

Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Code Read Dyslexia Network Australia Limited (**Code Read**) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria.

1. Summary

This submission addresses paragraphs (1)(a), (2)(b), (3) and (5) of the Terms of Reference.

Summary of submission

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability in reading and spelling. Dyslexics can be taught to read using evidence-based methods but are often confronted with failure and frustration at school. Without appropriate support, this can lead to anxiety, poor self-esteem, social difficulties, lack of confidence, school refusal, depression and disengagement from learning. Untreated dyslexia is a significant reason for the poor literacy rates in Australia.

Low literacy can lead to life-long problems including higher unemployment, lower wages, poorer health outcomes and impacts on self-esteem, social interaction and education. Nationally, the economic impact of illiteracy on the Australian economy may be as high as \$44 billion annually.

Best practice in literacy instruction is based on the Science of Reading (**SoR**), with explicit instruction using systematic synthetic phonics (**SSP**). However, this has still not been implemented in all Victorian Government schools, where individual schools can choose their own literacy programs, even if they are not based on the SoR.

This submission provides two examples of successful implementation of SoR on a whole sector basis - South Australia and Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Part of this approach is a 40 word Year One Phonics Check, but this has not been adopted by the Victorian Department of Education.

One of the main reasons why SoR is not being implemented in Victorian Government schools is that it is not being taught to pre-service teachers in their Initial Teacher Education (**ITE**). This is largely because of an ideological conflict between proponents of whole language/balanced literacy and proponents of SoR (the so-called "Reading Wars").

Summary of recommendations

Code Read calls for urgent action. Despite many previous reports, Victorian pre-service teachers are still not being trained using best practice methods, quality literacy education is still a lottery in Victorian Government schools and many teachers still lack a sufficient understanding of dyslexia and how to support it.

Code Read seeks the following:

- Implementation of reading instruction based on SoR in all Victorian Government schools, including training and coaching of principals and teachers;

- Introduction of a 40 word Phonics Check (including 20 pseudo words) in Year 1 in all Victorian Government schools;
- Implementation of instruction in the SoR and how to teach it within the ITE of teachers in Victoria, including any necessary training of ITE educators;
- Instruction of pre-service teachers and graduate teachers about how to support dyslexic students, about dyslexia as a disability under the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and about their schools' obligations under that Act and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.

2. About Code Read

Code Read is a not-for-profit advocacy network founded to improve the outcomes for children and families with dyslexia. The organisation includes parents, carers, educators, health professionals and people with dyslexia.

Our Vision:

For all people with dyslexia to be understood, acknowledged, empowered and to have equal access to opportunity.

Our Mission:

- We will raise awareness about dyslexia.
- We will support and empower those with dyslexia and their families.
- We will work with government and other decision makers to improve the education system and workplaces for those with dyslexia.
- We will work to enhance the everyday experience of people with dyslexia.

Our Aims:

- Raise awareness of dyslexia and its impact on children and families.
- Ensure families with dyslexic children are able to advocate effectively for their children.
- Mandate national early testing in every school.
- Ensure national implementation of best practice teaching methodologies and approaches for dyslexia.
- Educators that are knowledgeable about dyslexia and how to identify it.
- Educators using current evidence-based teaching practices.
- Effective evidence-based literacy instruction using explicit SSP in schools and high expectation for all students.
- Schools and teachers to be dyslexia aware and give all students equitable access to the curriculum.
- Dyslexia to be de-stigmatised in the community.
- Action to alleviate the potentially devastating outcome of undiagnosed or unsupported dyslexia.

3. About Dyslexia

This part of the submission addresses paragraph (3) of the Terms of Reference.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is 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 (sound system) 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 the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (quoted in Maxwell 2019)

Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in the awareness of individual sounds in a word (ability to identify and manipulate separate sounds within words), verbal memory and verbal processing speed.

Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities and, according to the Australian Dyslexia Association, affects an estimated 10% of the Australian population (although this may be an under estimate as estimates in other English speaking countries are up to 20%).

Being neurological, dyslexia is a life-long condition but, with appropriate tuition, dyslexic students can learn to read. But they need to be taught using evidence-based methods. If a school does not provide this, parents will have to seek help outside school.

