services continues to fall short of the ever growing demand.

Our challenge, as is elsewhere globally, is to support conductive education providers and to ensure that in the desire to provide CE to as many families as possible, the quality of CE is not compromised, as can happen when staff become over stretched and under pressure.

Our strength as been in the continuity of lead Programme Teacher Conductor Shona Ballantyne (recruited in Oct 2009) who is expert in conductive education and teaching, has the driver and the desire to grow CE services by ensuring the teacher-conductors are given the best chance possible to do the amazing job for which they are trained. Working closely with the families and health care providers, Shona understands the delicate balancing act and considerable heartache to the families seeking CE.

The support given by CECWA, financially and emotively to support CE in WA will bring invaluable benefits to the children and their families accessing conductive education programmes in early intervention, primary and through new and developing partnership programmes with other schools, particularly High School programmes where provision is urgently needed.