



# Dyslexia and teaching Reading

Intelligence  
masks dyslexia  
and dyslexia  
mask intelligence

Students with dyslexia suffer from self-doubt and may go to extreme lengths to hide their difficulties. If they haven't received adequate remediation, by High School, they are often frustrated and demoralised. They are frustrated by the fact that they process information, read and write much more slowly than their peers and therefore become overwhelmed by the quantity of work expected. No matter how hard they try, their written work rarely reflects their ability. They have likely had many well-intentioned, but misinformed teachers accuse them of being lazy or inattentive and not working to their potential.

‘Students with Dyslexia may be talented in areas like oral expression, problem solving, big picture thinking, intuition and insight, computing, mechanics, grasping mathematical concepts (in spite of having difficulties with simple computation and recall of basic number facts). Teachers must be better taught to acknowledge their strengths and not only focus on their weaknesses.’

(Adapted from Speld SA Newsletter, Spring 2012)

Dyslexia remains largely misunderstood by the community, even though it affects between 3 and 10 percent of all learners. Some studies indicate that dyslexic learning styles in the general population may be as high as 20 percent. Sadly, there is no specific support for dyslexic students in South Australian Government schools.

If you understand dyslexia, you understand the reading process. And if you don't understand dyslexia and your approach to reading doesn't account for dyslexia very well, then your approach to reading is wrong for everyone, not just children with dyslexia.

Students with Dyslexia and their families are mostly left to their own devices. If the school can manage some extra support for these students, it is usually provided by non-specialist volunteers or teacher aides who have little or no training in the area specific learning disabilities. Unfortunately, many of these wonderful people, although well intentioned, do not have the necessary training or experience to understand the complex cluster of difficulties that make up dyslexia and as a result, struggle to use the remediation programs that have been provided to them to their full potential.

Steve Dykstra, PhD is a very well regarded Adolescent Psychologist and a founding member of the Wisconsin Reading Coalition says:

*"Dyslexic kids aren't qualitatively different than other children. They need more of what all children need, delivered more skilfully, with greater care and intensity. As far as I can see, there is nothing they need which is different than what any child needs."*

If you understand developmental dyslexia, you can begin to understand how the brain learns to read, (and what's happening when it can't). Only from learning about dyslexia did I learn what every teacher should know about the reading process. If you don't understand dyslexia and your approach to teaching reading doesn't account for dyslexia very well, then your approach to teaching reading will likely be wrong for all students, not just children with dyslexia.

Some schools invest heavily in computer-based programs that claim to *re-wire reading circuits* in the brain, sitting students at computers for a set number of sessions per week.

Unfortunately, there is little independent research to prove that these programs work despite the millions of dollars well-meaning schools have spent on them. If your child's school is considering implementing a program for their struggling readers that sounds like it might be a little too flashy, a good place to get some independent information on its efficacy might be the Macquarie University Special Education Centre ([see NOMANIS](#)) or [When Educational Promises Are too Good to be True](#).

Too many dyslexic students in our schools think they are dumb and that they will never learn to read, spell or write. What these kids need to know is that they are intelligent (average to above average for their age), but learn in a that many classroom teachers don't know how to teach. There's nobody to blame, just the need for our community do better in terms of:



We now need to fill this gap in teacher training as well as coach our wonderful and committed teachers how to teach reading in the way that the research tells us works.

**Teacher education:** about dyslexia pre-service and post-service and the continual improvement of (tier 1) classroom teaching practices to better accommodate for dyslexic learning styles. Talk to any Australian teacher and they will tell you that explicit training in teaching students to read and spell was missing from their training and if there was some instruction in this area, it was likely based on *whole-language* or its offspring, *balanced literacy*, both of which blatantly ignore the scientific consensus of reading researchers. Teachers are crying out to know how to help struggling readers and have a very healthy appetite for correct information. They may also tell you that teaching phonics was (and still is) *out of vogue* in teacher education establishments and the teaching in phonics in schools was shunned when they trained.

The '*whole language*' method of teaching, then later, '*balanced literacy*' and now, it's most recent, but equally damaging incarnation, '*phonics in context*' are all based on misguided ideology and not what neuroscience and psychology have taught us about how reading happens in the brain. Although it's hard to believe, *whole language* and its grubby offspring remain well embedded in schools (like a tick) despite the fact that all leading reading researchers agree that they are based in incorrect and scientifically unsupported assumptions about reading development.

