

SUBMISSION BY MARGARET RYAN

Questions addressed in this submission

In this submission I address the following questions raised by this Review:

- Question 6 of the Terms of Reference (**TOR**) asks:

What more can we do to ensure that ITE curriculum is evidence based and all future teachers are equipped to implement evidence-based teaching practices?

- Question 7 of the TOR asks:

What more can ITE providers and employers do to ensure ITE students are getting the practical experience they need before they start their teaching careers?

- The first question under Part B Question 4 of the Discussion Paper is:

*Are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (**Teacher Standards**) fit for purpose in identifying the key skills and knowledge pre-service teachers need to be ready for the classroom?*

- The first question under Part B Question 5 of the Discussion Paper is:

How can ITE providers best support teachers in their ongoing professional learning?

My request

I consider that there are three things that can be done to improve teacher training:

1. Teach student teachers about specific learning disorders (**SLDs**) including dyslexia;
2. Teach student teachers how to teach primary school students to read and write explicitly, using the evidence-based methodology of systematic synthetic phonics (**SSP**);
3. ITE providers can support teachers in their ongoing professional learning by providing courses covering points 1 and 2 above. I believe that it should be made compulsory for each teacher to undertake a course on SLDs every so often, eg once every five years (or every three years if other disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, are to be included in compulsory professional learning).

Our experience

I am a mother of a dyslexic daughter. She commenced school in 2010. Her Prep (Foundation) teacher told us at the end of Prep that she was behind in reading. She was therefore included in a Reading Recovery course in Year 1. She made progress whilst doing the course, but at the end of the following year (Year 2) she was only one reader level above where she had been the previous year. I now understand that this is a common experience with Reading Recovery.¹

I understand that Reading Recovery is still used in Victorian schools. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the New South Wales Department of Education will no longer be funding Reading Recovery from 2019.²

It was suggested to me (by a third party) that I engage a tutor for my daughter, which I did in Year 3. However, the tutor was not trained in teaching dyslexic students and my daughter did not progress.

I raised my concerns about my daughter's poor progress in reading forcefully with the school in Year 4 and the school arranged for some assessment to be undertaken. This included a report of a speech pathologist in 2015, that identified that my daughter had poor phonological awareness (which I now know can be a sign of dyslexia). However, at no time did anyone from her primary school raise the possibility of my daughter having dyslexia, or that external tests could be done to diagnose dyslexia, or that dyslexia can be treated by specific tuition. If I had known this, I would have arranged for such testing immediately.

The difficulty was that I simply did not know why my beautiful, intelligent daughter could not read and spell properly. I assumed that the school and teachers were the experts in teaching children to read, including understanding reasons why children would have difficulty in reading. I did not know that teachers were not trained to understand issues such as SLDs.

My daughter was only diagnosed with dyslexia late in Year 5, not as a result of anything said or done by the school, but at my instigation, as a result of a telephone call that I had with a friend. On the phone we attempted to diagnose my daughter, having absolutely no expertise in this area. My friend said that the daughter of a friend of hers had auditory processing issues and I agreed that this could be a possibility. This gave me something to Google and I was able to arrange for my daughter to be tested immediately. My friend was correct, in that my daughter did have auditory processing issues as well as dyslexia. Surely, this is not how a child should be diagnosed with dyslexia in a modern country such as Australia.

When school commenced in Year 6, I had a meeting with school staff, and they did not appear to be familiar with dyslexia. I believe that all of my daughter's primary school teachers were good teachers, motivated only by good will, but, in my opinion, they had not been trained in the skills to know what to do when a child was severely struggling with literacy.

Point 1 of my request – ITE training in SLDs

SLDs, as their name suggests, create problems with learning. I believe that student teachers should be trained with a basic working knowledge of SLDs in their undergraduate teachers' course. I understand that currently there is only limited information provided to student teachers about SLDs as part of their course. Teaching of these conditions is left to a Masters degree, that only a proportion of teachers complete.

All Australian teachers will encounter children with SLDs. These are life-long conditions, which will have an impact on the child throughout their school years and beyond. I understand that dyslexia affects about 10% of the population,³ so it is certainly not a rare condition. Statistically, each teacher will have about 1 or 2 dyslexic students in their class, although they may be undiagnosed. Correct remedial tuition can make a significant difference to the lives of these children.

