DYSLEXIA VICTORIA SUPPORT

Submission to the Federal Department of Education

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

9 May 2023

Heidi Gregory
Founder,
Dyslexia Victoria Support
Vice President, SPELD Victoria

Brie Gabrielle Jones
Dyslexia Victoria Support

Contact: Heidi Gregory

Email: dvsaustralia@gmail.com

http://dyslexiavictoriasupport.com/

A. Introduction – Dyslexia Victoria Support (DVS)

1. DVS is a non-partisan, parent-led dyslexia support group that endorses evidence-based teaching approaches and programs that have been independently, scientifically peer-reviewed and published in reputable scientific journals.

2. In 2014, Heidi Gregory and three other mothers of dyslexic children were looking for answers to their children's reading struggles and realised that there was no specific support or advocacy for parents of dyslexic children in Victoria. This prompted like-mined parents to create DVS, to connect with other parents and create a support network. The mission of Dyslexia Victoria Support is "to SPEAK OUT and advocate for change in Victorian schools so our children will learn to read, write and spell".

3. DVS has since grown to a membership of 8,500+ parents, teachers, principals, educational psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, students, and people living with dyslexia.

4. DVS advocates for change in our education system for children with reading difficulties. We aim to ensure all schools use evidence-based initial reading instruction, to ensure early identification of children with reading difficulties and to ensure such children are provided with evidence-based early intervention.

5. DVS supports the recommendations made by AUSPELD: "Understanding Learning Difficulties, a guide for parents", the Five from Five Initiative, the Australian Dyslexia Association (ADA), International Dyslexia Association (IDA), Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA), and Royal Australian and New ZealandCollege of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO)

6. *Dyslexia can be defined as … a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.* When looking at identifying a specific learning disorder with impairment in reading (dyslexia), deficits in one or both of the following key academic areas are usually present: • Inaccurate or slow and effortful word reading (e.g. reads single words aloud incorrectly or slowly and hesitantly, frequently guesses words, has difficulty sounding out words).*

• Difficulty understanding the meaning of what is read (e.g. may read text accurately but not understand the sequence, relationships, inferences, or deeper meanings of what is read).*" [1]*

7. DVS agrees with the Department of Education and Training position that "*Teachers have the most powerful influence on student learning outside of the home, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds*".[2]

8. The links between illiteracy and youth justice involvement have been demonstrated via research in Australia over the last two decades.

9. While DVS focuses on Specific Learning Difficulties, particularly dyslexia, there are many and varied disabilities that can contribute to children's struggles in learning to learn to read, write and spell. In the case of some children, this unfortunately reflects lack of exposure to evidence-based classroom practices and such children are termed "instructional casualties". Of course, it is possible to have a disability, and also be an instructional casualty.

    We note that 17.2% of Australians with a disability are believed to live below the poverty line[3]. Therefore, the reasons to educate every Australian child include both individual and population level are imperatives. We provide the following response to the Discussion Paper.

B. *Strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates*

10. Currently, the Victoria curriculum provides no evidence based guidance to Government schools as to which literacy and numeracy approaches or programs should be employed to teach children. There is limited, or no guidance as to which literacy and numeracy programs are evidence-based, and which are not. For teachers who have completed their initial teacher education (ITE) training in university courses, the issue of science and evidence is rarely discussed, much less privileged. Often teachers are using legacy programs for intervention or teaching students with literacy programs chosen by "the school". Little or no maths evidence based programs are available. This usually means an individual principal or interested teacher chooses the teaching trajectory and academic outcome for each school student.

---

[1] AUSPELD Understanding Learning Difficulties: a Practical Guide for Parents
[2] Teacher Expert Education Panel Report Summary p2
[3] Australian Council Social Services Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2 – Who is Affected? (Final Report, 2020), 49.

11. These circumstances have resulted in a lack of consistent teaching methods, with some schools currently using reading programs that have been completely discredited such as Balanced Literacy or Reading Recovery, and some using evidence-based programs based on the evolving body of research known as the "Science of Reading".

12. In Victoria, families do not have the choice about which government schools their children attend and may be zoned to only one school, particularly in regional areas. Therefore, they similarly have no choice or understanding as to whether their children will be taught to read in a manner which is evidence-based or discredited. While for many children, attending a school where teachers are using methods which have been proven not to be successful, may not matter and they may learn to read regardless, for children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities/difficulties, it can mean the difference between learning to read and not learning to read. This in turn means the difference between academic success, and academic failure. Academic failure is associated with complex mental health, sequelaue that are expensive and difficult to treat.

13. We refer again to the Teacher Expert Education Panel Report Summary ("Report Summary") p2.

    ITE program content should be evidence based and set graduate teachers up well to handle the classroom environment. The Panel has identified the key teaching practices every teacher should learn in ITE to be prepared for the classroom and best support students. This would equip graduate teachers with a strong understanding of what works best to improve student learning based on the best evidence. This content covers:

    *• **Brain and learning:** Knowing how students learn to provide teachers with a foundational understanding of why specific teaching practices work. This includes understanding how students process new information, how they retain that information and how they apply that knowledge to new situations.*

14. We agree that curriculum content should be "evidence-based", while at the same time noting that this phrase is commonly misunderstood and/or loosely applied. We assume that when the Panel refers to "evidence-based" it refers to programs and practices that are supported by reading science, being subject to independently peer-reviewed research. We believe this should be made plain given the common usage of the phrase and the variety of misunderstandings about what the phrase actually means.

