

Submission  
No 74

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO  
STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

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## **Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.**

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Dyslexia is that form of disability in which children fail to learn to read despite receiving appropriate reading teaching. Research has shown that such children are at serious risk of mental health difficulties, especially depression. Juvenile delinquency is more common amongst children who have not learned to read, as is dropout from school and unemployment. People with poor literacy are less responsive to health education and use of disease prevention strategies, are less able to successfully manage chronic disorders such as diabetes and asthma, and incur significantly higher health care costs. All these personal costs of dyslexia explain why significantly more students with dyslexia are likely to attempt suicide than students with normal reading. And these personal costs of dyslexia explain why the final report of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission has identified that strengthening functional literacy is a key strategy to improving health outcomes across Australia. For all of these reasons, dyslexia must be recognized as a disability.

All Australian States have Anti-Discrimination Acts and there is a Federal Act that protects citizens from discrimination. Under these Acts dyslexia is categorised as a "neurologically based learning difference or disability" and schools and workplaces must not discriminate against dyslexic students.

Yet in NSW at present children with dyslexia have no specified pathways to achieve diagnosis and support. In the education system there are few qualified to diagnose, and the wait time for school psychologists is up to a year. For adults, there is no process through Centrelink for support. Individuals therefore have to fund their own diagnosis and subsequent support. On a user pays basis, only the financially secure can afford this. This leaves pensioners, low-income earners, students and the unemployed with nowhere to go. In other words, people in these groups are being discriminated against on the basis of their dyslexia.

It has been easy for schools and State Departments of Education to evade this problem because there has not been sufficient emphasis on dyslexia counting as a disability. The only way to prevent such evasion is for any document about disability to include an explicit statement that the term "disability" includes the condition of dyslexia. I hope that the Inquiry's report will strongly emphasize this critical point.

So with respect to the eight terms of reference of this Inquiry, and regarding the term "disability" in these terms of reference as including dyslexia, I have various observations to make on these terms of reference. At this juncture, in the interests of brevity, I will make just one of these observations.

***Term of reference 7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training.*** In New South Wales, pre-service and in-service teacher training re dyslexia is demonstrably grossly inadequate.

Teacher training about the teaching of reading in general is inadequate. In 2004 the then Federal Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, commissioned a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy which reported to him in December 2005. Amongst the findings of this report were the following:

- 50% of the 34 teacher training programs in Australia devoted less than 5% of the curriculum to teaching about reading.
- 60% of senior teachers considered the majority of beginning teachers were not equipped to teach children to read.
- The majority of beginning teachers reported that they were not confident about their ability to teach reading.
- Many beginning teachers themselves had limited literacy skills, and also lacked the metalinguistic skills needed for the teaching of reading.

Given that teachers are so inadequately trained in the general area of how to teach reading and what to do for children who are having any kind of difficulty learning to read, it is not surprising to find that almost all primary teachers are taught nothing in their pre-service training about dyslexia, how to recognize it, and what can be done about it.

It follows that the syllabi of the teacher training institutes in NSW need to be revised so that all of these syllabi include adequate training for teachers in how to recognize the dyslexic child and how to help him or her.

This will not be easy, because such a proposal is likely to be met with great resistance from the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Institute of Teachers, who are responsible for teacher-training curricula. Their first response will be to claim that teacher-training syllabi are already overcrowded and there is no room for new material in them.

The most recent occasion in which dyslexia was considered at parliamentary level in NSW concerned the **Education Amendment (Educational Support for Children with Significant Learning Difficulties) Bill**, which was passed at the end of 2008. After it was passed, I arranged a meeting with the a senior member of the NSW Department of Education, who is directly concerned with disabilities, and asked him what new practices DET would introduce as a consequence of this legislation. He said: "None", stating that DET was already doing everything that was needed for dyslexic children. I also asked him whether DET would be informing head teachers at NSW schools about this legislative amendment. He said No again, explaining that he didn't think head teachers ever read anything they were sent from DET. He went on to express the view that whatever happened in Macquarie Street was of little relevance to how DET went about its business. If the NSW Parliament cannot influence the practices of NSW DET, then there is no point in its holding an Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability.