

Bulletin



**Response to Intervention:
Giving children a second (and third)
chance for reading success**

LDA Council 2021-2022

(as at November 2021)

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LDA MISSION

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

THE BULLETIN

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From the President

Dr Robyn Wheldall

As 2021 draws to a close, I am delighted to be writing this column as the new President of Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA).

At the Annual General Meeting held in September 2021, significant changes occurred in the governing body of the LDA Council. More details about this change are presented in the Council News on page 5 and on the LDA website at <https://www.ldaustralia.org/about/meetourteam/>.

LDA has a long and proud history of supporting and advocating for students with learning difficulties, and the 2021-22 Council is committed to LDA continuing to pursue its mission of assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research, both in the classroom and through individualised instruction.

LDA also has an important role to play in ensuring that *all students* are the beneficiaries of effective instruction across the spectrum of educational settings. Knowledge about effective practice must be imparted to teachers everywhere, so that the very best evidence-based instruction can be employed in every classroom. Apart from being what every student needs, it is most important that students with learning challenges are in environments that will support and consolidate the gains that they make as a result of more individualised and specialised support.

There are students with learning difficulties in every classroom, and knowing how to support them is the business of every teacher. But even with the very best instruction in the classroom, there will always be a small percentage of students who require additional, often more intensive, support. LDA is committed not only to providing this support directly via our LDA

consultant network, but also by helping to ensure that there is an understanding of evidence-based practice across Tiers 1, 2 and 3 in a Response to Intervention or Multi-Tier Support System framework – a topic explored in this issue of the LDA Bulletin. This includes promoting approaches that are complementary across the different tiers of instruction that a student with learning difficulties may encounter. The expert knowledge of specialist educators is critical for students with learning difficulties to succeed in every educational setting. LDA is firmly committed to sharing this expertise with others.

As noted in several of the acceptance speeches given by our 2021 LDA Award recipients (see pages 10 to 12), a very encouraging development in the field of education has been occurring over recent years, with evidence-based approaches to teaching being taken up by increasing numbers of teachers. We have seen, particularly over the last couple of years, and in some ways aided by the COVID19 pandemic (which has made people more comfortable with platforms like Zoom), a strong and rapid growth of teacher organisations that have attracted thousands of followers in a relatively short period of time. This is a cause for great celebration. The amount of free professional development that has come out of these movements is extraordinary. LDA's activities have contributed strongly to this area as well, with excellent offerings in the professional development area including the Wednesday Weekly Webinar series in 2020 and 2021 and the popular recent six session Science of Writing course. These initiatives have been very well received and have also resulted in a growth in LDA membership, which is now over 800 members (and growing weekly). We can be rightly proud of the impact that our organisation has had.

There *is* evidence of a turning tide, but there is also a great deal still to be done. We believe that LDA has a distinctive place in the evidence-based educational landscape. We want to help build that awareness and those skills that are needed to best support our most vulnerable learners, wherever they are educated.

As well as reaching out to others in the educational community, our

association has a responsibility to nurture, encourage and nourish its own members. The excellent work in the publications area of LDA – the *Bulletin* and the *Australian*



Journal of Learning Difficulties – is another distinctive and important way in which LDA achieves this purpose. The recently released new LDA website is also a valuable resource for members and non-members alike.

The new 2021-2022 LDA Council has a great deal of breadth and depth. We are classroom teachers, special educators, speech pathologists, academics and researchers, as well as being experienced in running both not-for-profit and commercial organisations. Together we also have a great deal of LDA experience, as well as including some members who are new to Council and bring in valuable fresh ideas and approaches. There are also a great many people with exceptional skills within the wider LDA membership who are committed to its mission. Their expertise should continue to be harnessed in the context of a collegial, respectful, and strong organisation. In so doing, others may continue to join our number.

As LDA President, I want to express my thanks to a number of people. Bec Rangas is our very busy and talented (and always cheerful) Administration Officer at LDA who has helped enormously in the transition to a largely new Council. A great deal of work goes on behind the scenes to ensure that all that needs to be done is done. The new Council would like to say a big thank you to Bec for all her help in this transition phase and we look forward to continuing to work with her. I would also like to thank members of the new Council for enthusiastically embracing roles as Committee Convenors and members. Every Council member is engaged in at least one LDA Committee. The hard-working Executive (the five office bearers of the association) has also displayed

continued on page 4...

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extraordinary commitment to moving LDA forward and I thank them sincerely for all their efforts. A special thank you to Kristin Anthian, who stepped in right after the AGM to take on the role of Acting Convenor of the Professional Development Committee, charged with delivering the Science of Writing series to more than 950 delegates in October and November. Kristin went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that this was a successful professional learning series. Thanks are also due to Geoff Ongley of [Training 24/7](#), who volunteered many hours to ensure everything worked on the technical side for this extended event. We are delighted and enormously appreciative that Geoff has offered to provide volunteer services as the LDA IT Consultant going forward. We are very fortunate indeed to have so many talented and committed people working together to deliver services to our members, the wider educational community, and to the individuals with learning difficulties who we seek to serve.

I would also like to thank the outgoing Council, some of whom have served LDA for many years. We acknowledge and applaud the work that has been done to increase teacher awareness of best practice instruction and how to do this in classrooms and other educational settings around Australia. We are committed to building on their vital work.