Diagnostic tests, tutoring, additional resources and technology can be expensive and many parents cannot afford them. For example, 78.5% of survey respondents in Levi's (2017) survey of Victorian parents of dyslexics were unable to access tutoring for their children due to financial constraints and 59.5% were unable to access software. This translates into ongoing inequality in literacy outcomes, and therefore life outcomes, between the rich and the poor.

Dyslexia is a disability within the meaning of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth). In s 4 "disability" is defined to include "(f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction". Dyslexia falls within the broad definition of "special needs".

Impact of dyslexia on student wellbeing

Children with dyslexia are constantly confronted with situations of failure and frustration in school settings. When mastery of skills falls short of peers, this can have a significant impact on self-esteem and wellbeing. Dyslexic children can be labelled "lazy" or "dumb". This can lead to learned failure and poorer school outcomes than children without dyslexia.

As the International Dyslexia Association (2022) has explained, anticipation of possible failure when asked to read or spell can provoke anxiety and fear. Ultimately, anxiety may cause school refusal. Research cited by GreatSchools Staff (2022) indicates that as many as 70% of children with learning disabilities suffer from poor self-esteem and as many as 75% of children with learning disabilities have social difficulties such as in making and keeping friends. Low self-esteem and a lack of confidence only serve to interfere further with learning and academic success and reinforce a cycle of failure and negativity.

GreatSchools Staff (2022) also cite research showing that students with learning disabilities have increased levels of anxiety, higher levels of loneliness and a greater risk of substance abuse. The International Dyslexia Association (2022) article provides detailed information about the social and emotional problems related to dyslexia.

These international reports are supported by evidence from an Australian survey of parents of children with dyslexia compiled by Forbes in 2016. This national survey was completed by 1,720 participants (468 from Victoria) and aimed to convey the experiences of parents about the education of their children with dyslexia from Prep/Kindergarten through to Year 12. In relation to the impact of dyslexia on student wellbeing the survey reported:

Tragically, 72.9% of students experience anxiety, 67.2% are highly stressed and 21.8% battle with depression. Half these children have disengaged from learning (50.4%) and many regularly experience constant failure (40.0%).

Consequences of low literacy

Not all low literacy can be attributed to dyslexia. Students may be “instructional casualties” with their poor literacy attributable to poor instruction, or there may be other reasons, such as English being their second language, absences from school, difficult personal circumstances or problems with vision or hearing. But the consequences for a student leaving school without adequate literacy skills is clear.

Del Rio and Jones (2023) *Saving Money by Spending - Solving Illiteracy in Australia*, which was commissioned by Code Read, is an economic analysis of the literacy crisis in Australia, looking at its economic costs, comparing this with the costs of remedying the situation and making recommendations for the way forward. The authors explain that low literacy can lead to life-long problems such as higher unemployment and lower wages, lower health literacy and poorer health outcomes, impacts on self-esteem and morale, social interaction and community involvement, personal development and education. Nationally, the economic impact of illiteracy on the Australian economy may be as high as \$44 billion annually.

4. The need for science-based reading instruction

This part of the submission addresses paragraphs (1)(a) and (5) of the Terms of Reference.

The provision of reading instruction based on scientific evidence about how children learn to read and how to teach them is crucial for improving educational and emotional outcomes. Significant research into the SoR and the most effective evidence-based teaching methodologies for literacy shows that explicit literacy instruction is essential for all students, especially those with dyslexia.

Teaching children using SSP has long been proven to increase literacy success.

... there is much convincing evidence to show from the practice observed that, as generally understood, ‘synthetic’ phonics is the form of systematic phonic work that offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers. (Rose review (2006))

Effective literacy instruction includes the five essential areas as identified by research:

1. Phonemic awareness
2. Phonics
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary
5. Reading comprehension

These are often called "the Big Five". Dyslexic children should receive this evidence-based instruction from teachers who have a thorough understanding of dyslexia and its learning challenges.