In spite of this, a small band of educators, academics and so called experts continue to ignore the scientific consensus about how to teach reading (not unlike climate change deniers), and cling to these disproven ideologies about how reading should be taught. They minimise, even dispute the importance of structured, synthetic phonics. They ramble

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endlessly about the importance *meaning* and developing a *love of reading in children* and seem to not understand that fluent, comprehending reading involves mastery of a sound-symbol code (aka phonics), and that there's simply no road to proficient reading that doesn't pass through phonics. Like the rest of us, these well intentioned folks do want all children to be able to read, but are still caught up in the highly intuitive, but incorrect hypothesis that the brain learns to read in the same way it learns to speak - by just being immersed in language.

Sadly, for our profession, their message is eagerly gobbled up by high level educational decision makers (ex-classroom teachers) who dread facing the reality that what they've espoused for their entire career is in fact wrong, and responsible for Australia's shocking reading results.

The research from the last two decades has since proven their ideas idea wrong. Every brain has to learn to read anew. Reading acquisition is not natural. There are no specialised brain regions ready to learn reading from birth (like there are for language acquisition). Reading is *painstakingly bolted on to every brain (to use Steven Pinker's*

*words)* through explicit, structured and sequential teaching that teaches phonemic awareness to proficiency and then the relationships between letters and sounds in a step by step manner (phonics). For an excellent summary of this, see Alison Clarke's excellent YouTube video "How Phonics got Framed"

We now need to fill this gap between the science and practice in teacher training as well as coach our wonderful and committed teachers how to teach reading in the way that the research tells us works. Teachers also need to be empowered to identify and refer children who are not responding to evidence based classroom (tier 1) literacy instruction. Too many parents of dyslexic learners have heard the words '*don't worry, their reading will click*', or '*boys take a bit longer*', from educators *only* to find themselves a few short years later with a child who hasn't *just* clicked, who is well behind their peers and national standards in reading and feels utterly defective and hates school.

**Improved funding models** for students with dyslexia that recognise and fund dyslexia as a learning disability / disorder. Currently, no specific funding is available for students diagnosed with Dyslexia. Some Ministers tell us that funding is available and that how schools spend this is up to them. Unfortunately, this is buck passing and is not a reflection of the real situation.

Sadly, Teachers and Principals have to deliver the horrid news that there is no support to disheartened parents daily. Dyslexia takes away a learner's ability to access the *currency* in schools - *print*. It is through print that children show teachers what they have learned. In later primary school and beyond, print becomes the main way information is learned, memorised and shared. A child who cannot process print quickly and efficiently must be remediated, using research proven teaching methods.

This takes specialised training and allocation of staff hours to offer research proven, intensive remediation programs (such as the Playberry Multisensory Language Program, or other Orton-Gillingham based programs) in schools. While the current situation exists, schools are forced to stretch limited funding to meet a huge need - a need that extends to roughly 1 in 5 students. It's little wonder that schools fall victim to flashy, well-marketed programs that promise to remediate dyslexic learners that have no research proving their effectiveness.

**Accommodations for learners with Dyslexia**, especially in test and exam situations. [Dr Sally Shaywitz](#), a leading world authority on dyslexia tells us that slow reading *robs* dyslexic students of valuable time in tests and examinations. The only way we can give that time back is to allow students accommodations, particularly under test conditions where dyslexic difficulties are most pronounced.

Parents, teachers and leading Psychologists in South Australia have worked hard to lobby the South Australian Certificate of Education Board (SACE board) for easier access to Special Provisions in year 12 exams for students with Dyslexia and other specific learning disorders.

To their credit, and due to the hard work of Psychologists Karen Hodson and Annette Brock, in 2016, the SACE board finally listened. The process for applying for special provisions was made much simpler and easier. This was a huge breakthrough and a credit to the SACE board and the board's then director – Dr Neil McGorran.

**Dyslexia South Australia (Dyslexia SA)** is a group of made up parents of children with dyslexia, and other interested community members who are committed to raising awareness of dyslexia and increasing support for dyslexic students. been active in lobbying Government and Education authorities to take action on the poor state of reading attainment in Australia and to better support dyslexic learners in Australian schools.