Dr Robyn Wheldall, BA, Ph.D., MAICD, is an Honorary Research Fellow of Macquarie University, a Founding Director of MultiLit Pty Ltd., and the Deputy Director of the MultiLit Research Unit.

Consultant notes

Elaine McLeish, Convenor, Consultants Committee

It is a very exciting time for me to be returning to LDA Council and taking on the role of Consultant Convenor. I first want to express my great appreciation for the magnificent work of my predecessor, Olivia Connelly, who was tireless in her efforts on behalf of LDA Consultants through 15 extremely busy and demanding months.

Many Consultant Members know me well from my days managing the Victorian phone referral service (2002 to 2011) and then as Consultant Administrator until my retirement in November 2020. I first joined LDA as a Consultant Member in 1998 and am now a proud Life Member.

The Consultant Committee is fortunate to still have two stalwart supporters of LDA and Consultants in our ranks. Diane Barwood and Jan Roberts are both Life Members, Network leaders, past Presidents, Consultant Convenors, and recipients of the Rosemary Carter Award.

We've also welcomed two brand new Council members to the Committee. Felicity Brown is a Victorian Consultant who has represented the Glen Waverley Network for many years. She has a Masters in Special Education, 37 years secondary teaching experience, has been a member of LDA for over 25 years, and a Consultant in private practice for seven years. Felicity is also a member of the Governance sub-committee with a strong interest in the management of change to LDA's Constitution and in ensuring it best meets the needs of all members.

Eleanor McMillan from the ACT is the other new member. Eleanor holds dual qualifications in Speech Pathology and Education and is currently an Executive Teacher in Learning Support and RTI in a secondary school. She is also actively involved in LDA's Professional Development Committee.

The Committee has been very busy in the months since the September AGM. Unfortunately we have needed to spend a lot of time identifying

problems with the new website and requesting modifications, but we are optimistic that these will be rectified by the time you read this. We have also been planning for the inclusion of Allied Health professionals as Consultant Members, with an initial focus on Speech Pathologists. I will provide more information about this in my next report when we will be much further advanced in our planning and possibly already welcoming suitably qualified Speech Pathologists as Consultant Members.

Wherever you are in Australia, I hope you enjoy a happy and safe holiday season.

Elaine McLeish is now retired and divides her time between Northcote and Cape Paterson. She has five grandchildren and a German Shorthaired Pointer, who all keep her on her toes. She is delighted to be part of the new Council with a shared commitment to pursue the LDA Mission Statement.



In this issue of the Bulletin...

Ros Neilson, Editor, LDA Bulletin

The first section of this issue of the LDA Bulletin, containing the LDA-related news, includes not only a message from the new President, warm congratulations to LDA Award winners, a welcome to the new *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* Editors, and regular Consultant Notes, but also information about what has been a major change at the Council level of the association. Almost all the Council members and the General Manager stepped down at or before the AGM in September 2021, and the association now has an almost entirely new set of Council members. It is in fact this change that inspired the choice of the theme for the second part of this issue of the LDA Bulletin: the concept of multi-tiered levels of support for students.

By way of explanation of this choice: At the heart of the recent changes that have taken place in LDA Council lies a debate that has over the past couple of years evoked strong feelings within membership as well as amongst the Council members: the debate about whether or not the name 'Learning Difficulties Australia' should be changed as part of a growth strategy for the association. Those wanting to change the name would have preferred a name that included the words 'effective teaching' and/or 'science' – a name that did not include the words 'learning difficulties.' A formal debate about the issue took place at the June 2021 Special General Meeting that was called to vote on several changes, including this name change. One speaker who argued in favour of the name change began with the generally accepted

assumption that it is important for LDA to reach out to the increasing number of mainstream classroom teachers who want to learn more about explicit teaching. This speaker commented that there tended to be a change in the atmosphere of professional development workshops for mainstream teachers whenever the term 'learning difficulties' was used – she felt that a focus on learning difficulties turned teachers away. Speakers on the other side of the debate, arguing against a name change, were concerned that, despite the wave of enthusiasm to promote what is generally agreed as best practice in literacy teaching, the reality remains that there are individual differences in the levels of support that students require in the learning environment. Even best teaching practice in the mainstream classroom doesn't immediately solve all the challenges, although it should minimise the prevalence of the challenges. It was argued that all teachers need to be aware of students who need more support, and need to know how to make appropriate adjustments in the classroom. Furthermore, all schools need to have in place a system that ensures that safety nets are in place. Speakers who did not want LDA's name changed argued that 'learning difficulties' is not a word to be avoided, and to change the name and the focus of Learning Difficulties Australia would risk casting the association adrift from its important historical roots.

As the Council News section in this Bulletin reports, the outcome was that, despite the strong recommendations of many of the members of Council at the Special General Meeting, the majority of LDA members who attended the meeting voted 'NO' to the name change. Our name is still 'Learning Difficulties Australia'.

Those individuals who had nominated to stand for the incoming Council and those who were appointed at the AGM continued this important debate amongst themselves, trying to articulate a middle ground where best

practice in the mainstream classroom is not separated from a deep understanding of learning difficulties. The additional new Council members



who have joined since the AGM have contributed substantially to the debate. As Editor of the Bulletin in the midst of all this, I felt that an LDA Bulletin issue devoted to multi-tiered systems of support for all students seemed to be a timely move.

