

Lifting Literacy in Tasmania: Tasmania's Community-wide Framework Submission to the Literacy Advisory Panel in response to Paper One: Setting the Scene

Thank you for the essential work you are doing to develop this framework to achieve 100 percent literacy in Tasmania. It is wonderful that the Literacy Advisory Panel is recognising that literacy is a fundamental human right. It is imperative that the Tasmanian government urgently address the systemic problems that result in Tasmania's current poor literacy outcomes. Thank you also for the opportunity to be involved in this consultation process.

I have recently joined the academic team at the University of Tasmania developing the Master of Speech Pathology course starting mid-2022. This new program will result in speech pathologists from 2024 who have trained in the Tasmanian context and understand the local opportunities and challenges.

The consultation paper highlights significant themes that have emerged from your information gathering ('What we've heard so far') and I will respond briefly to some of these themes. My comments will focus on the role of speech language pathologists in achieving the target of 100 percent literacy. Substantial investment in speech pathologist services in both the Departments of Education and Health in Tasmania will make a significant impact on achieving this target.

The importance of early learning

As the state with the highest level of disadvantage in pre-school children in Australia, providing early learning support for children and families is critical. Speech language pathologists have essential skills and knowledge to contribute to this support team. There are some good early learning initiatives in Tasmania, but there needs to be greater access and resourcing, improved equity, and consistent evidence-based information, training and resources available to both early learning educators and families.

Speech language pathologists must be integral and embedded in all early learning programs in Tasmania. This will allow early identification of children and families that need targeted intervention. Speech language pathologists must also work with early years educators and families to improve the language and communication skills of all vulnerable children before they start learning to read.

Access to services and the importance of oral language skills

Oral language skills are the foundation for literacy. Speech language pathology services need to be available immediately when children are identified with communication development support needs. Early, effective, well-resourced intervention to support oral language development is crucial. Increased capacity (i.e. creating more speech pathology positions) and improved coordination and integration of speech pathology services through both the Tasmanian Health Service and the Department of Education is needed. The government could explore joint funding across Health and Education of speech pathology services for children and families before they start school.

I believe there are currently only 53 full-time equivalent Department of Education speech language pathology positions across all Tasmanian schools and early learning contexts and a significant portion of these positions are unfilled. This means that speech pathologists do not currently have the capacity to provide the services required to support literacy effectively in Tasmanian schools. Limited capacity means they have to prioritise children in the first few years of school. Therefore, children who need support in later years miss out altogether. To provide the service required to effectively support children before they get to school, and once they are at school, will require significantly increased resources.

Access to and attracting allied health professionals to Tasmania

The Allied Health Expansion Program at the University of Tasmania is an important initiative to address this issue. From 2024 there will be 20 to 30 speech pathology graduates each year with experience and connection to the Tasmanian context. To build the workforce the government should explore opportunities for graduate recruitment pathways as well as migration pathways to support international students who intend to live and work in Tasmania.

There is also a need to attract experienced speech pathologists throughout Tasmania to support and build language and literacy initiatives in the short term. Increased occupational therapy and educational psychology support services are also essential in schools and early learning contexts.

Explicit teaching of the Big Six of reading

The 'science of reading' is well-established and the importance of synthetic phonics in reading instruction is clear. Speech language pathologists should be integral team members in all schools, working collaboratively and in consultation with teachers and school leadership to improve literacy outcomes. The importance of oral language foundations for literacy (e.g. vocabulary, syntax, language comprehension as identified in the 'Simple View of Reading' and Scarborough's 'Reading Rope') is the reason why speech language pathologists should be embedded in these teams.

Screening and diagnosis of language challenges and tiered or responsive support

Expressive and receptive language and phonological awareness screening and follow-up diagnostic assessment processes at school entry should be used to identify children who need support (as long as there is also capacity to provide this support – identifying a need through screening is pointless unless responsive services can then be provided). Speech language pathologists are the most effective professionals to do this screening and assessment.

Children who enter school with poor communication skills because of environmental language learning factors can be supported through responsive tiered intervention support and monitoring. We know children with language and speech sound disorders are at high risk of literacy difficulties and need to be closely monitoring these children and providing the targeted support they need throughout their school years (not just in the early years).

Routine hearing screening is also necessary to improve language learning and literacy outcomes. Language assessment at school entry could also monitor changes in oral language skills over time as initiatives to facilitate language skills in early learning contexts are implemented.

Consistency in approach to literacy instruction across the school

Implementation of consistent, school-wide evidence-based approaches to instruction and intervention is imperative. Speech language pathologists working within schools need to be able to work effectively with all teachers and across classrooms in a systematic way, with a shared understanding. When there is lack of consistency within a school it is difficult for the interprofessional team to work together in a responsive way to support children. Within a response to intervention framework children should be able to come together from different classrooms if necessary and know that the approach being used is the same for small group or individual target support.

Ensuring graduate teachers' knowledge of appropriate evidence-based strategies

Graduate teachers need to have a good understanding of the role of oral language as the foundation to literacy as well as the role of speech pathologists in optimising language skills and literacy development. With the introduction of the Master of Speech Pathology at the University of Tasmania we plan to explore working with the initial teacher education programs to develop shared and reciprocal understanding of our respective roles and contributions to implementing an evidence-based approach to literacy and the science of reading.

I am very happy to be involved in any further discussion about any of these comments and look forward to the next phase of your work on this vital initiative.