Teacher cannot diagnose SLDs in students. But they should have sufficient awareness of SLDs:

1. to understand students with an SLD and the challenges they face; and
2. appreciate the possibility of a student having an SLD and raise it:

- (a) with the school to obtain appropriate assistance; and
- (b) with parents when appropriate to give parents the option of having their child tested.

You do not know what you do not know. That is why it is so essential that teachers be trained to be aware of SLDs. Otherwise, a child may slip through the cracks, as my daughter did, with the school not understanding her problems and not knowing how they can be treated.

Are the Teacher Standards fit for purpose?

Question 4 of the Discussion Paper asks whether the Teacher Standards are fit for purpose. The “Literacy and numeracy strategies” Illustrations of Practice resource pack in Part 2.5 of the Teacher Standards - “Know the content and how to teach it” provides:

Focus area 1.1 - Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students

Graduate **Descriptor:** *Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students and how these may affect learning.*

This is an admirable requirement. Is it meant to include knowledge of SLDs? If it does not, this must be included as they most definitely affect learning. However, there is no content/no specifics to this requirement. Indeed the Teacher Standards themselves seem to contain little substance. For example, Standard 2.5 “Literacy and numeracy strategies” provides:

Know and understand literacy and numeracy teaching strategies and their application in teaching areas.

Yes, of course. Does this even need to be said? I am a parent, not a teacher, so I do not understand the Teacher Standards and whether there is some, much more detailed document to support the Standards. But, if not, I fail to see the point in making such motherhood statements without setting down any requirements/explanations/guidance as to how this is to be done. The Teacher Standards contain some Illustrations, but they seem to provide very limited information.

Point 2 of my request – ITE should teach students SSP

I am aware of the so-called “Reading Wars” and the difference in approaches to teaching literacy of whole language or balanced literacy vs SSP. I understand that Reading Recovery is based on whole language or balanced literacy theory. I am sure that many other submissions from persons far more expert than me in this area will be able to explain the nature of SSP, the fact that it is evidence-based and that SSP has been proven to be superior to other approaches in teaching children to read.

What I can contribute is my daughter’s experience in attempting to learn to read, write and spell. As mentioned above, Reading Recovery was not an effective intervention for my daughter, as any progress made during the course was not maintained. I appointed a literacy tutor for my daughter when she was in Year 3 who followed some program called ERIC. This tutor also worked at my daughter’s primary school using this course. This was also not effective.

It was only when my daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia in late Year 5 that we appointed a tutor who taught using multi-sensory learning and taught my daughter the rules of the English language. My daughter made substantial progress in her reading as a result of this tuition.

I understand that part of the SSP approach is to teach explicitly, explaining the correspondence between the English alphabet and the sounds the letters make etc. I am puzzled that anyone would wish to teach in any other manner. When I encounter a written word that I am not familiar with, I instinctively break it up into its parts and sound the letters out mentally in an attempt to understand the word. I would expect all readers of the English language would do the same.

I am aware of research published this year⁴ which concluded:

In this research, we investigated the impact of teaching regularities in the writing system explicitly rather than relying on learners to discover these regularities through text experience alone.... Results showed that virtually all participants who received instruction performed at ceiling on tests that probed generalization of underlying regularities. In contrast, despite up to 18 hr of training on the novel words, less than 25% of discovery learners performed on par with those who received instruction. These findings illustrate the dramatic impact of teaching method on outcomes during reading acquisition.

Essentially, participants in this study who were taught the rules of the language (artificial alphabets created for the experiment) were substantially more likely to understand them than participants who had not received this explicit instruction and had to discover the rules for themselves.

It surprises me that anyone would need to conduct such an experiment because I would have thought that its conclusion was just common sense. Surely, in most cases, trying to discover anything for yourself is less likely to provide a complete understanding of the subject matter than having it explained to you.

I am a practising solicitor. I studied arts and law in the 1980's. For each subject we received lectures, in which the subject matter was explained to us, and tutorials, which were after the lectures. In law tutorials, there was typically an invented fact-based problem, and the students were supposed to apply the knowledge they had gained from their lectures and independent reading to the problem. From 2014-2016 I was a university sessional lecturer and tutor in intellectual property law, where the same lecture/tutorial approach was adopted. I received positive feedback from my students in student surveys.