The SoR is to be distinguished from the Science of Learning. The SoR relates to what happens in the brain when a student learns to read. The Science of Learning relates to the mental processes, or cognitive skills, which enable a student to take in, understand, store

and retrieve information and looks at the cognitive capacity of the student. It is helpful for educators to have a basic understanding of the Science of Learning.

Example of best practice in Canberra/Goulburn

Code Read provides the example of the Catalyst program that has been introduced by Catholic Education Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn (CECG). The program is informed by the Science of Learning and has been implemented across the 56 schools in the Archdiocese. It is an evidence-based approach to teaching, supported by high quality professional learning and curriculum resources. The Catalyst website provides information about Catalyst. Del Rio et al (2023) provide a detailed explanation of the program. It has three elements:

1. Measurement - to identify at risk children and ensure all children reach their potential;
2. Evidence-based curriculum based on the Big Five;
3. High impact teaching based on cognitive load theory.

Del Rio et al explain cognitive load theory as follows:

Learning can be challenging and ineffective when students are presented with more information than their memory can handle, leading to cognitive overload. Breaking down the material into manageable parts helps students learn by preventing cognitive overload and enabling them to transfer information from working memory to long-term memory.

Significantly, with Catalyst CECG has changed from permitting different schools to use different teaching practices to introducing practices applicable across all CECG schools that are consistent with the SoR. These new practices have included:

- professional development for school principals to lead the change-management process in their schools;
- compulsory Year 1 Phonics Check to identify children who have not sufficiently retained information on letter-sound relationships;
- universal screening for literacy skills in Kindergarten to Year 2 and access to tools for screening in Years 3 to 6 to identify children in need of intervention;
- moving away from a balanced literacy approach and inquiry-based learning to explicit instruction of the Big Five reading skills;
- expansion of the program to Years 3-6 and into secondary schools;
- reducing teachers' time burden in finding their own resources by developing a low-variance curriculum;
- teachers supported by highly experienced instructional coaches who provide coaching and feedback on high impact teaching practices based on cognitive load theory;
- significant additional resources to schools including:
 - two days' teacher training;
 - purchase of curriculum resources;
 - access to coaches for teachers;
 - purchase of decodable readers to enable foundational students to sound out words rather than guess them;
- getting buy-in from experienced teachers and supporting teachers to evolve their teaching practices.

Del Rio et al analysed the NAPLAN results of CECG schools from 2019 (before Catalyst) to 2022 and found:

- *Reading: in 2019, 42 per cent of Catholic schools were underperforming compared to students in similar schools in the rest of the country. In 2022, only four per cent of Catholic schools underperformed.*
- *Writing: in 2019, 71 per cent of Catholic schools were underperforming. In 2022, only 13 per cent of Catholic schools underperformed.*
- *Spelling: in 2019, 71 per cent of Catholic schools were underperforming. In 2022, only 21 per cent of Catholic schools underperformed.*

These are remarkable statistics. The Catalyst program is significant in that it shows what can be done when an educational body adopts a whole of sector, consistent and adequately funded approach to improving literacy based on the Science of Learning and SoR.

Example of best practice in South Australia

A further example of best practice instruction based on the SoR given by Del Rio et al (2023) is the Literacy Guarantee Unit in South Australia. Similarly to the overarching approach of Catalyst, this initiative of the South Australian Government involved the provision of high-quality curriculum materials for schools, professional development for teachers and screening tools to identify students at risk of not reaching grade level standards and has included substantial funding. Screening has included a Year 1 Phonics Check.

Significantly, Del Rio et al note that:

The improvement strategy is based on evidence that a strong literacy foundation has a positive lifelong impact on a person's health, welfare and wellbeing.

Position in Victoria

In contrast to the Catalyst and South Australian approaches, where literacy practices have been implemented across all schools, Victoria has high levels of school autonomy. Del Rio and Jones (2023) state that this has involved:

...leaving decisions about curriculum, teacher training, screening tools and intervention up to the discretion of principals, school boards and teachers who aren't always well supported or trained to make evidence-aligned decisions. Jurisdictions such as Victoria and the ACT seem to favour a 'balanced literacy' approach, which may not adhere to the research base on literacy instruction, nor to the requirements of the Australian Curriculum.

