

Submission to the National Inquiry into The Teaching of Literacy

from

AUSPELD:

The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations

submitted by

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Summary

The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) has, for over thirty five years, provided State and National support in response to the needs of children and adults with Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia. Nationally, the organizations federated under AUSPELD represent some 4500-4800 members.

This submission focuses on the importance of the Inquiry resulting in findings that are inclusive of all children in our schools – not just the majority. On the whole, the majority is fairly well served across our nation. But there is a significant minority – perhaps 7-10% – whose literacy learning needs are still not properly catered for, despite the consistent efforts of organizations such as AUSPELD.

AUSPELD presumes that the primary intention of the Inquiry is ultimately to develop national literacy benchmarks for Years 3, 5 and 7, against which all students will be tested and their results reported nationally.

In order for benchmarks to be useful however, they need to be informed by research into the teaching of reading and especially into the needs of children who, despite normal teaching, do not learn to read effectively. The results of such research are known and widely accepted, but on the whole do not translate into classroom practice. Neither, on the whole, are they reflected in teacher preparation programs in universities.

This submission begins with general comments on the objectives of the Inquiry, and goes on to make more specific comments under the first four objectives of the Inquiry. Objective 5 is ignored, as it refers to the preparation of a report by the Inquiry.

The Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) has, for over thirty five years, provided State and National support in response to the needs of children and adults with Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia. Nationally, the organizations federated under AUSPELD represent some 4500-4800 members.

AUSPELD welcomes the opportunity to participate in the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. We look forward to the findings of this Inquiry leading to successful implementation of the Inquiry's stated key priority of "achieving real, sustained improvements in the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian children to better prepare them for their futures." (Inquiry Terms of Reference)

The following submission includes Responses from SPELD Associations in NSW, Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia, and is endorsed by the AUSPELD Advisory Council.

The submission will focus on the importance of the Inquiry resulting in findings that are inclusive of all children in our schools – not just the majority. On the whole, the majority is fairly well served across our nation. But there is a significant minority – perhaps 7-10% – who are still not properly catered for, despite the consistent efforts of organizations such as AUSPELD. (AUSPELD was, for example, responsible for the formation of the Senate Select Committee of Inquiry into Specific Learning Difficulties in 1974, and submission to the Commonwealth Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities in 2002.)

General Comments on the Purpose of the Inquiry: Benchmarks

We presume that the primary intention of the Inquiry is ultimately to develop national literacy benchmarks for Years 3, 5 and 7, against which all students will be tested and their results reported Nationally. Benchmarks are usually couched in terms of outcomes, and while syllabus documents give some advice as to how these outcomes are to be achieved, it is left up to individual teachers to ensure that all children achieve the outcomes.

The determination of acceptable benchmarks ("standards") for literacy achievements will be critical to public acceptance of this Inquiry's findings. The current benchmarks seem clearly not acceptable, as responses to the article of January 5, 2005 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled "Barely able to read but able to pass literacy benchmark" indicate. The article gave the illustration of a dyslexic student who, despite a disability that put him two years behind his peers in reading (i.e. at grade 1 level), met the literacy benchmark for year 3:

"Primary school children who can barely read are passing the Federal Government's national literacy benchmarks.

"The NSW Department of Education and Training says 92 per cent of the state's year 3, 5 and 7 students have passed the benchmarks. But this figure includes children who have been diagnosed with severe learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

"For the first time NSW parents were told last year how their child performed in relation to the state average and the national benchmark. This was determined through the state-run Basic Skills Tests for year 3 and year 5 and the English

Language and Literacy Assessment for year 7.

“One mother of a dyslexic boy was surprised to find he had met the national literacy benchmark for year 3 despite independent experts telling her he was 24 months behind his classmates in reading.

“The boy's Basic Skills Test report also showed he was in the bottom 17 per cent of the state and in need of "considerable assistance in literacy".

“The mother, who did not wish to be named, said her son had previously been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and language disability.