I believe that teaching a subject explicitly, followed by opportunities for the students to apply the knowledge that they have learnt, is the best way to teach any subject, including teaching children how to read, write and spell. I understand that this is what SSP is all about.

I find it disappointing that there is any resistance to this approach among the teaching profession and institutions that provide ITE. Australian children are suffering because of this. I sincerely hope that this Review will be the catalyst for substantial change in the way ITE is taught in Australia and, consequently, how literacy is taught in our primary schools.

Point 3 of my request - ITE provider support for teachers

If registered teachers lack sufficient awareness of SLDs or they do not know how to use evidence-based practices to teach literacy, they need to be educated. The Discussion Paper deals not only with student teachers, but with the continuing professional development

of teachers. This is important as any reforms to student teacher education will not necessarily affect those who have already graduated.

I have been told by one person that there are courses available on SLDs, but there is a tendency for these to be attended by Special Needs teachers. By contrast subject teachers have significant demands on their time, and must attend training in other areas, such as anaphylaxis, as well as training in their areas of subject expertise, and so may not undertake training in SLDs. Another person has contradicted this information and has suggested to me that there is some difficulty in being able to locate and attend training in SLDs. I do not know the true position, but perhaps both are correct, and the location of a teacher, especially in regional areas, may affect the availability of professional development in SLDs.

Whatever is the current position, I consider it essential that all teachers, not just Special Needs teachers, have a basic familiarity with SLDs, so that they can understand where there may be an issue and seek appropriate assistance and alert the parents. Equally, all registered primary school teachers should be offered training in SSP so that they can teach literacy in the most effective way.

Crisis in our schools

There is a crisis in our schools, and it is not about whether Australia is declining in the PISA rankings. Each child who is unable to read and write at their grade level is an individual tragedy. If they do not catch up, they will have life long problems with poor literacy, which may affect their mental health and their study and job prospects and may even result in their ending up in prison. The NSW Department of Corrective Services found that in 2001 there was “a 60 percent rate of functional illiteracy among inmates”.⁵ Assoc Prof Pamela Snow and Prof Martine Deakin have identified that:

Between 46 and 52% of young male offenders have clinically significant (yet previously undiagnosed) language disorders⁶

I am an educated, determined and, fortunately, financially comfortable mother. Over a five year period, I did not cease trying to discover the reason for my daughter’s literacy problems until she was finally diagnosed with dyslexia near the end of primary school. My husband and I were then able to afford the expensive assessments and tuition fees needed to help my daughter reach her full potential.

There are many Australian parents who are not in this position. This is why I am making this submission – to plead that this Review recommend changes in Australian teacher education so that teachers are taught how to teach literacy effectively using evidence-based practices and to recognise why a child may be failing to progress in literacy.

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¹ NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, Bradford, D and Wan, W, 2015 “Reading Recovery A Sector-Wide Analysis” <http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications/reports-and-presentations> p21

² A Smith *Sydney Morning Herald* 30.12.2017 <https://www.smh.com.au/education/new-literacy-teachers-recruited-as-nsw-government-axes-reading-recovery-20171222-h09c5f.html>

³ Australian Dyslexia Association - <https://dyslexiaassociation.org.au/dyslexia-in-australia/>

⁴ Rastle, K., Lally, C., Davis, M.H. and Taylor, J. S. H. “The Dramatic Impact of Explicit Instruction on Learning to Read in a New Writing System” (2021) Vol. 32(4) *Psychological Science* 471–484

⁵ Quoted in Wise, J, Harris, B, Nickson, R, Boughton, B, & Beetson, J “Impact of the ‘Yes, I Can!’ adult literacy campaign on interactions with the criminal justice system” (2018) *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 562 pp. 1-16. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi562> See also Stewart, M, July 2019 Vol 7 Issue 1 *The New Zealand Corrections Journal* “Supporting neurodiverse learners in New Zealand prisons”

https://www.corrections.govt.nz/resources/research/journal/volume_7_issue_1_july_2019/supporting_neurodiverse_learners_in_new_zealand_prisons

⁶ Research referred to by Snow, P in 2014 Submission 32 to Senate Inquiry into the Prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and Speech Pathology services in Australia
Pathology services in Australia.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Speech_Pathology/Submissions