The topic of multi-tiered support systems in schools is introduced by three Australian experts in the field - contributors who are academics as well as teachers: Dr Kate de Bruin (one of our new council members), Emina McLean, and Karina Stocker. Kate begins with a historical introduction to tiered support systems, and she and Karina then go on to discuss the implementation of these models, with a focus on the secondary level. Emina, writing from the experience of someone who is herself driving the whole-scale adoption of a tiered support system in a primary school, provides useful specific details of how such a system is ideally implemented. Their contributions are followed by a cautionary note from Cathryn Bjarnesen, an educational consultant in New Zealand, and Roslyn Neilson, who argue that if there is no external evaluation of the system to complement the checks and balances within the system, multi-tiered support models may appear to be working but may still be ineffective. They provide a case study to document the potential problem.

The MultiLit team of Kevin and Robyn Wheldall, with due disclosure of commercial interests, contribute a behind-the-scenes account of how their suite of programs has had to evolve to ensure that there is continuity between Level 1 and Level 2 early literacy teaching.

Dr Linda Siegel invites Bulletin readers into the Educational Psychologists' room. Her argument returns to one of the problems that originally led to the development of multi-tiered support systems: the unhelpful requirement that psychologists assess students' IQs to determine whether they can be classified as having learning difficulties and are eligible for support. Her recommendations for re-imagining the role of school psychologists complements and enriches the possibilities of a multi-tiered support system.

These articles on best practice for supporting all students are followed by what provides probably the most powerful argument in the whole issue of this Bulletin. It comes from the voices of parents. Sarah Gole, Jacqui Tarquino and Olivia Connelly provide data from a Victorian survey of parents of children with learning difficulties. They document the experiences they and their children have had in the school system, and in doing so they show how urgent the need is for adequate systems of support in the school system. Their submission to this issue finishes with a request for Bulletin readers to sign a petition that they have organised to present to the Victoria Department of Education,

recommending the introduction of a Phonics Screening Check in Victoria, as has been occurring in many other parts of the world.

This issue ends not with the usual book review but rather with an important comment that follows on from the extensive book review that was published in the previous LDA Bulletin, Wendy Moore's discussion of Wes Hoover and Bill Tunmer's (2020) book, *The Cognitive Architecture of Reading*. In this issue, Wes Hoover and Bill Tunmer respond carefully to serious criticisms that have been levelled against the Simple View of Reading in the literature, arguing that the simple model still serves the implementation of the science of reading very well indeed.

We hope you enjoy reading the articles in this LDA Bulletin, and we invite you to join in with letters of comment to bulletin.editor@ldaustralia.org.

Thanks very much to the Bulletin Editorial team for their help in preparing this issue, and special thanks to the contributors.

Dr Roslyn Neilson
Editor, LDA Bulletin

2022 DSF Language, Literacy and Learning Conference

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The conference will provide a unique opportunity for educators and practitioners to hear about current research and evidence-informed approaches to teaching and intervention in the fields of language, literacy and numeracy acquisition.

It will be particularly relevant to classroom teachers, school principals and administrators, school psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, tutors, and other key stakeholders concerned with the effective education and support of school-aged children – including those with learning difficulties.

The conference will be an opportunity to hear from internationally renowned speakers including Stanislas Dehaene, Julie Washington, Tom Sherrington,

Courtenay Norbury, Eugenia Cheng and Claude Goldenberg. It will include a variety of interactive workshops, keynote presentations and information sessions presented by Australian and international experts and designed to meet the needs of all delegates.

Presentations will focus on evidence-informed practice, reading and spelling acquisition, language development, and the improvement of outcomes across key academic areas for all students.

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LDA members qualify for a discount on 1, 2 or 3-day conference registrations. Contact LDA for the discount code needed prior to registering and visit literacylanguageconf.com for more information about this incredible event.

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Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): An Introduction



Kate de Bruin introduces the series of articles about tiered levels of support with an historical explanation of how and why the concept developed in the American context, and a discussion of how the approach might meet current needs in Australian schools.

When I was a high-school English teacher, I was part of a group of teachers who set out to address the issue we had identified amongst a number of our students: they couldn't read. Although we weren't trained in reading instruction, we could see that without being able to read, these students were doomed to fail high school. So, we enrolled in professional learning, lobbied for resourcing, and got ourselves trained to run a commercial program with clear evidence to support its use with teenagers. Armed with these, we set about systematically identifying and teaching every student to read.

The students we taught were diverse. Some of the students in our first 'intake' were students with long disciplinary records, on the fast-track to expulsion. Others were refugees, traumatised and with patchy primary-school education, or were instructional casualties of the 'reading wars' playing out in Melbourne's primary schools. A few had disabilities such as dyslexia, hearing impairment or had intellectual disabilities. The students ranged all the way up to year ten but what they shared was that they were reading at about a grade two level.

We taught them all to read, without a single exception. We also sought to change the belief of many of our colleagues who felt that these students couldn't learn, that the students 'didn't belong here', that they would be better off leaving, or that they had to go to a special school to get an education. We persuaded them that we could teach them all, that they were our students, that they deserved a place in their local high school, that they had the same right to be educated at that school as their siblings and peers. We talked a lot about equity and held up our success stories and some of our star students as examples of our school's greatest achievements.

After teaching that first group, from whom we also learned so much, we set up a system so that all students transitioning from the local feeder schools were screened in the term before their arrival. Four years after setting it up, we had run six cycles of students through that programme. But the non-readers kept coming up from the primary schools. It took me years to ask why. Twenty years later, I teach pre-service and postgraduate students the answers I have since learned to that question of 'why'. Many of these answers

are explored in depth in the subsequent articles in this issue of the LDA *Bulletin* on 'levels of support'. The concept of levelled support is grounded in multi-tiered frameworks such as Response to Intervention (RTI). In this introduction, I tell the story of how RTI came to be developed in the United States (US) as a means of de-segregating the school system for students with disabilities and providing effective universal instruction for every student, as well as timely intervention on the basis of need.

What did we do before RTI?

The process of delivering educational support services to students experiencing difficulties at school has historically relied on understanding disability through a 'medical' lens both in the US (Sailor et al., 2018) and also Australia (de Bruin et al., 2020). This meant that any prolonged difficulties in learning or behaviour experienced by students is attributed to a deficit, disability or impairment *within the student themselves*. When difficulties at school are viewed this way, the accessibility and quality of regular instruction are not considered as contributing factors. Rather, students who share a diagnostic category are assumed to share a need for specially designed instructional practices matched to their disability or deficit. Accordingly, they are often grouped in separate 'special' settings away from their peers in general education for the purposes of efficiently delivering these 'special' practices. To determine students' eligibility for special educational services they are typically referred to medical and allied health professionals such as psychologists for assessment and diagnosis. The category of a student's diagnosis (e.g., intellectual disability, developmental disability, learning disability) is then used to determine the funding for educational services (Ysseldyke et al, 1999), and many unfunded students go without support.

How did we decide who needed special educational services?

The categorical approach for funding and service delivery of special education was developed in the United States in the 1970s, when two [key civil rights cases](#) prompted reforms of federal education legislation. These court cases drew on a previous legal precedent that determined 'separate

is not equal' and triggered the racial de-segregation of public schooling in the US. Applied to students with disability, this precedent meant that under the newly-reformed Federal education law, *all* students were able to access a quality education within the regular school system (Ysseldyke, 1999). This reform was ground-breaking on many fronts, but most notably in legislating for the right of students with disabilities to be educated when so many had previously been excluded or institutionalised. It also broke new ground by recognising the category of 'learning disability' for the first time.

What was so wrong with that model?

While well-intentioned, the categorical funding and service delivery approach in the US did not result in improved instruction and achievement for students with disabilities within general education classrooms. Indeed, the effect was in fact rather the reverse, because there was more attention paid to administering the evaluation process than there was to the quality of instruction provided to students (Sailor, 2002). The evaluation process contained an inadvertent incentive to have students diagnosed in order to access funded services, as well as profit to be made from conducting the diagnostic process itself in the newly-expanding fields of psychological and psychoeducational testing (Germann, 2010; Sailor et al, 2018). These incentives resulted in ever-more students being pulled out of the general education classroom; few ever returned (Chard, 2013). Thus, instead of improving the access of students with disability to a quality education within general education classrooms, the economic incentives within the new system of assessing entitlement fuelled a new and different but socially sanctioned form of segregation: the separate special education classroom.

During the 1980s, concerns were raised regarding the rapid expansion of students identified with learning difficulties/disabilities and behavioural difficulties/disabilities. Particular criticism was made about the IQ-achievement [discrepancy model](#) using gaps between students actual and expected achievement as a basis for diagnosis of learning disability which was viewed as an unreliable process (Pullen et al, 2018). There were additional concerns that these

processes required a 'wait to fail' model whereby a diagnosis could only be made once students' academic achievement or behaviour were substantially below that of their same-age peers. This meant that students who genuinely needed support often went without that support for years, by which time underachievement or behavioural concerns were often extensive and more difficult to address.

How did this lead to RTI?

In response to these concerns, in 2003 the US Federal Government set up six research centres to investigate the potential of multi-tiered prevention models to improve reading and behaviour outcomes of students (Chard, 2013). Multi-tier models originate from public health, in which primary tier practices are promoted across the population to prevent disease, such as healthy eating and regular exercise. For some individuals, secondary and tertiary tiers of intervention are then provided in response to acute and chronic health conditions that are implemented on a scale of intensity depending on individual responses to treatment which are carefully monitored.

Recast in the world of education rather than public health, multi-tier models were examined in relation to: coordinated tiers of instruction and intervention; data for universal screening and progress monitoring; evidence-based practices for instruction and intervention; professional learning; and school improvement (Chard, 2013). These were examined by researchers in application to two lines of inquiry: reading and behaviour. Research at the University of Oregon drew on this approach to develop a tiered framework of practices for proactively teaching and responding to student behaviour (Sailor et al, 2018). This work established a collaborative model for raising the intensity of behavioural instruction for students when Tier 1 quality teaching was not sufficient. This was achieved by engaging in school-based problem-solving and decision-making to identify the most appropriate strategies to change the teaching and learning environment and address underlying causes and functions of unwanted student behaviour (Fletcher et al., 2018). The research ultimately resulted in the framework known as Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) or School-wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Support (SWPBS) among other variations.

At the same time, research at Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas drew on the multi-tier model to develop a more rigorous approach for determining student eligibility to access special educational services under the category of learning disabilities (Sailor et al., 2018). This work sought to understand how students' responses to effective instruction in the general education classroom might permit more accurate identification of students needing supplementary support (Bradley et al., 2007). This research focused most strongly on the area of reading and produced particularly valuable standardised protocols in screening and progress monitoring, as well as the use of evidence-based instruction and intervention, ultimately becoming the model we know today as Response to Intervention, or RTI. This early work on RTI was conducted by academics interested in reading, and much of it took place at the time leading up to and following the report of the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000). Given these factors, it is easy to see why RTI research relates predominantly to learning and achieving in reading. In light of its emphasis on intervening early, it is also easy to see why the majority of existing research has focused on RTI in primary schools with the majority of evidence relating to this area to date.

So, what is RTI?

RTI operates as a multi-tiered model of service delivery in which students are provided with high-quality academic instruction and intervention. It uses student achievement data instead of a categorical funding model to determine student eligibility for more targeted educational support services. This means that the educational support services available within a school are made available to any student who needs them, rather than being preserved for those who are eligible for funding based on disability diagnosis. The core elements of RTI include:

- the use of evidence-based practices
- a sliding scale of increasingly intensive instruction and intervention across multiple tiers
- the collection of universal screening and progress monitoring data from students
- the use of this data for making educational decisions

Within RTI, all students receive high-quality evidence-based instruction

at Tier 1 in the general education classroom. The degree to which they are responding to this instruction and making appropriate progress in Tier 1 is determined by regular screening. When Tier 1 instruction is implemented with fidelity, this should be sufficient to support progress and achievement for the majority (approximately 80%) of students. For students who are not responding sufficiently to Tier 1 instruction, further targeted assessment may be conducted to identify which particular academic skills they might need to learn and rehearse more frequently in increasingly smaller groups at Tier 2. Students who do not respond to Tier 2 are offered support at Tier 3, which tends to be considerably more individualised and intensive, representing a substantial cost in terms of teacher time and school resources. For this reason, Tier 3 should not be implemented until Tier 2 has been implemented with fidelity and provided in a manner that was based on robust assessment data indicating the instructional needs of students. Importantly, Tier 2 and 3 do not replace Tier 1 teaching but are offered in addition to it.

Where to from here?

Both RTI and PBS represent a profound move away from a medical model that views student learning difficulties as a medical issue within the individual. Both approaches presume that all students are capable of learning with the right amount of quality instruction and determines that amount by considering how they respond to foundational Tier 1 instruction in order to provide the appropriate degree of intensified supplementary intervention at Tiers 2 or 3.

Beyond implementing PBS or RTI as discrete models to address academic or behavioural skills, there is now a shift towards implementing these as a cohesive model which incorporates a comprehensive assessment system that routinely collects data on students' academic progress and behaviour and understands that these are related. These are generally known as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) which integrate the collaborative team-based problem-solving approach developed from PBS and the improved decision-making from robust assessment developed within RTI. Not only does the model make sense in terms of combining the technical processes to make a more robust system, it also

understands that academic learning and behaviour are often interlinked. Many of those students I taught all those years ago who could not read misbehaved as a strategy to avoid having to read, or to be exposed as such to their peers. Their behaviours were a direct result of not being able to access the curriculum. Identifying them as needing a no-excuses disciplinary response would never have addressed this. Teaching them to read most certainly did.

What does this mean for Australia?

The rationale and benefits of RTI reforms in the US that were developed against these issues offer a clear set of recommendations for educational reforms in Australia. This includes the lessons about de-segregating the system, which is particularly timely given the focus on improving access to an inclusive education within the ongoing Royal Commission into the Violence, Neglect, Abuse and Exploitation of People with Disabilities, and the neglect constituted by failing to teach children to read. There are clear benefits to Australian students in ensuring that appropriate instruction and intervention are available to any student. Categorical funding models have remained in place since the 1980s in all Australian states and territories, with well-known associated issues relating to categories that are ineligible for funding, such as students with dyslexia (de Bruin, 2020). This has meant that there has been no system-level support for ensuring that all students are able to access targeted support if and when they require it, having instead to 'wait to fail' and hope for the 'right' diagnosis.

In my old school, reading intervention is no longer offered. These days, students who cannot read are now given no support to learn to do so. They fail, they drop out, or they leave to learn 'life skills' at special schools; the lucky ones have parents who can afford to pay for private tuition. With the recent advent of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for School Students with Disability (NCCD), however, many state education policies and those of other sectors are beginning to shift towards a needs-based approach. This means that the time is ripe in Australia to adopt multi-tiered models and provide support across all systems and sectors for implementation at scale *as is done in the US*. The articles in this issue offer a series of insights into

the implementation of RTI including how to set it up at the school level, the role of allied health professionals within an RTI system, and ensuring coordination between the tiers. Those of you who are interested to know more can access a wealth of resources at the following links:

- <https://www.interventioncentral.org/response-to-intervention>
- <http://www.rtinetwork.org/>
- <https://mtss.education/>

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Dr Kate de Bruin is a senior lecturer in the field of inclusion and disability at Monash University. Her research examines how inclusive education can be achieved in classrooms, schools, and systems through adopting multi-tiered systems of support to ensure that all students receive an education that is high in quality, with access to appropriate evidence-based support. Kate is a co-convenor of the AARE Inclusive Education Special Interest Group, and a council member of LDA. In her spare time she enjoys playing with her two children and her new puppy (a whippet).

Community voices: Lobbying for better levels of support for students with reading difficulties

This article, co-written by **Olivia Connelly, Sarah Gole and Jacqui Tarquino**, attests to the efforts of families and community voices to ensure that all students receive appropriate support at school as they learn to read and write. The article finishes with a link to an e-petition to the Victorian State Government, that will be open for signing until May 2022 – LDA encourages you to sign the petition if you agree with the view expressed.

Olivia Connelly:

I'm an LDA Consultant based in Melbourne. I work with students who have language and reading difficulties, with their families and their schools. I have recently had inspiring discussions with two members of the Victorian community who are part of an important grass-roots movement to improve the levels of support offered to children who are not thriving within the school system. Parents' views are often overlooked and un-represented in policy decisions around

best practice literacy approaches. But parents are voters, and they can play a powerful advocacy role for education policy changes if their experiences can only be documented and brought to the attention of the decision-makers.

There is a great deal at stake for these families, not only for their own children but also for society at large. As Snow (2020) argues:

The ability of a population to read and write at standards considered competent, and not merely functional, confers widespread opportunities to succeed academically and gain post-school training and education, even in the context of inter-generational academic under-attainment. This in turn affords opportunities for larger numbers to be part of the social and economic mainstream, and sits at the core of reading ability as a pressing public health issue and as a modifiable form of social inequity and disadvantage. (p.2)

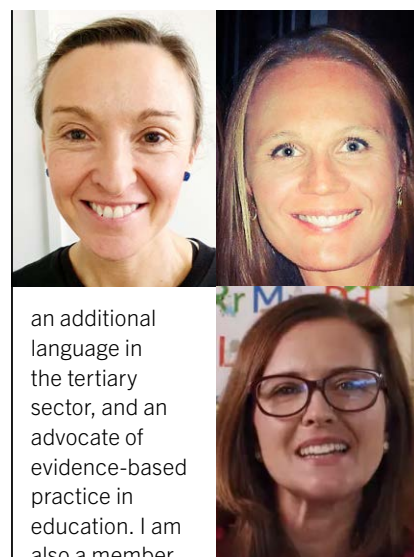
Part 1, below, reports on a survey that has been carried out with parents of children with reading difficulties.

Part 2 documents the efforts of a parent/teacher to persuade the State Government to introduce a compulsory Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in Victorian Schools.

Part 1: The DVS Parent Survey – Literacy in Victorian Schools

Sarah Gole:

I'm a parent of a child with reading difficulties, a teacher of English as



an additional language in the tertiary sector, and an advocate of evidence-based practice in education. I am also a member of the Dyslexia

Victoria Support (DVS) group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/dyslexiavictoriasupport/>. DVS runs a large, very active closed FaceBook group that includes many parents of students with reading challenges. DVS wanted to provide our members with an opportunity to share their experiences about their personal journeys as they and their families navigated through the school system. With considerable support from Heidi Gregory, the founder of DVS, we decided to conduct a survey that would allow at least these respondents to have their voices heard. Our 2020 detailed survey report is available here: <https://dyslexiavictoriasupport.com/>.

Our project received much-appreciated advice from members of the SOLAR Lab at La Trobe University, who assisted us with the design of the survey and made suggestions about the analysis of the responses. We thank them for their support.

The survey comprised 21 open-ended and multiple-choice questions. We surveyed 604 parents, and included 436 responses in our analysis. Over 3000 comments were considered using thematic analysis, and this allowed us to draw out common themes. The common themes are summarised under the headings below, along with some representative quotes.

Quality of literacy teaching and intervention

When parents were invited to comment on the programs, approaches, methods and resources their child's school uses to teach literacy, over 50% of parents rated the literacy teaching at their child's school as low or very low quality. The majority of parents reported teaching approaches were whole language / balanced literacy / 3-cueing, which parents noted as not suitable for their child. The most reported intervention programs were Fountas and Pinnell, Levelled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery, and these intervention approaches were also regarded as ineffective. Parents whose child did not benefit from school-based intervention, and parents who could not get intervention for their child at school, reported multi-sensory structured language (MSL) as the most common private intervention.

"We had to seek alternate support externally. And did all the research and paid for it all ourselves. It was a hard and difficult process and very time consuming especially when working as well and trying to help!"

Identification of literacy difficulties

62% of parents identified their child's literacy difficulties on their own and paid for private assessment. When parents raised their child's literacy difficulties with schools, they were often dismissed. Parents were advised to 'wait and see' or 'give it time'. There was consensus among schools that some children will always struggle with literacy and not much can be done:

"She is my third child. I highlighted in prep her learning wasn't the 'same' as my other two children. The school said she was fine and would learn at her own pace. By the end of grade one I was frustrated and sad to see my vibrant, happy, easy going girl change so drastically. She was crying every night and so aware that she couldn't do what the other kids in class were doing."