“Sharryn Brownlee, the president of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW, said the national benchmark was simply too low when compared with the NSW one. “ We have these broad general benchmarks in some aspects of numeracy and literacy, and in fact some of the children meeting these benchmarks are barely literate.

“We need to make sure they really can survive and have skills in the current workforce.”

This is a clearly unacceptable situation that may indicate a political manipulation of the assessments to produce an acceptable result across the nation for literacy. Certainly we all want to see an acceptable result, but we also want to see a realistic one.

From the point of view of our target population, those children with a Specific Learning Difficulty, achievement of age appropriate outcomes depends on each teacher's knowledge of:

- how children who learn differently can and do learn successfully,
- how to assess their risk for “reading difficulties” by identifying the functional strengths and weaknesses of their learning abilities and skills and relevant environmental factors,
- evidence based programs and methods that are likely to help these children, keeping in mind that no one program or method works best for every child. For example, the significant and extensive findings (which convincingly inform the whole language / phonics debate) and subsequent initiatives resulting from the National Reading Panel's review of research-based knowledge on reading instruction (available at: www.nationalreadingpanel.org).

When teachers have appropriate foundation qualifications, there is purposeful early intervention and ongoing additional learning support for those at risk of reading difficulties. The first goal of the Commonwealth initiative *Teachers for the 21st Century* is “lifting the quality of teaching through targeted professional development and enhancing professional standards”. International empirical research supports this goal:

“...measures of teacher preparation and certification are by far the strongest correlates of student achievement in reading and mathematics, both before and after controlling for student poverty and language status” (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

(This material was brought to the attention of the Commonwealth government in AUSPELD'S submission (April 2002) to the *Commonwealth Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities*. (Available at www.speldnsw.org.au)). However, in the

Commonwealth teachers document the only “specialist skills” mentioned in the quality teacher development section are for the teaching of indigenous students, students in rural or remote locations and students in urban disadvantaged schools. There is no mention of students with Specific Learning Difficulties (or any equivalent term). So at least in that instance, inclusive best teaching practice was put aside in favour of exclusive targeting. The National Inquiry must include consideration of the needs of students with Specific Learning Difficulties if it is to be inclusive.

Currently, education systems continue to rely upon a deficit model of often humiliating remediation and behaviour management, instead of a proven cost effective preventive model with long-term positive effects. Information processing difficulties characteristic of students with learning difficulties are evident and easily identified long before children have fallen behind. AUSPELD urges the Inquiry Committee to recommend investigating adapting the UK model framed by the Special Education Needs Code of Practice (1994), which sets out the processes aimed at enabling students with special educational needs (SEN) to reach their potential and make a successful transition to adulthood.

The definition of SEN does not require that children have fallen behind before we know they have a significant difficulty in learning. The Code emphasises just how important it is to identify SEN early in a child’s school career. It is too risky to ‘wait and see if he grows out of it.’ (Johnson & Peer, 2002).

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) often points to the success of the Reading Recovery Program as the preferred early intervention helping children with reading difficulties. However, recorded in the NSW Hansard Articles is the following:

“Over the past three years the year 3 Basic Skills Literacy Test results indicate that on average, 75 per cent of former year 1 students statewide who successfully completed Reading Recovery were still performing at or above acceptable levels for their grade. In 2002, year 5 students statewide who successfully completed Reading Recovery in 1997 have also continued to improve, with 88 per cent achieving results at or above acceptable levels.” (LC 16/09/2003: #47)

This means there were 25% of students not achieving at “acceptable levels” and by year five, 12% were still not achieving at “acceptable levels”. Further, a personal communication from the DET Manager of Learning Difficulties Programs (06.2003) stated that “approximately 12% of students are referred on from Reading Recovery for further support and may well be considered to have an ongoing learning difficulty”. AUSPELD submits that these numbers of children not achieving age appropriate literacy skills in primary school are significant and unacceptable.

Specific Objectives of the Inquiry

The comments which follow are organised roughly under some of the objectives of the current National Inquiry. Repeatedly, these comments indicate the importance of pre- and in-service education of teachers, the importance of continuity of approaches throughout the school experience of a child, and the significance of ensuring a flow of research information to teachers.

- 1. Review and analyse recent national and international research about literacy teaching approaches, particularly approaches that are shown to be effective in assisting students with reading difficulties.**

In USA, The National Reading Panel (2000) undertook meta-analyses of studies on effective teaching of reading that conformed to stringent experimental methods. Taken together these studies showed that

“Effective reading instruction includes teaching children to break apart and manipulate the sounds in words (phonemic awareness), teaching them that these sounds are represented by letters of the alphabet which can then be blended together to form words (phonics), having them practice what they have learned by reading aloud with guidance and feedback (guided oral reading), and applying reading comprehension strategies to guide and improve reading comprehension” (Overview p. 10).

AUSPELD is of the view that it would be improvident use of resources to duplicate this study, even under the guise of “Australianising” the review. Details may be found at www.nichd.nih.gov/reading. The NICHD Reading Research: From Research to Practice – summarises the findings about how reading works, the background of the National Reading Panel and what they did, and the subsequent establishment of the National Institute for Literacy - and the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. All this material should be considered by the Inquiry. Even before the work of the National reading Panel, however, there was plentiful research information on these matters, but it tended to be disputed by those with vested interests in the *status quo*.

There is however a need to define the specifications for teaching and the curriculum that will form the sufficient conditions for formal apprenticeship into a literate society. An acceptance that the domains of breaking the code, participating in the meanings of text, using texts functionally and analysing them critically are necessary for becoming literate leads to two significant questions regarding the debate on how children should be taught reading, and the comprehensiveness of current literacy curricula and teaching practices. These questions are posed in the briefing paper issued by the committee for the current inquiry:

1. Does any one of these domains come naturally or easily such that its learning can be left entirely to incidental, indirect or implicit processes?
2. Does learning about these domains have some natural or inevitable development progression such that some domains can be left exclusively to instruction in later school years?” (www.dest.gov.au/schools/literacyinquiry, Domains of literacy p.3 #4.)

2. Identify the extent to which prospective teachers are provided with reading teaching approaches and skills that are effective in the classroom, and have the opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to implement effective classroom reading programs. Training in both phonics and whole language approaches to reading will be examined.

All Teachers in training

Some years ago, the NSW government directed that in order to secure employment as teachers in their service, all graduates in teaching must be able to show that they had completed at least one unit of study in Special Education. Initially, the Director of Special Education in the NSW DET examined this provision. However, there was no follow up to this, and although such units of study are still included in teacher preparation courses, their content is not known. There is no guarantee, and indeed no particular likelihood that they will include any consideration of students with specific learning difficulties in literacy areas, nor of appropriate methods of teaching reading and spelling in the normal classroom that will assist such children.

Tasmania is believed to be the only state that does not make special education a compulsory subject in teacher education. From that state, it is reported that one educator declined to give one hour's instruction in special education to university students on the grounds it was to be their *only* instruction in special education and was manifestly inadequate. The outcome of this lack is that special needs (learning) teachers observe that many classroom teachers do not understand assessment tools and do not know how to interpret them. However, the special education courses offered in other states may not result in teachers understanding assessment tools, or anything about the needs of students with Specific Learning Difficulties.

It should be noted however, that even this minimal provision of one unit of study was not included in most teacher education courses of study in past years when most of the (now ageing) teaching service were trained.

Teaching Literacy

The need for a Common Curriculum

There are hundreds of courses around Australia preparing teachers to teach literacy. This results in great diversity in course content and emphasis. This submission asserts that the research-based body of knowledge should form the core of a common curriculum that prepares teachers for literacy teaching. In addition, there is wide variation among the courses in the time allocated to lecture/seminar topics for literacy teaching.

The importance of a Research-based Curriculum

Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) write, 'Teacher preparation for the teaching of reading has not been adequate to bring about the research-based changes in classroom practices that result in success' (p. 289). This raises the issue that not only must teacher preparation courses incorporate this knowledge, but that practicing teachers need to utilise this knowledge in their teaching of literacy. Ensuring that this will be so requires significant review of inservice arrangements for teachers already in the profession. This may be something that will become part of proposed teacher accreditation arrangements.