As reported in Del Rio and Jones, 20% of Year 9 Victorian students were at or below the National Minimum Standard for Reading in the NAPLAN assessment in 2022. This was actually a better result than some Australian States and Territories. However, this is to be compared with the figure of 95% of students who could meet academic benchmarks for reading if they received effective instruction. This means that in Victoria approximately 15% of these school students were not reaching their potential.

Del Rio and Jones also report that:

According to dyslexia advocates, there are at least 185 schools that are using either Reading Recovery or levelled literacy interventions which are not based on evidence-based intervention best practices.

These schools are Victorian Government schools.

Reading Recovery

Del Rio and Jones (2023) refer to Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is a commercial literacy intervention which has been very common in schools in English speaking countries including Australia. May et al (2022) conducted long term impact analyses of Reading Recovery. The study found that that students, with a score just below a certain level, who participated in Reading Recovery in the 1st grade (USA) had scores in 3rd and 4th grade that were below those of students with scores just above the level who did not participate in Reading Recovery.

This study considered two alternative hypotheses for this result, namely:

- The Reading Recovery students did not receive sufficient intervention in later grades;
- Reading Recovery may produce large impacts on early literacy measures but its practices and strategies do not translate to skills needed for continued literacy success in later grades.

Code Read supports the latter hypothesis.

May et al found that the data was not consistent with the first hypothesis because the Reading Recovery students were more likely to receive additional intervention than the control students. The authors noted that:

More specifically, Reading Recovery does not include isolated, systematic phonics instruction that is advocated by some literacy experts. If those experts are correct, and systematic and explicit phonics instruction is essential for building decoding skills, then it is plausible that students who participate in Reading Recovery may not develop sufficient decoding skills that lead to success with larger words in 2nd and 3rd grade texts. Furthermore, this hypothesis may explain why, despite significant additional intervention in 2nd through 4th grades, students who participated in Reading Recovery fall behind in later grades if the strategies they are taught actually hinder decoding of more complex words.

In 2012 Reading Recovery was offered in approximately 60% of New South Wales Government primary schools, according to Bradford and Wan (2015). As reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2016), in 2016 Reading Recovery lost its mandated status in New South Wales Government schools following publication of an analysis by Bradford and Wan of the longer term impacts of Reading Recovery. This report showed that, whilst there was some evidence of Reading Recovery being effective at improving short-term reading outcomes at the end of Year 1, for students at higher baseline starting literacy levels, Reading Recovery is not as effective as the instruction and interventions offered at non-Reading Recovery schools. The program was de-funded in New South Wales in 2019 (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2018).

Levelled literacy intervention (LLI)

Del Rio and Jones (2023) also refer to levelled literacy interventions (LLI). Also known as Fountas & Pinnell, LLI is another commercial literacy intervention and program that is common internationally and in Australian schools.

The Catholic Education Melbourne Review of Evidence noted that the intervention is not aligned with evidence-based literacy instruction. For a critical analysis of *Fountas & Pinnell*

Classroom that concludes that the Kindergarten to Grades 5 materials "do not meet the expectations for text quality and complexity and alignment to the standards" see Report by EdReports (2021).

Code Read Recommendation

Code Read recommends that the Victorian Government and the Department of Education adopt a fully resourced, whole of Government schools approach to literacy based on the SoR along the lines of the Catalyst and/or South Australian programs.

This would mean that individual schools would not be able to implement programs for literacy that are not evidence-based. Victorian Government schools need to abandon Reading Recovery, LLI and any other literacy program or intervention that is not based on the SoR, and substitute programs and interventions that involve explicit literacy instruction using SSP. Principals and teachers need to be trained and supported by coaches in the transition period.

5. Year 1 Phonics Check

This part of the submission addresses paragraph (5) of the Terms of Reference.

Phonics Check in Australia

Both the South Australian and Catalyst programs include a Year 1 Phonics Check to identify children who have not sufficiently retained information on letter-sound relationships. Phonics involves students learning to link individual sounds of speech to their written symbols (letters of the alphabet and combinations of letters). The Check is designed to assess students' decoding skills and provide guidance for instruction that will improve reading. According to Buckingham (2020):

The Year 1 Phonics Check is a prime example of an evidence-based policy that has been rigorously developed, tested, scrutinised, and evaluated over many years. It has strong research evidence for its technical and theoretical rationale (22) and it has growing evidence of impact in practice.

The Year 1 Phonics Check has also been introduced to New South Wales schools, and a survey found that 98% of participating teachers said the assessment provided beneficial information about students' reading skills (Buckingham). The Check is not only an opportunity to assess the abilities of an individual child, but provides important feedback to educators on the success of their programs.

Early intervention following a Phonics Check that uses methods based on the SoR is crucial. Del Rio and Jones (2023) state that it takes four times as many resources to resolve a reading difficulty by Year 4 than it would have taken in Year 1. The literacy abilities of students should continue to be assessed throughout primary school and into high school to ensure that anyone who needs additional support receives it.

Best practice is the multi-tiered system of support outlined by Del Rio and Jones (and recommended to be taught to ITE students by *Strong Beginnings - Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP)* (2023)). Tier 1 involves providing high quality instruction, as set out in Part 4 above, based on the SoR. This aims to prevent learning gaps in the first place. Tier 2 involves targeted and additional support, usually in small groups. Tier 3 involves intensive support, often one-on-one, for students who do not respond adequately to Tier 2 interventions.

Example of best practice from the Commonwealth

The Federal Government has funded the Literacy Hub which is managed by Education Services Australia. The Literacy Hub contains a freely available Phonics Check.

This Phonics Check provides examples of 40 words, 20 real words and 20 pseudo words. Pseudo words are words without meaning but which conform to the rules of English - so that they could be real words. The purpose of including pseudo words in the Phonics Check is to determine whether the student is in, fact, reading the words (decoding). If a student has been memorising words or guessing them, rather than decoding them, they will not be able to read the pseudo words because they have never seen these words before.

This 40 word Check conforms with the SoR.

Example of best practice - South Australia

As reported by Del Rio et al (2023), when the Phonics Check was first introduced, schools received funding for a three-day release for all Year 1 teachers to allow for one day for professional learning, one day for implementing the Check and one day to analyse and respond to the results. More recently, this has been reduced to one day to implement the Check because of the greater expertise and experience of teachers and the normalisation of the teaching of SSP in classrooms.

Del Rio et al list impressive results from the 2022 South Australian Phonics Check which show State-wide improvement in the ability of Year 1 students to decode and blend letters into words. These include:

- In 2018, only 43 per cent of all students in South Australia met the expected achievement level for the Check. In 2022, 68 per cent met the benchmark.
- In 2018, only 18 per cent of students in the most disadvantaged schools met the benchmark. In 2022, this number increased to 41 per cent.
- In 2018, only 21 per cent of First Nations students met the benchmark. In 2022, this number increased to 40 per cent.

Position in Victoria

The Victorian Government has mandated the English Online Interview (**EOI**) for Foundation (Prep) and Grade 1 students in Victorian Government schools. The EOI is accessible to teachers on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority website.

Part of the EOI is a Phonics Check, but this Check contains only 10 words, with only five being pseudo words. According to an article in *The Age* published 28 August 2023, the Check has been heavily criticised as insufficient, with the Commonwealth Phonics Check being considered more meaningful. Professor Pamela Snow of La Trobe University is reported to have said that 10 words was not an adequate sample and would result in over- and under-identification of children with literacy issues.

Dyslexia and the Phonics Check

As Nayton and Boyle (2018) explain, early screening, such as the Phonics Check, is not intended to identify students with dyslexia, but to identify students in need of early intervention and ensure that this is put in place as quickly as possible. Once structured reading instruction commences, some students may continue to struggle and will require explicit, intensive instruction to avoid falling further behind their peers. According to Nayton and Boyle, with this level of intervention, most students will make excellent progress, but in some cases a more individualised response will be necessary.

In order to diagnose dyslexia, at least six months' intensive, targeted intervention is required. But as Nayton and Boyle emphasise, it is important to screen and intervene first – and assess and diagnose second.