Of parents who were offered assessment by their school, wait times of over 2 years were reported; leading many parents to seek private assessment. Of parents who sought private assessment, many reported it made little difference to the level of support their child received at school. Secondary behavioural difficulties were more likely to attract school support.

Individual Educational Plans (IEPS) and 'Reasonable Adjustments'

One-third of parents said their child did not have an IEP. Parents whose child did have an IEP had to advocate strongly for it. Parents reported IEPs as a 'box-ticking' waste of time. IEPs tended to include intervention that was 'more of the same' that didn't work in the first place and lacked SMART goals and were inconsistently implemented.

27% of parents said their child received no reasonable adjustments at all despite being eligible. Parents whose child did receive reasonable adjustments said their implementation was inconsistent across year levels and teachers.

Teacher knowledge about dyslexia

48% of parents rated their child's teacher as 'not knowledgeable' in dyslexia. Parents took on the responsibility of trying to educate their child's teachers about dyslexia by initiating discussions and sharing web links. Some teachers were receptive to parents' efforts.

"Her teacher this year (grade 5) is the first teacher to actually understand our daughter. She doesn't know much about dyslexia but is always willing to learn and is amazed by how much my daughter teaches her."

Of parents reporting high levels of knowledge about dyslexia, some said the teacher had self-funded professional development.

Literacy difficulties and mental health & wellbeing support

81% of parents said literacy difficulties had a negative or very negative impact on their child's mental health. Over half of parents said their child did not receive wellbeing support at school. Parents noted inconsistency in effectiveness of

wellbeing support. Some parents paid for out-of-school wellbeing support.

Changing schools

Over two-thirds of parents had considered changing schools due to their child's literacy difficulties. Parents who did not change schools said there were no better options. Many parents commented that other schools were using the same approach to teaching literacy as their school, so changing schools would be a waste of time. Parents noted their child's social connections at their current school as the reason for not changing schools.

Positive changes in school in relation to supporting child's literacy

Around a third of parents said that there had been no positive changes over time due to teacher reluctance to change instructional practices or teacher knowledge not being sufficient. Parents who said there had been positive changes at their school mentioned compensatory changes such as increased awareness of dyslexia, the implementation of accommodations and modifications such as LOTE exemption and modified class work.

"My son asked his teachers to explain to his classmates what dyslexia was and tell them that this is what he has. This has been a hugely positive impact because 99% of the students are kind, caring, empathetic and helpful to our son and he no longer feels the level of shame he used to."

Benefits and challenges of remote and flexible learning

Parents were divided on the benefits and challenges of remote and flexible learning. Some parents reported benefits such as growth in their child's confidence or fewer distractions.

"Regular 1:1 support whenever he needed it. The ability to be able to ask questions and clarify what was required as many times as he needed. Accommodations whenever needed. Only real challenges were around the social isolation and lack of sport."

Many parents mentioned a benefit of seeing firsthand how much their child is struggling in their learning and some were able to focus on improving their child's literacy skills and/or use of assistive technology.

"It was very upsetting for me to witness how little he can write. He has so many basic gaps with grammar and punctuation, spelling is extremely bad so he won't attempt to write a sentence as he can't spell. He is in his first year of high school, Good to see some of the programs would have a voice to read the questions. I have had to sit with him the entire time to make sure he was on track and knew what he was doing so took me away from my work. The main benefit was that he was not under stress by other kids seeing that he couldn't do the work."

Out of school advice and intervention

Only 10 parents surveyed said their child's school was meeting their literacy needs. All other respondents reported consulting a range of allied health practitioners including paediatricians, MSL therapists and speech pathologists. Many parents commented on the cost of out-of-school support by referring to it as being a prohibitive factor, or a necessary cost given their school was not helping their child.

"She is progressing and gaining confidence. It is very expensive, and I can only send her once a week. I think she would benefit from more time."

Take-homes for the education community

Parents overwhelmingly commented on the need for teacher training in reading instruction in both pre-service teacher training as well as within schools. Parents also called for an updated Australian and Victorian English Curriculum, updated Victorian Department of Education website, assessment and funding for dyslexia.

To sum up what we learned from the survey, the frustrations and concerns expressed by our participants suggest that the situation for students with reading difficulties in Victorian schools is still very problematic. Ultimately, the DVS Parent Survey - Literacy in Victorian Schools Report is an important reminder of the need to put children and families in the centre of decisions around best practice in schools. We hope that the survey will assist those in positions of responsibility to see the impact of ineffective language and literacy practices on children who struggle to read.

Olivia Connelly:

Perhaps the findings of the survey can be best summed up by the following comment, addressed to both the school system and the politicians and bureaucrats who make decisions about the system:

"Work with families not against them. We don't want to make your job harder - we want to give our children better opportunities and a better chance at an equal education to their peers."

This survey demonstrates that many parents are crying out for changes in teaching practices – but, in this time and in this place, their voices are still largely going unheard. There is a huge need for concerted advocacy, so that policy makers, principals and teachers can step up to the collective responsibility of ensuring high quality instruction for all children in their early years.