Curriculum Content

The work of the National Reading Panel (2000) has already been mentioned as supporting evidence based approaches to the teaching of reading and therefore to the pre- and in-service education of teachers. Among others, Hoffman et al., (2003) argue for a curriculum for teachers that includes

- Early literacy, including oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics and word identification;
- Fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension;
- Assessing all aspects of literacy learning;
- Organising and managing literacy instruction across grade levels. (p. 10)

The SPELD NSW submission to this Inquiry has argued that research has shown that there are certain basics that teachers on the whole do not know, and ought to know in order to teach the English language effectively (e.g. Moats, 1987, 1994).

These include

- the phonemic bases of spoken English
- the alphabetic basis of written English and its relation to spoken English
- the orthographic system of written English

- research-based methods of teaching children the concept of written language (as distinct from yet related to the spoken language that they already know)
- systematic and multisensory methods of teaching the phonic system of written English
- ways of supporting the development of phonemic awareness in children whose phonemic awareness is poor (using poetry (rhyme), developing clear articulation, music, gross motor activities)
- integrating the teaching of language structure with purposeful and meaningful reading
- classroom modifications for children who have difficulty with the visual perception of print
- the development of effective handwriting through gross and fine motor skill development and systematic teaching
- integrating the teaching of handwriting with the teaching of sounds and words
- pedagogically, the need to have substantially the same research-based and effective methods used as the child moved from class to class.

The Importance of catering for Individual Differences

The International Reading Association (2003) report has stressed the importance of teachers using literacy strategies that are matched to individual differences. There is ample evidence for example, that students with dyslexia do not take the same benefits from Reading Recovery as other students. Nor do they progress well with whole language approaches.

The Importance of a Teacher's Personal Competence

While the research-based evidence is unequivocal for the skills required for a student to gain sound literacy skills, a critical issue is the teacher's own literacy skills. The work of Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2005) demonstrated that a significant number of teachers have a poor knowledge of the relationship between speech and print. With regard to breaking apart and manipulating the sounds in words Fielding and Purdie showed that "their knowledge of short vowel sounds (92.3% correct) was markedly greater than knowledge of the number of speech sounds in a given word (24.1% correct). This issue of personal competence in literacy needs a focus in teacher education.

The Significance of Training Methods

It would seem, along with learning classroom instruction techniques, that a case study focusing on a child with Specific Learning Difficulties would be essential to understand their learning needs. This would involve an assessment and the teaching of a child with difficulty in literacy. This would be a highly structured approach directed by an expert in working with children with Specific Learning Difficulties.

In NSW, Professional Teaching Standards have been Endorsed (Feb 2005) and are characterised thus: "The Professional Teaching Standards describe what teachers need to know, understand and be able to do as well as providing direction and structure to support the preparation and development of teachers." (p2)

This is a useful start, but we believe specific definition of accreditation qualifications is required.

It is within these Standards, Element 2 (p6), 2.1.5 & 2.1.6 where "knowledge of strategies for addressing student needs" ... in relation to the "specific strategies for teaching" for those students with "Special Education Needs" (2.1.5) and "range of literacy strategies to meet the needs of all students, including ... Students with Special Education Needs" (2.1.6), is listed. However, there is no specification as to who these students are.

It will be important for the National Inquiry to establish what kinds of teaching strategies or approaches will ensure that all students including those with Specific Learning Difficulties have the best chance of success in literacy learning.

The importance of continuity in approaches

The importance of a coordinated approach to the teaching of reading, especially to those with specific difficulties, is emphasised in a submission from a parent.

“Lack of continuity and carry-through from one year to the next. For example in primary school, each year the parent has to explain the child’s difficulties to the new teacher. The teacher from the previous year never seems to brief the new teacher. Some reading programs such as *First Steps* give indicators for assessing reading, writing and spelling and places children on a level. They then monitor progress from kindergarten to Grade 7, and children who are struggling will show up. Parents of poor readers appreciate the continuity, which commonly is lacking as a child moves from one class to the next.

