



Ms Jenny Gale Co-chair  
Literacy Advisory Panel  
Submitted electronically  
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Dear Ms Gale

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Community Consultation on Lifting Literacy Lifting Tasmania.

Speech Pathology Australia (the Association) is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 13,000 members. Speech pathologists are the allied health practitioners who specialise in treating speech, language and communication disorders (including literacy difficulties) and swallowing difficulties.

We commend the advisory panel on recognising the need for implementation of a consistent evidence-based approach to literacy instruction across Australian schools. We appreciate the development of a framework across the early years, preschools, schools and adult learning environments, recognising the importance of literacy at all stages of life in Tasmania.

We provide the following feedback on the *Final Consultation Report for The Development of Tasmania's Community-wide Framework*.

### **Role of Speech Pathologists**

In addition to the role of a speech pathologist outlined on page 17, speech pathologists can:

- assess speech, language and communication skills to determine if there are any difficulties and provide intervention strategies to support speech, oral language and communication development.
- support speech, language and communication skills related to literacy in early childhood education and care settings, preschool and schools.
- work with early childhood education and care settings, preschools, schools, and families, providing prevention and promotion strategies and interventions to support speech and language development.

Speech pathologists are qualified to conduct a wide range of assessments to determine the presence, severity and area(s) of breakdown in a child's reading, spelling and writing composition, as well as oral language competencies. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the literacy and learning support team within education settings and adult learning environments working collaboratively with educators and other key stakeholders.

Speech Pathology Australia believes it is essential to acknowledge:

- oral language competency and literacy skills have a reciprocal and cyclical relationship.
- the vital relationship between early childhood education and later literacy development into adulthood.
- the unique impact that communication disability (including literacy) has on an individual's ability to access and participate in education and achieve expected educational outcomes.
- the critical role speech pathologists play in the educational team in the prevention, identification, and management of language and literacy difficulties.

Speech Pathology Australia maintains that current best practice models for speech pathology services in education settings are collaborative and organised across all tiers of a multi-tiered framework.

### **Terminology**

Throughout the document there is reference to ‘teaching literacy skills’ ‘developing literacy skills’ and/or ‘teaching language and literacy skills’. Oral language competency and literacy skills have a reciprocal and cyclical relationship.<sup>1</sup> Learning to be literate is largely founded on oral language competencies (e.g. vocabulary, syntax, narrative skills) that are acquired in the early years prior to school. It is important to recognise that children with oral language delay are at risk of later literacy difficulties. Research shows that language development in the early years is the most significant predictor of literacy skills at a later age.<sup>2</sup> In turn, being literate further enhances and extends oral language abilities, as well as knowledge attainment across the lifespan.

As such, Speech Pathology Australia recommends the use of the term “development, support, teaching of oral language and literacy skills” more consistently within the framework.

### **Importance of Systematic Synthetic Phonics Approach**

As per the evidence provided regarding the ‘Science of Reading’, the Association supports the recommended approach of synthetic systematic phonics-based instruction in the critical early years of school. Whilst a year 1 Phonics Check has been successfully implemented within several states, it is vital to plan for how these results will inform the subsequent teaching practices for these students in Tasmania. This is particularly critical for those students who are identified as being behind or at risk through the Check, and Speech Pathology Australia recommends that a systematic synthetic phonics program is also implemented in all Tasmanian primary schools in conjunction with the Phonics Check.

### **The role of books and decodable readers**

The Association emphasises the importance of decodable texts as they are specifically written to align with a defined phonics scope and sequence. They are a graduated series of books that are designed for use in the early years of formal reading instruction, to support the explicit teaching of skills associated with decoding text. Decodable texts are also written for struggling older readers, where the content and accompanying illustrations are tailored accordingly.

Decodable books are therefore critical tools in supporting approaches to early reading instruction that favour explicit teaching, using a scope and sequence about how the written English code works.

Speech Pathology Australia recommends the use of a decodable books series that:

- has quality production standards (e.g. quality graphics, design, paper stock);
- is a graduated, systematically organised series of books;
- aligns with a publicly available systematic synthetic phonics scope and sequence;
- comprises books with age-appropriate content (recognising that some series are for beginning readers and some are for struggling older readers); and
- include illustrations that are developmentally appropriate and are a complement to, not a substitute for, the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun, L., & Wallach, G. P. (2014). Language disorders are learning disabilities: Challenges on the divergent and diverse paths to language learning disability. *Topics in Language Disorders, 34*(1), 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TLD.000000000000005>  
<sup>2</sup> Cadbury, N. & Douglas, J. (2019). *Language unlocks reading*. Available at [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Language\\_unlocks\\_reading.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Language_unlocks_reading.pdf)

## The impact of language and literacy difficulties within youth justice

The Association appreciates the panel's acknowledgement of the substantial body of evidence<sup>3</sup> demonstrating a high prevalence of language disorders in both youth and adult custodial populations. One study<sup>4</sup> suggests that the association of speech, language and communication needs with offending might be explained in the form of a compounding risk model, in which compromised oral language competence increases the risk of difficulties acquiring literacy, and in turn, educational challenges, mental health problems and offending behaviour.

In the face of this evidence, it must be considered that young children entering school with oral communication difficulties are more likely than their typically-developing peers to struggle to acquire literacy skills, which in turn negatively impacts the development of more complex oral language and academic skills.<sup>5</sup> This has the potential to start a cycle which can increase the likelihood of behavioural difficulties, disengagement from school, and engagement in anti-social behaviour, a well-documented trajectory termed as the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>6</sup>

Given these associations, Speech Pathology Australia strongly supports the suggestions on page 44, including the need to screen for literacy skills, in addition to language skills, and the need for speech pathology supports to be accessible to those within the justice system, from the point of entry.

Speech Pathology Australia strongly supports initiatives to improve literacy and is keen to engage in further discussion. If we can assist in any other way or provide additional information, please contact Jane Delaney, Senior Advisor Early Childhood and Education on 03 9642 4899 or by emailing [delaney@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](mailto:delaney@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au).

Yours sincerely



Tim Kittel  
President



Helen Hall  
Tasmania Branch Chair

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<sup>3</sup> Chow Jason, C., Wallace Erin, S., Senter, R., Kumm, S., & Mason Carolyn, Q. A Systematic Review and Meta Analysis of the Language Skills of Youth Offenders. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2021\\_JSLHR-20-00308](https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_JSLHR-20-00308)

<sup>4</sup> Bryan, K., Garvani, G., Gregory, J., & Kilner, K. (2015). Language difficulties and criminal justice: the need for earlier identification. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 50(6), 763-775. doi: 0.1111/1460-6984.12183

<sup>5</sup> Snow, P. (2014). Oral language competence and the transition to school: Socio-economic and behavioural factors that influence academic and social success. *International Journal on School Disaffection*, 11(1) 3-24. doi: 10.18546/IJSD.11.1.01

<sup>6</sup> Christle, C.A., Jolivet, K., & Nelson, C.M. (2005). Breaking the School to Prison Pipeline: Identifying School Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Delinquency, *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, 13(2), 69-88. doi: 10.1207/s15327035ex1302\_2