

SPELD VICTORIA SUBMISSION TO CHILDCARE INQUIRY; PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION:

JUNE 2014

Executive Summary

Those Australians that have unaddressed difficulty reading are restricted from fully participating in their own lives and our workforce. The strain on Australian families, our education, health and other social service increases with every year that every child with a learning difficulty goes undiagnosed and untreated. Early intervention is one of the key protective factors for these children across their working lives.

It is conservatively estimated that well over 20% of Australian children and young people are currently struggling with learning difficulties and 3 – 5% of students are known to have a developmental learning disability. Of those students identified with a learning disability, four out of every five are assessed as having a reading disorder (or reading disability), commonly known as ‘dyslexia’.

In 2006 the ABS identified that 52% of Australians aged 15 – 19 had a literacy level that was ‘insufficient to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work.’

Thus, this submission focuses the crucial but often overlooked role that the child care and early childhood learning sector can play in identifying dyslexia and specific learning difficulties and arranging for vital early intervention.

SPELD Victoria recommends that:

- 1. The commission investigates the savings and productivity gains possible through a comprehensive pre-primary system for detection and proposed intervention for children with learning difficulties.**

 - 2. The government responds to commission findings by scoping a system for compulsory screening for specific learning difficulties in the pre-primary year, identifying those ‘at risk’ of dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.**

 - 3. Proper stakeholder involvement is integrated in the design and implementation of a joined up system; with input from schools and other education settings, departments of education, service providers and families, in order to efficiently implement early interventions.**
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Response to Commission Scope

The commission terms of reference identify there are issues with:

- *a small but significant number of children start school with learning and developmental delays and;*
- *short falls in reaching and properly supporting the needs of children with disabilities and vulnerable children....*

SPELD Victoria argues that one of the multiple factors driving these issues, is the current lack of a consistent strategy for the child care and early learning sector to meet the needs of children with learning difficulties.

Early diagnosis and intervention would help to ensure that the more than 10% of Australian children with dyslexia are prepared for school in a way that will respond to their additional needs.

The Extent of the Issue

Young people with dyslexia and learning difficulties face many barriers, in both continuing to be engaged in education, and subsequently undertaking training and entering the work force. Learning difficulties also impacts on full employment participation over an individual's lifetime.

Dyslexia is a lifelong neurological condition which is not curable, but can be assisted with remediated evidence based teaching strategies and a range of assistance including assistive technology and appropriate computer software, personal and family support and assistance.

'It is conservatively estimated that well over 20% of Australian children and young people are currently struggling with learning difficulties and 3 – 5% of students are known to have a developmental learning disability. Of those students identified with a learning disability, four out of every five are assessed as having a reading disorder (or reading disability), commonly known as 'dyslexia'. (Dyslexia is viewed as a reading disability (DSM IV), a reading disorder (ICD 10), a 'learning difficulty' (UK) or a specific learning disability (USA))

'Most of these individuals have chronic literacy problems and a great many of them are functionally illiterate. The implications of this are significant: on long term academic and employment prospects; mental health; community involvements; socio economic status; and individual resiliency.'

AUSPELD (Australian Federation of SPELD Associations) representing all state and Territory SPELD Associations including SPELD Victoria

'52% of Australians aged 15 – 19 had a literacy level that was 'insufficient to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work' and '46% of the Australian population have literacy issues'

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006

Dyslexia and other Learning Disabilities Support

Around 53% of the existing workforce is struggling with language, literacy and numeracy deficits according the 'No More Excuses' report released in 2011 by the Industry Skills Councils. These statistics represent significant impediments to business growth and productivity improvement....

We will continue to see school leavers populating the workforce with significant shortfalls in language, literacy and numeracy skills until the education system focuses on curriculum frameworks to meet both potential employer and student needs.

VECCI (Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry) 2012

'Approximately 53% of working age Australians have difficulty with numeracy skills; 46% of Australian Adults have difficulty with reading skills, and 13% are classified in the lowest literacy category.'

'Language, literacy and numeracy are the essential underpinning skills that enable people to be productive in their work, to continue to learn and develop, and to participate fully in society. This is an obvious statement, the truth of which has been recognized for decades. It does need to be made though, as progress to a satisfactory situation has been slow.'

'Literally millions of Australians have insufficient LLN skills to benefit fully from training or to participate effectively in the workforce.'