“The problem is compounded at high school, when there is a different teacher for each subject. A further problem at high school, is when a parent mentions that their child has a learning difficulty, the response is almost always to offer remedial reading. With any luck, reading has already been remediated by this stage, and there seems little appreciation of the other ways in which a learning difficulty affects a child – lack of speed in note-taking, poor organisational skills, the need to be taught how to plan an essay, approach research and such, and accommodation in written examinations” (from the SPELD Tasmanian response).

3. Identify the ways in which research evidence on literacy teaching and policies in Australian schools can best inform classroom teaching practice and support teacher professional learning.

The following, relating to the learning needs of students with Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia, is based on data presented in *Mapping The Territory – Primary Students with Learning Difficulties: Literacy and Numeracy*, (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). *Mapping the Territory* was commissioned to provide a national picture of how students with learning difficulties are supported in their literacy and numeracy in regular school settings, and to identify successful strategies for addressing literacy and numeracy learning needs.

While the explicit teaching of phonological awareness and phonic skills such as phoneme identity and sound-letter knowledge are strongly recommended, the authors of *Mapping the Territory* found that many teachers do not have the necessary knowledge to provide this teaching. *In order to teach phonological awareness effectively, it seems that many teachers need explicit professional development in the sound structure of words.* (See previous comments on teacher preparation, page 5.)

Some schools devise their own intervention programs, others adopt commercially developed programs. Data collected in this report indicated that about half of all primary schools had teachers who had participated in Reading Recovery or First Steps. *Reading Recovery* and school developed Reading Recovery-like programs are based on a ‘whole language’ model of reading where word analysis skills are taught as and when the need arises, within the context of connected text. Unfortunately these programs tend to be

presented in the original Reading Recovery form, unmodified. This means that the opportunity to provide instruction in specific phonological awareness and phonics skills, so important for students with phonological awareness and decoding difficulties, is lost.

Support provided to students in the middle and upper primary years focuses on strategies to help them manage in the classroom. This indicates that once they have left junior primary school, the dyslexic's underlying difficulties with decoding will not be addressed through a systematic phonics-based program.

Data from *Mapping the Territory* indicates that formal evaluations of intervention programs were conducted in fewer than half of the case study schools. Too often, the literature review argued, statistically significant results are reported on assessments that relate too closely to the intervention strategies, or of performances that do not transfer to other contexts, or of performances that are not maintained over time.

The literature review also acknowledged "that there were some issues that cannot be resolved in a quantitative pre-test post-test paradigm. Chief among these is the problem of implementation. Even for interventions robustly supported by research, take-up in schools depends on teachers' judgments about the practicality of strategies. Teachers are more likely to take up strategies that can be assimilated into their current repertoire, that can be used with children with learning difficulties as well as with other children, and that have been accompanied by opportunities for in-service training providing for coaching and feedback."

The data collected in this report points to insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher training related to the nature of the difficulties and the kinds of programs that address the dyslexic student's learning needs. Data collected relating to preservice primary teacher education indicated that very few literacy units appeared to contain information on specific learning difficulties. Teachers tend to favour strategies that fit into their current program for use with the whole class, and for which hands-on inservice training has been provided.

Mapping the Territory reports the importance of early phonics teaching to 5-year olds in the classroom as highlighted in research carried out at the London University Institute of Education. Analysis of the data presented in *Mapping the Territory* indicates that the needs of students with a phonological deficit are supported in mainstream Junior Primary classrooms only where there is a focus on the explicit teaching of phonological awareness and phonic skills. Such an approach is however beneficial for all students since it provides them with the underlying skills needed for independent reading.

Some children, however, will be slower to develop these skills and will need more repetition and more practice for each skill. These children often need one-to-one intervention which continues to focus on phonological awareness and phonics. Data from *Mapping the Territory* indicates that it is at this crucial level that students may not be receiving appropriate support. This is first, because teachers have not been trained in how to teach phonological awareness and phonics skills, and second, because many schools use programs which have a 'whole language' focus. Consequently, students in such teaching environments are not taught the underlying skills for reading.