Part 2: Lobbying for a compulsory Phonics Screening check for Year 1 students in Victoria

Jacqui Tarquino:

I am a teacher, a mother, and a qualified phonics trainer. Recently, I have been working towards persuading Victorian Department of Education to introduce a compulsory Phonics Screening Check (PSC) for Year 1 students. This effort has involved starting up an e-petition to present to the Victorian State Government.

I was brought up within a Whole Language approach, and I know first-hand what it was like to struggle to read and write as a child. As a tutor, I care deeply about the fact that when I go in to school staffrooms and introduce the term 'systematic synthetic phonics' into discussions around improving children's literacy, I often find that I'm the person who teachers avoid. Why do I feel as though I'm speaking a foreign language? The development of reading skills should be the bedrock of early learning in Australia, where we are privileged with a robust education system.

Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) is well supported as an effective teaching method – this has been accepted by three major inquiries into the teaching of reading in the USA, the UK and Australia. The English alphabetic

code is very complex, and this means that a critical foundation of literacy involves understanding the intricate relationship between speech sounds (phonemes) and letters (the graphemes that map onto sounds). SSP teaches the English alphabetic code explicitly. As a teaching method, SSP can assist children to navigate the complexities of the English language through better understanding the relationships between letters and sounds. SSP programs are also widely accessible: there are many excellent SSP programs currently available.

Some students can learn to read without SSP, but an absence of a systematic, explicit approach to teaching leaves behind an unacceptably large population of children. Many of these children have learning difficulties. Others have English as an additional language. SSP, therefore, is an inclusive education tool that maximises the chance for the majority of children to learn at the earliest stage possible. We know that the gap only widens over the years between more and less successful students – 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer'. We also see, in many cases, behavioural and emotional consequences arise from poor reading skills.

Currently, the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) fails to identify children who are struggling with reading and writing in the early years. An earlier universal assessment is needed.

In 2020, the Federal Government invested \$10.8 million into a voluntary, free Phonics Screening Check for all Year 1 students in Australian schools. This test can be viewed via the [Literacy Hub](#). Modelled from England's Phonics Screening Check, the Australian Phonics Screening Check is a short, simple assessment that enables teachers to measure how well students are learning to decode - to blend letters into words. The Phonics Screening Check is not a diagnostic tool. Rather, it is an early intervention trigger that disrupts the 'wait to fail' approach. It can help to identify children - such as those with learning difficulties like dyslexia, and/or those who require closer assessment and early remediation - to ensure better reading outcomes.

Our neighbours in South Australia first trialled the Phonics Screening Check in 2018. They subsequently were the first Australian state to implement a mandatory PSC for all Year 1 public school students. When the Phonics Screening Check was first trialled there

in 2018 and 2019, only 43 per cent of South Australian students were at the expected achievement level. With ongoing teacher training and support, 63 per cent of Year 1 students in the state's public schools met the expected standard in 2020, and this increased to 67 per cent in 2021. This represents a substantial improvement, and the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 11 November 2021 reported that this was accompanied by a big jump in the State's Year 3 NAPLAN scores for the students who formed the first cohort.

In line with this trend, the New South Wales Department of Education recently announced that, starting in 2021, the Phonics Screening Check has become mandatory for all Year 1 students in NSW public primary schools.

Yet despite the Federal Government's incentive for screening, Victoria has not implemented a mandatory Phonics Screening Check.

Having a Phonics Screening Check in place would help teachers to focus on SSP and understand why SSP is useful. Phonics should not be a topic that teachers in staffrooms avoid. If teachers can be provided with basic data about their children's mastery of the alphabetic code, this would allow them to deliver reading and writing assistance in a timely manner.

All children in Victoria have the right to develop their literacy skills on par with students in neighbouring Australian states. Implementing the PSC would ensure that all Victorian schools begin to teach systematic, synthetic phonics as part of their reading and literacy programs, and that early intervention could be obtained before a child reaches Year 3.

An e-petition requesting that the Victoria Department of Education mandate the Phonics Screening Check for all Year 1 students in Victoria is currently open. If you are a Victorian resident, we urge you to please [sign the e-petition here](#) and share it on social media and other networks. The e-petition will be open until 18 May, 2022.

Olivia Connelly:

This e-petition was prepared with the support of many participants, including Dyslexia Victoria Support, SPELD Victoria and Learning Difficulties Australia. That support is really appreciated - we need all our children to be given the best chance of learning how to read with the earliest possible support.

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Sarah Gole is a proud mum to three sons. Due to her experience of having her eldest go through primary school without learning to read or spell, Sarah speaks out for systemic change in how language and reading are taught in schools.

Olivia Connelly is the director of Gameplan, a language, literacy and learning practice in Melbourne. She is passionate about supporting children, adolescents and adults with learning challenges, using research-driven practices. She is also the busy mother of two very energetic children.

Jacqui Tarquino is a mother, phonics tutor and trained primary school teacher. Currently she tutors students in phonics and trains teachers through Jolly Phonics in Melbourne. She is a lover of all quality systematic synthetic phonics programs and is ready to start a reading revolution in Victoria.

Every child has the right to read before they leave primary school

PLEASE SIGN THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL E-PETITION TO MANDATE THE YEAR 1 PHONICS SCREENING CHECK IN VICTORIA

JOIN THE READING REVOLUTION

<https://bit.ly/31QqPjT>

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