The sooner a student's potential reading problems are identified, the sooner they can be resolved, or, if they are more serious and are subsequently diagnosed as a learning disability such as dyslexia, the sooner appropriate interventions and accommodations for the student can be put in place.

The initial years of primary school are spent learning to read. However, by about Year 3/4, this switches to reading to learn. The basics of reading ability are assumed and students are expected to be able to read and understand more complex information. If literacy problems have not been resolved or remediated by this time, the student will fall further and further behind in their learning.

Code Read Recommendation

A 40 word Phonics Check (including 20 pseudo words) should be introduced in Year 1 in all Victorian Government schools in line with the Commonwealth Phonics Check.

6. Initial Teacher Education

This part of the submission addresses paragraph (2)(b) of the Terms of Reference.

It is essential that Victorian teachers be instructed in the SoR and how to teach it within their ITE. This training must include identification of students at risk of long term literacy problems, including dyslexia.

History of inquiries into the teaching of literacy

Australia's falling literacy standards continue to have lifelong impacts on Australia's children, especially those with dyslexia, who struggle to learn to read. Almost 20 years ago, the *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL)* (Rowe Report) (2005) made 20 recommendations. The following two recommendations are relevant to this submission:

1. *...[t]eachers be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children.*
2. *... [t]eachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency.*

However, as is stated in *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Review (QITR)* (2022):

Since 2005, multiple inquiries, studies, and reviews have found that ITE courses in Australia do not adequately prepare graduates in the teaching of reading.

Despite this, the QITR reported that concerns remain that ITE students may not be well prepared to enter the classroom in a number of key areas including the teaching of reading, supporting diverse learners and students with disability.

Consultation with ITE graduates and employers of teachers nationwide revealed a consistent, shared concern: far too many graduates are leaving university underprepared to teach children how to read. The Expert Panel has heard that variance in approaches across ITE courses, along with underexposure to rigorous research is producing cohorts of graduates who are not equipped to teach this fundamental skill. (QITR p 36)

...

Given the critical role of literacy in children's ongoing development, all ITE graduates and currently practising teachers need to be empowered with research-driven, gold-standard teaching strategies that are shown to be effective in raising reading levels. (QITR p 37)

Following on from the QITR, in 2023, *Strong Beginnings - Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP)* was published to provide advice on four reform areas. Priority Reform 1 of this Report was "Strengthening ITE programs to deliver effective beginning teachers". It recommended that four types of core content be added to the *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures* to ensure ITE graduates are taught sufficient evidence-based practices to support them to meet the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. They include:

1. **The brain and learning:** *content that provides teachers with an understanding of why specific instructional practices work, and how to implement these practices.*
2. **Effective pedagogical practices:** *practices including explicit modelling, scaffolding, formative assessment, and literacy and numeracy teaching strategies that support student learning because they respond to how the brain processes, stores and retrieves information.*
- ...
4. **Responsive teaching:** *content that ensures teachers teach in ways that are culturally and contextually appropriate and responsive to student need. This includes core content on:*
 - ...
 - *diverse learners, including students with disability.*

Appendix D of *Strong Beginnings* sets out details of core content for ITE programs. Under the heading "Literacy" this includes:

How to deliver effective reading instruction that attends to how the brain learns to read through systematic and explicit teaching practices for the following elements: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and oral language.

Initial Teacher Education and Dyslexia

Research by Maxwell (2019), comparing ITE in the United Kingdom and Australia, recommended that ITE training should include explicit teaching to meet the needs of students with specific learning needs (including dyslexia) across all abilities and include strategies to support inclusive student participation and engagement in classroom activities. This includes ensuring new graduating teachers have a specific understanding of dyslexia. The author concluded:

Unfortunately, according to the extremely limited research available, teachers in Australia are insufficiently equipped to support students with dyslexia.

In 2010 the Dyslexia Working Party included in its report *Helping people with dyslexia: a national action agenda* a recommendation in relation to teacher pre-service training that:

All teacher-training syllabi should include ... Training in early screening/identification of students at risk of long term literacy problems, including dyslexia

The Australian Government's response to this recommendation was:

The Australian Government supports training for pre-service teachers to identify and teach students with special needs including dyslexia. Syllabi for specific instructional strategies for classroom teaching are not determined by the Australian Government, but by higher education providers.