'The situation looks as if it could be getting worse, not better: the LLN performance of Australian students' have, over the past decade, worsened in comparison to other OECD countries.'

'The importance of foundation skills such as literacy, language and numeracy cannot be overstated. Poor foundation skills can be a major barrier for job seekers and for those wishing to up skill. These core skills are crucial to higher educational outcomes – which in turn lead to higher workforce participation and higher productivity.'

No More Excuses, An Industry response to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Challenge, Industry Skills Councils

SPELD Victoria in 2011 conducted research among parents of children and young people throughout Victoria with dyslexia and learning difficulties, which identified major concerns for parents. One of these concerns was about the future of their young people in terms of engagement and success in ongoing education, training and employment.

SPELD Victoria Parent Research Report 2011

While the scope of the issue and impacts on children is well documented the flow on effects to the Australian economy are not robustly quantified. There is a need to establish what is lost when children with learning difficulties fall through the cracks and what could be gained through early intervention for these children, their families and the systems that support them. We hope the commission will be able to quantify what the net contribution of the savings and productivity gains might be.

RECOMENDATION ONE: That the commission investigates the savings productivity gains possible through a comprehensive pre-primary system for identification and proposed intervention for children with learning difficulties.

The Australian education sector and the community currently, is significantly behind OCED peers (e.g UK, Canada, USA) in our understanding of, acceptance of and assistance to children and young people with dyslexia.

Frequently children and young people face a difficult and often traumatic educational journey from early schooling through to secondary schooling, tertiary education and entering employment.

Research indicates that dyslexia and learning difficulties can impact significantly on the lives of an individual. It can impact on their ability to develop skills in a range of areas in terms of fully participating and achieving in education, employment, relationships and their community and loss of individual potential.

Those with dyslexia and learning difficulties may experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are over represented in unemployment statistics, juvenile justice and corrections services.

There is the tendency for increased vulnerability and significant 'risk' generally for these young people.

Dyslexia is a lifelong neurological condition which is not curable but can be assisted with remediated teaching strategies and a range of assistance including assistive technology and appropriate computer software, personal and family support.

'It is conservatively estimated that well over 20% of Australian children and young people are currently struggling with learning difficulties and 3 – 5% of students are known to have a developmental learning disability. Of those students identified with a learning disability, four out of every five are assessed as having a reading disorder (or reading disability), commonly known as 'dyslexia'. (Dyslexia is viewed as a reading disability (DSM IV), a reading disorder (ICD 10), a 'learning difficulty' (UK) or a specific learning disability (USA)

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RECOMMENDATION TWO: That the government responds to commission findings by scoping a system for compulsory screening for identifying those 'at risk' of specific learning difficulties in the pre-primary year.

At a state level it is recognised that improving outcomes for children with dyslexia involves multiple stakeholders including teachers, parents and carers, service providers, government and peak bodies. The professional peak bodies play a vital role in advocate on behalf of dyslexic students and liaise with schools carers and broader stakeholders about effective evidence-based interventions.

ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties, (2013) sited in Canberra Times, June 4, 2014

As an independent peak body SPELD Victoria through AUSPELD (the National Federation of SPELD state associations) can work across the nation to identify the inconsistencies and areas for improvement.

Early intervention along with a joined up approach to addressing the issues of children with dyslexia will be key areas where we create opportunities for improving the lives, education and productivity of the one in five Australian children with learning difficulties.

We recognise that a key success factors in this addressing issue will including key stakeholders in both the design and implementation early diagnosis and intervention from an early age. This issue cannot wait until schooling but must be addressed early and in a way that is integrated within any reforms in the child care and early learning sector.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: That proper stakeholder involvement is integrated in the design and implementation of a joined up system; with input from schools, departments of education, service providers and families in order to efficiently implement identification processes and early interventions.

SPELD Victoria

The mission of SPELD Victoria is to enable individuals with dyslexia and other learning difficulties to achieve their potential by:

- Providing impartial, evidence based advice and assessment to individuals, families, schools, and other organizations (including workplaces)
- Developing educational strategies for individuals with dyslexia and learning disabilities
- Providing services to schools and work places to enhance the learning opportunities for individuals with dyslexia
- Sharing knowledge and best practice regionally and nationally.
- Advocating for recognition and funding of appropriate services for individuals with dyslexia and learning difficulties

Through our Chief Executive, Michele Semens we are available to advise further on these issues and our recommendations to the commission.