15. In that context, in relation to "*knowing how students learn*", such knowledge is well-known and has been established for many years. In terms of reading, we refer to the Science of

Reading, and the recognised scientific approach of teaching children through explicit teaching and systematic synthetic phonics [4],[5],[6] so that all children successfully master the intricacies of their writing code in the first three years of school. We believe this should be made plain, as the Science of Reading is not a phrase which is included in either of the two Panel Reports.

16. In relation to the following on pg. 2 of the Summary:

- ***Effective practices:*** *Knowing the classroom practices that have the highest impact on improving student learning, including:* We assume that this is understood, in terms of reading, to be Science of Reading approaches.
  o *breaking down what students need to learn and then demonstrating each step so that students understand what is expected of them* We assume this to mean explicit teaching
  o *assessing where students are in their learning and providing them with timely feedback to correct misunderstandings and build their knowledge,* and We assume this to mean a Response to Intervention Framework
  o *literacy and numeracy teaching strategies.* We assume this to refer to scientifically proven strategies and programs.

17. We submit that the approaches we list are required to be included in ITE programs. We advocate for language around this topic to be more targeted and less open to interpretation.

18. In terms of "classroom management", while this is not in our purview, we believe there needs to be a recognition that many students with disabilities demonstrate behaviours of concern when not provided with appropriate instructional support, and refer to the inquiries, reviews, and investigations of children with disabilities/education in Victoria and Australia. We also note the interim reports from and testimony to, the current Disability Royal Commission relating to the abuse of students with disabilities in schools.

19. It is self-evident, that when students cannot read, they suffer poor self-esteem, can be targets of bullying and can demonstrate behaviours of concern out of shame, avoidance, boredom, and frustration, often not being able to access classroom learning. At the other

---

[4] Independent review of the teaching of early reading Final Report, Jim Rose, March 2006
[5] Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005 ("the Rowe Report"),
[6] Helping people with dyslexia: a national action agenda Report to the Hon Bill Shorten, Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services, from the Dyslexia Working Party

end of the spectrum, children with ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Conduct Disorders may display behaviours of concern and disrupt classrooms. We also note that two children in every class of 30 can be expected to meet criteria for diagnosis of Developmental Language Disorder, and virtually all such children will experience difficulties with reading, writing, and spelling[7].

20. Our interest in classroom management is that behaviours of concern in the classroom can often interfere with learning and can also often be a symptom of a child being unable to learn in that current environment. Therefore we support the fact that "*classroom management*" is included, however suggest a more sophisticated analysis of this issue which recognises disability and its impacts.

C. Strengthening the link between performance and funding of ITE

21. Commensurate with our raising of the Science of Reading as mentioned above, we believe that a quality measure for ITE programs must be whether such programs base their teacher training, in terms of teaching children to read on that science.

22. This is currently not one of the four categories that is proposed to be assessed in relation to ITE providers. We submit that it must be and that training teachers in evidence-based approaches and programs for Language and Literacy must be mandatory.

23. In relation to selection and the participation of diverse and high-quality candidates, we note that disability is not mentioned, and we believe it ought to be.

D. Improving the quality of practical experience in teaching

24. In our view, each state Department of Education should, in the absence of directing its schools to use any sort of teaching method/approach, at least keep up-to-date data on which approaches and programs schools are using. In our submission, there is little utility in training a teacher in using evidence-based approaches and programs, and then allowing them to do their practical experience in a school which is using teaching approaches that have been roundly discredited by the research. This will simply result in confusion. This unhelpful.

---

[77] Norbury et al., 2016, https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcpp.12573

E. Recommendations

(1) Commit to high teacher knowledge about reading, writing and spelling and maths.

(2) Provide teacher training in early screening for reading difficulties using standard assessment tools, such as the Federal Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

(3) Adopt a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)/Response To Intervention (RTI) framework in all schools to effectively promote population-level success, prevent reading failure, and ensure availability of intervention resources where they are needed.

(4) Identify and respond to the needs of struggling students early and effectively – so that at least 95% of students enter secondary school proficient in reading, writing, spelling and maths.

(5) Ensure that the definition of the term "evidence-based" is clear in any further documents relating to this reform, being approaches and programs supported by science and independently peer reviewed research.

(6) Promote and require to the extent possible, a Science of Reading approach to the teaching of reading, being explicit teaching, systematic synthetic phonics, phonics screening and Response to Intervention frameworks.

(7) Ensure there is a recognised link between the support of students with disabilities, behaviours of concern in the classroom, and the need for evidence-based approaches to address such behaviours.

(8) Ensure that performance measures of ITE include their teaching of evidence-based approaches and programs.

(9) Ensure that people with disabilities are targeted in the diversity cohort for recruiting teachers.

(10) Ensure that trainee teachers are provided practical experience in schools that use evidence-based approaches to reading, writing spelling and maths.

Please do not hesitate to contact DVS for further information or clarification on any aspect of this submission.