According to Firth, the United States, United Kingdom and Canada have mandated initial teacher training in learning disabilities but Australia is lagging behind.

If teachers are given insufficient knowledge and training in their ITE to support children with dyslexia, then they will be unable to meet the Australian Teaching Standards and provide effective individual support in their classrooms. It is also likely that many graduate teachers will be unable to respond to children with sufficient understanding and empathy in relation to their learning difficulties.

In the Forbes (2016) "Parent Survey on the Education of Students with Dyslexia in Australia" participants were asked "Do you consider teachers are knowledgeable with adequate training in dyslexia?". 82% of participants responded to this question "No", 15% replied "Somewhat" and only 3% responded "Yes". 82% of parents saying that teachers lacked adequate knowledge or training in dyslexia is extraordinary. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability which, by definition, affects learning. It is essential that pre-service teachers learn about learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

When participants of the survey were asked:

Do you consider schools are knowledgeable in the legislation (Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards in Education 2005) is [sic] relation to dyslexia and related learning differences?

68% of participants said "No", 28% said "Somewhat" and a mere 4% said "Yes".

Knowledge of these laws was the subject of a specific recommendation in *Strong Beginnings*. Appendix D Table D4 - Core Content 4 - Responsive Teaching recommends that ITE programs should teach:

The legislation, regulations, policies and obligations related to inclusion and support including ... legal entitlements as defined by the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and core educational policy such as the Disability Standards for Education, 2005, which state that students with disability should have the same opportunities and choices in their education as students without disability.

Forbes' Parent Survey would suggest that ITE programs are failing in this regard as well. 94.3% of participants In Levi's (2017) survey nominated "Specialist training for qualified teachers regarding dyslexia" as a policy change that they would like to see at State or Federal Government levels.

Why are we here?

Despite the numerous reports on literacy that have been recommending essentially the same thing, many Victorian children are still struggling to learn to read. The time for action is now. As set out in part 4 above, 20% of Year 9 Victorian students were at or below the National Minimum Standard for Reading in the NAPLAN assessment in 2022.

Much of Australia's basic literacy instruction is based on ideology rather than being evidence-based, best practice instruction. This is a major contributing factor to the reading failure of dyslexic students. Australia's teaching of reading is still heavily linked to a "whole language" philosophy where immersing children in oral and written language is expected to result in them learning to read. (Whole language has been transformed into/succeeded by "balanced literacy").

This approach conflicts with the efficacy of the SoR, where the correlation between the spoken sound, the letter name and the letter shape is explicitly and systematically taught. This conflict is known as the "Reading Wars" and was noted in the NITL Report (2005):

The attention of the Inquiry Committee was drawn to a dichotomy between phonics and whole-language approaches to the teaching of reading. This dichotomy is false. Teachers must be able to draw on techniques most suited to the learning needs and abilities of the child. It was clear, however, that systematic phonics instruction is critical if children are to be taught to read well, whether or not they experience reading difficulties.

Australia's experience and rates of literacy are similar to other countries where the whole language, balanced literacy approach to literacy has been implemented. Australia is failing to give a large proportion of children vital literacy skills and our student teachers continue to enter schools without the requisite knowledge and skills to teach reading/literacy effectively by applying a proven science-based approach. For Victorian students, this results in ongoing failure among those who struggle to learn to read.

Teachers are professionals who want to help their students achieve their best. Leaving teachers insufficiently prepared to support struggling students and those with dyslexia undermines the foundation of their professional role. This includes providing them with poor literacy teaching methodologies, insufficient training to teach literacy effectively or support students' specific learning needs.

Position in Victoria

In Victorian Government schools, the issue of teacher understanding of dyslexia is similar to the Australia-wide position revealed by the Forbes' (2016) survey. According to the survey by Levi (2017), 82% of respondents said "no" when asked about their overall confidence in Government school teachers' understanding of dyslexia and the learning and support needs of their child.

