

## Literacy Advisory Panel's Community Consultation

Submitted electronically

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Dear Literacy Advisory Panel,

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Community Consultation on Lifting Literacy Lifting Tasmania. We are very pleased to engage in the consultation process for the development of a community wide framework to improve literacy in Tasmania from the early years, throughout schooling to adults.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 13,000 members. Speech pathologists are university trained allied health professionals with expertise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of speech, language, communication disorders and swallowing difficulties.

Being able to read and write is profoundly transformative, both for individuals and for population-level health and wellbeing more widely. It enables the two-way transmission of ideas, information, experiences, memories, opinions, wishes and much more, via language, but without reliance on the auditory-verbal channel from which human language is derived<sup>i</sup>.

Language skills are a foundation of all learning, but in particular, literacy learning. As oral and written 'language' is the medium of learning in our education systems, students with communication disabilities and learning difficulties are at a profound disadvantage from the outset. This in turn impacts upon an individual into adolescence and adulthood. This trajectory may lead to ongoing literacy difficulties into adolescence and adulthood.

There is a significant link between early childhood education and development, and adult literacy, however we would argue that our education system does not sufficiently recognise this vital relationship. There is a wide held belief that some students will be slower to learn to read compared with their peers but given time they will "catch up". Evidence suggests otherwise – for many the gap actually widens rather than narrows. There is also considerable evidence to indicate that children who start out as poor readers remain poor, particularly if they do not receive explicit and systematic instruction.<sup>ii</sup> Evidence from the speech pathology field supports strategies that focus on explicit systematic instruction in foundation skills (such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary and language structure).<sup>iii</sup>

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for the development of language and literacy. These years lay the foundation for health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Early childhood is a time when children experience enormous developmental growth across a number of areas, including communication, social and emotional development and cognition.

Early communication skills are known to predict later social, emotional, academic and vocational achievement. As such, the importance of the early years to overall child development and the critical 'window' of opportunity for early intervention during early childhood is well accepted in international and national research and policy. Within this context, there has been growing recognition within both the early childhood education and community health sectors of the importance of the earliest years of childhood as an opportunity to shift children's developmental trajectories.



Therefore, it is crucial that children are given the best start in life to allow them to thrive, access, participate and achieve academically. The Association is pleased to note these themes have already been raised in the consultation process to date in the 'What we've heard so far' section of the paper.

As further noted in your paper the importance of synthetic phonics can not be underestimated. We believe a consistent evidence-based approach to literacy instruction must be adopted across all Australian schools. The recommended approach would be an explicit, comprehensive teaching approach including systematic phonics-based instruction, in the critical early years of school. This must be supported by funds to develop information/guidance for school principals to support their decision making about literacy programs implemented within schools.

Policy makers, funders and providers within the education system nationally must acknowledge 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. Unless this is addressed, Australia will continue to perform poorly in terms of literacy and numeracy levels when compared with other countries.

Speech Pathology Australia is a member of a coalition (the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition) which undertook the development of the [Proposed Early Language and Literacy Strategy](#) which was released on International Literacy Day in 2021. As you have referenced, this strategy highlights priorities to support a national approach to facilitating early language and literacy development.

The central objective of a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy is to establish a coordinated national approach to enhancing babies' and children's early language and literacy development in Australia. The overarching and long-term goal is to ensure that, before starting school, children are provided with the best opportunities to develop the foundational language and literacy skills required to learn, be healthy, develop a positive sense of identity and culture, and participate within their family, community and society, throughout their childhood, into adolescence and adulthood.

The National Strategy aims are:

- establishing a common understanding around early language and literacy development,
- reflecting and building upon existing strategies, initiatives, services and programs, and
- identifying priorities, targets and responses in the short, medium and long term.

From a speech pathology perspective, 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. Speech pathologists and teachers have different but complementary roles in education. As such, speech pathologists must be included as an essential member of the literacy and learning support teams in schools working collaboratively with teachers and other key stakeholders. Additionally, there are very good evidence-based interventions that are known to maximise outcomes for students – specifically those that utilise a whole school collaborative approach and include the expertise of speech pathologists.

Speech Pathology Australia believes it is essential to acknowledge:

–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 pivotal role speech pathologists play in the educational team and the critical role of speech pathologists in prevention, identification, and management of literacy difficulties.

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

Furthermore, the Association recommends a consistent evidence-based approach to literacy instruction across Australian schools. The recommended approach would be systematic phonics-based instruction in the critical early years of school. Additionally, funds should be allocated to the development of information/guidance for school principals to support their decision making about literacy programs implemented within schools. It is vital that there is strong support for the development of a framework across the early years, schools and adult learning environments, recognising the importance of literacy at all stages of life in Tasmania.

Speech Pathology Australia is eager to engage in further consultation within this initiative. If the Association can assist in any other way or provide additional information, please contact Jane Delaney, Senior Advisor Education on 03 96424899 or by emailing [jdelaney@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](mailto:jdelaney@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

Yours faithfully,



**Gail Mulcair**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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<sup>i</sup> Snow, P.. 2020 SOLAR the Science of Language and Reading. Child Language Teaching and Therapy 1-12  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265659020947817>

<sup>ii</sup> For a synopsis of the literature see Catts, H., Sittner Bridges, M., Little, T., Tomblin, J. (2008) 'Reading achievement growth in children with language impairments'. Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research, 51: 1569-1579.

<sup>iii</sup> McLeod, S., & McKinnon, D. H. (2010). Support required for primary and secondary students with communication disorders and/or other learning needs. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 26(2), 123-143.