



9th July 2015

Letter to the Senate Education and Employment Committee

Outside the Square is a community group of parents and teachers supported by leading researchers and academics. Together we are committed to the education reform and social justice to support students with dyslexia and related learning differences.

About Us

This documentary is possible with special thanks to the support and commitment of the following leaders in education:

- Carol Barnes – GLD (Gifted with Learning Disabilities) Australia
- Dr Jennifer Buckingham – The Centre for Independent Studies
- Distinguished Professor Anne Castles – ARC Centre of Excellence for Cognition and its Disorders
- Jodi Clements – Australian Dyslexia Association
- Liz Dunoon – Dyslexia Daily and Helping Children with Dyslexia
- Dr Nola Firth – Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the University of Melbourne
- Tanya Forbes – Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group
- Dr Lorraine Hammond – Learning Difficulties Australia
- Bill Hansberry – Raising Beautiful Kids
- Dr Suze Leitaio – Curtin University
- Associate Professor Genevieve McArthur – ARC Centre of Excellence for Cognition and its Disorders
- Dr Sandra Marshall – Dyslexia SA
- Julie Mavlian – Dyslexia Support Australia
- Mandy Nayton – AUSPELD and DSF Literacy and Clinical Services
- Dr Bartek Rajkowski – Reading Doctor
- Sandy Russo - SPELD SA

The lack of understanding of dyslexia in education

Dyslexia is the 'forgotten' learning disability in the education system. There is currently a huge lack of understanding and support for students with dyslexia and related learning differences in schools.

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that affects a child's ability to have a good understanding of written language. Children with dyslexia struggle with reading, writing and spelling. Dyslexia is a neurological learning difference, it is on a continuum from mild to severe, and is far more prevalent than realised.

The occurrence of dyslexia is widespread with 10% of the population being directly affected [Australian Dyslexia Association] and up to 20% of the population being on the dyslexia continuum [International Dyslexia Association]. This means that in every classroom, there will be between 3-5 students with dyslexia that will struggle to access the curriculum and participate on the same basis as their peers. Most of these students are currently unidentified and unsupported in our schools. These are bright and capable children that are not able to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities due to their barrier with written language.

Dyslexia is a recognised learning disability in section (f) of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005) as "...a disorder or malfunction that results in a person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction..."

For years, parents have been advocating in schools and receive very little, if any, assistance for their children. Parents are often confronted with resistant schools that are reluctant to acknowledge dyslexia. Many parents face a lack of recognition of their child's learning needs and some schools will even deny the existence of dyslexia. Parents have to become experts, in both education and legislation, to advocate for their children and to address the current shortfalls within our education system.

The lifelong social and emotional damage to these children can be very detrimental. Children as young as five years are experiencing confusion and anxiety as they struggle to learn the alphabet. These feelings then continue to escalate for the next 12 years of their education. The downward spiral continues with increased feelings of low self-esteem, stress, frustration, embarrassment, shame, anxiety and depression. After many years of failure, the child will disengage from learning.

Unidentified and untreated dyslexia is an enormous social and economic burden to our country. There is a huge loss of people-potential due to limited employment opportunities and mental-health concerns. We hope to empower our schools and teachers so that children with learning differences are no longer instructional casualties of an education system that does not understand them or support them.

The ineffective teaching of reading

The constructivist whole-language teaching of reading has been a disservice to Australian students for many decades. The most disadvantaged students have been children with dyslexia.

Research indicates that at the moment, over 40 per cent of our students have inadequate literacy skills, 20 per cent of students have significant reading difficulties and an estimated 3-5 per cent of students will have severe and persistent reading disability.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2011 revealed that 46 per cent of 15- to 19-year-olds are functionally illiterate; this means they have inadequate literacy skills to cope with the basic demands of everyday work and life. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2011 revealed that many Australian Year 4 students have substantial literacy problems, with around one-quarter of students not meeting the Intermediate benchmark. In the PIRLS study, Australia was ranked the lowest for literacy out of all English speaking countries. Clearly we have a problem with the current teaching of literacy in Australia.

Scientific research supports the explicit teaching of language and literacy using evidence based methods. Evidence based methods (also known as ‘the big six of reading’) encompasses oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Specific instruction in phonology (phonological and phonemic awareness), sound-symbol associations (letter-sound correspondences), as well as syllable structures, morphology, syntax and semantics (the structure, use and meaning of words) is necessary for developing accurate, fluent reading and comprehension [Learning Difficulties Australia].

Some students with persistent and enduring reading difficulties will require more intensive specialist support with targeted intervention using multisensory structured literacy. Structured literacy places an emphasis on developing an understanding of the alphabet code by applying the blending and segmenting of phonemes to decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling). Targeted intervention is currently either under-resourced or non-existent in most schools. Very few schools have teachers with the specialist knowledge and expertise necessary to provide effective tiered intervention.

Outside the Square – Dyslexia Education and Advocacy Professional Learning Films

Outside the Square is an Australian series of documentary films to increase awareness and understanding of dyslexia in our education system.

- Film 1 – Understanding and Identifying Dyslexia
- Film 2 – Targeted Teaching for Students with Dyslexia
- Film 3 – The Explicit Teaching of Language and Literacy

These documentaries are designed to provide professional development to bring evidence based instruction and effective teaching strategies to EVERY teacher in EVERY classroom of EVERY school.

Please find enclosed DVDs of the Outside the Square series of films. Please take the time to view these documentaries as they paints a clear picture of the current state of education for students with dyslexia in Australia. In particular, Film 1 highlights the difficulties faced by our students due to a lack of identification, understanding and support in our schools.

Kind regards,

Parent, Teacher and Dyslexia Advocate
Founder of the Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group
Producer of Outside the Square