In Victorian Government schools, the professional development of teachers is likely to be affected by the implementation of literacy programs that may not be based on the SoR, as is happening currently in many schools. Graduate teachers learn that these programs are acceptable to use and the cycle continues. This can be reinforced by professional development in programs that have been the subject of criticism, such as Reading Recovery and LLI (see the websites of Reading Recovery Australia and Pearson (for LLI)).

In relation to ITE courses, Buckingham and Meeks (2019) analysed publicly available course outlines or summaries of the core literacy units of undergraduate ITE degrees

Australia-wide that qualified people to work as primary teachers. This assumed that, arguably, course outlines would show what the coordinator or lecturer considered to be the key aspects of the course. The authors found that, in 81 (70%) of the 116 literacy units reviewed, none of the Big Five essential elements of effective evidence-based reading instruction was mentioned in the unit outlines. All five essential elements were referred to in only 6% of literacy unit outlines. The authors acknowledged that this did not prove that the courses did not include the Big Five in their content, but it did indicate the limited emphasis on these areas.

Code Read has reviewed Appendix 1 of this article to select institutions with campuses in Victoria. Of 39 literacy units identified 29 (74%) made no reference to the Big Five. Only one unit out of 39 (2.6%) referred to all five. Calculating the results by institution, of the 11 Victorian institutions six, or 55%, made no reference in their unit outlines to any of the Big Five. Only one college, Alphacrucis College, (9%) referred to all five in one out of its three units.

One Victorian institution included in Buckingham and Meeks' analysis that did not refer to the Big Five in its literacy course outlines was La Trobe University. *Psychology Today* (2023) recently reported that a new administration at La Trobe University is leading Australia in a call for systematic change in how reading is taught across Australia, moving away from the balanced literacy/whole language model.

Training the trainers

Buckingham and Meeks (2019) also calculated that only 15% of the lecturers and unit coordinators whom they were able to identify had specific expertise in early reading instruction or literacy, most with a particular interest in early literacy development among Indigenous and other children from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The authors offer an important insight. It is possible that at least some teacher educators may not know how to improve the content of literacy units for ITE courses by implementing the SoR.

Early reading instruction is a highly specific and extensive discipline that is distinct from literacy more broadly. It requires deep and explicit knowledge about the metalinguistic structures of written and spoken English, and a sound understanding of the research on effective pedagogies. (Buckingham and Meeks)

This suggests that, in reforming the requirements of ITE courses and implementing the *Strong Beginnings* recommendations, training for the educators of the courses may be required.

Code Read Recommendation

- Victorian teachers must be instructed in the SoR and how to teach it within their ITE.
- This training must include identification of students at risk of long term literacy problems, including dyslexia.
- If necessary, training for educators of ITE providers in the SoR and how to teach it to pre-service teachers should be provided.

7. Conclusion

All Victorian children should receive explicit evidence-based literacy instruction using SSP. This should be implemented by a consistent approach across all Victorian Government schools. The current system of each Government school adopting the literacy approach that it

thinks best is not working. Whether a child receives best practice literacy instruction or a sub-standard literacy education is a lottery depending on the school zone in which the child lives. It is no exaggeration to say that, not only the education of many Victorian students, but also their mental wellbeing and their future life prospects depend on this.

The QITR *Next Steps* report (2022) and the TEEP *Strong Beginnings* report (2023) have spelt out what needs to be done. The task now is to implement these reports. They MUST NOT sit on the shelf gathering dust like so many reports before them on inquiries into literacy.

Action involves:

- implementation of reading instruction based on the SoR in all Victorian Government schools, including provision of resources, training and coaching of teachers and implementing the Commonwealth Year 1 Phonics Check;
- reforming ITE courses to ensure that all pre-service teachers are taught how to teach literacy using the principles, practices and programs based on the SoR;
- instruction of pre-service teachers and graduate teachers about how to support dyslexic students, about dyslexia as a disability under the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and about their schools' obligations under that Act and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*.

Code Read requests that this Committee and the Victorian Government do all in their power to take action to change literacy instruction for all Victorian Government School students.

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