4. Examine the effectiveness of assessment methods being used to monitor the progress of students' early reading learning.

1 National benchmark testing in Grade 3

National benchmark testing would be a worthwhile screening test, but because there is little carry-over from one year/teacher to another in Australian schools, the fact that in some states benchmark results are available only towards the end of the year or early the following year, makes them of little use as a guide to the classroom teacher.

In Tasmanian state schools for example, this assessment (WALNA Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment) is towards the end of the year and sent away for marking. Results do not arrive back until early the next year, so is of no use to the class teacher as feedback on how the child is progressing or failing. Teachers consider that the next year's teacher pays scant attention to the results.

As the test assesses more than reading and spelling (listening, reciting etc) children who are bright but poor readers (the profile for many children with LD) can do well, and, conversely, children who do not cope well with ticking boxes or "exams" can perform below their usual standard.

Catholic schools in Tasmania use the LANNA test of the Australian Council for Educational Research for Year 3 literacy benchmark testing, because they think it is a better test than WALNA and because results are returned to schools in October or November in the year the test is taken, not ideal, but better than when the pupil has moved on to the next grade.

In NSW the Basic Skills Test, while useful as a screening test, does not evaluate underlying skills known to be essential for success in reading. The results of this testing for children in year 3 who fall into, say, band 1, give no indication as to what might be lacking in the child's equipment for success in reading. It is AUSPELD's view therefore that such tests may be useful for benchmarking, but only as screening tests. All children who perform worse than expected for their age should be given further, more specific testing, based on research-based knowledge of factors that cause successful reading acquisition to fail to develop adequately. And for this to be of benefit to the child and an aid to the teacher, the timing of the screening needs to come forward in the year.

In some states, for example this year (2005) in Tasmanian state schools, professional development is occurring designed to insure that all infant teachers will know how to use Reading Recovery assessments by the end of the year. Experienced infant and remedial reading teachers say this is the best system they have seen the Tasmanian Department of Education adopt to date. It assesses how well children read as well as their accuracy, whether they understand letter sounds, recognise a sentence and know where to start a sentence and how they approach working a word out, if they can see patterns, whether they guess from sentence structure or for meaning.

It is hoped this assessment will overcome the difficulty for teachers of not knowing where to start a child and giving them books that are beyond them. Children are expected to move up the levels and those who do not should be recognised and picked up for extra help.

Despite this, the Reading Recovery program itself is not considered effective for children with SLD. (See previous comments, page 3)

2 Further testing

Benchmark testing tends to confirm what the teacher already knows, but further testing lets the teacher know where to focus his or her efforts, if teacher's education

has included reading and interpreting common assessment instruments.

Further testing specialist testing may include orthoptic assessment of binocular functions, a visual processing assessment, a screening for Irlen Syndrome and testing by an audiologist of hearing and auditory processing.

Parents report that in state schools in Tasmania and in some other states it can be difficult to have a one-to-one assessment done, and difficult to get a copy of the result if a test is done. It seems that guidance officers, who might once have devoted much their time to assessing learning difficulties are preoccupied with behavioural issues now.

Seeing how poor readers respond to intervention is coming to be considered a good identification tool, given that it does not require the delay that assessing a child's measured reading achievement against their IQ does. If the child does not respond to the first level of remediation, they are likely to be the ones who need remedial tuition of greater intensity, frequency and duration.

3 Speech pathology and early intervention

As early intervention allows the child to have the greatest chance of success and because of the high correlation between speaking/language difficulties in very young children and later difficulties with reading, children who experience early language difficulties should be identified for extra attention.

Parents should be notified that their child is in an at-risk group and intervention begun early. Training in phonological awareness from a speech therapist or specialist support teacher will serve the child well when reading begins to be taught.

The Executive of AUSPELD stand ready to assist the Inquiry in its research and deliberations as and when appropriate and earnestly hopes that it will achieve its aim of "achieving real, sustained improvements in the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian children to better prepare them for their futures." When this is really so, organisations such as the state SPELD associations will no longer be necessary.

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