Australia's failure to follow the research on the teaching of reading has come home to roost. In the 2011 PIRLS study, Australian year fours came 27th in the league table of countries, below all other English speaking countries and significantly lower than 21 other countries overall, including all other English speaking countries (except New Zealand). South Australian results sit at the bottom of this heap. The article [“Why Jaydon Can't Read”](#), written by some of Australia's most respected reading academics encapsulates the frustration felt by the academic community about this state of affairs.

**Dyslexia SA** has spread its roots through South Australia and has sprouted a number of other groups. More recently *Code Read* has been formed as a national advocacy group that is building membership and support to lobby on the national level. Right across our state (SA) now we have groups very connected and politically active parents, educators and allied health professionals who are raising awareness and knowledge about the poor state of affairs when it comes to the teaching of reading in Australia and the unsatisfactory support for young people with Dyslexia. Our groups are also well connected with Australia's top reading academics and together are making a noise.

Over the last decade, Dyslexia SA have put our 6 point plan in front of Policy Makers all over Australia:

<http://prezi.com/blizg1mk70pp/dagaas-dyslexia-6-point-plan-for-sa/?kw=view-blizg1mk70pp&rc=ref-16734939>

**WE SUPPORT  
EVIDENCE  
BASED EDUCATION  
FOR DYSLEXIA**

**Dyslexia SA**  
Advocating for the 1 in 5

Are you aware that many, many Australian educators still argue, and are still confused, over whether a 'whole word approach' to reading is better than a 'phonics-based approach'?

Please view this - it is illuminating and well worth your time to view.

Some of the questions put to policy makers includes;

- *Do you know that while Dyslexia remains largely misunderstood by the community and teachers, up to 25% of the population is affected by some form of language-based/ information processing difficulty?*
- *Do you know that Specific Learning Difficulties account for about 15% of the population, Dyslexia affects about 10%, and 4% of the population are severely Dyslexic?*
- *Do you know we are currently under diagnosing Specific Learning Disabilities by about 8% because there is no affordable, accessible and failsafe early reading screening system for all Australia kids?*
- *Why is it we're focussed on NAPLAN results beginning at year 3 at the expense of not screening our littlies for literacy/numeracy difficulties very early on in their schooling? Year 3 is too late.*
- *Do you know there is now extensive clinical evidence to show that unsupported Dyslexics carry elevated negative perceptions of their peers, of school, of themselves and about their academic futures?*
- *Are you aware of the growing evidence showing overlap between under-achievement in literacy (especially in reading) towards crime?*
- *Do you know there is no specific support available to Dyslexic students in South Australian Government schools?*



We've learned that politicians only listen if they think their position in parliament depends on it. Unfortunately, reading disabilities hasn't received anywhere near the public attention they deserve. It's our mission to raise this public awareness. If Government won't listen, we will make them listen.

- *Are you aware that some schools have adopted intervention programs within their Special Education suit that claim to help Dyslexic students, despite numerous independent studies showing many have no to poor transfer effects? Regulation is necessary and is easy to implement. All we need to do is follow the research!*
- *Are you aware that Dyslexic students, and their families, are usually left to find their own way?*
- *Do you know that good help and quality remediation has long been sourced outside of school systems by families - who can and can't afford it - because it simply hasn't been present in most Australian schools?*
- *Do you know that Australian educators have failed to effectively respond to conclusive research on how to teach reading to students in schools? (Please see the YouTube clip, 'How Phonics got Framed' - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9e8SJFuGRFM>)*
- *Are you aware that many, many Australian educators still argue, and are still confused, over whether a 'whole word approach' to reading is better than a 'phonics-based approach'?*
- *In fact, do you know there's been a backdrop in some systems where Dyslexia did not exist for a long, long time? Do you know that it was actually ignored, side-stepped and covered up?*
- *Do you know that the success of our dyslexic students in schools is a LITMUS TEST? When students consistently fail academically, behaviourally or emotionally – then we know our practice is falling short of meeting the individual learning preferences of many.*
- *Are you prepared to rectify these awful injustices?*

Dyslexia SA are inviting schools to become 'Dyslexia Aware' through an established a system of accreditation where all teachers and leaders in schools understand how to teach to students with Dyslexia. We now have [local SA schools](#) who



have earned the [Dyslexia Aware Schools Quality Mark](#). 'Dyslexia Aware Schools' or 'Dyslexia Friendly Schools'

are already well established in the UK, USA and Ireland. Great models already exist and they work for all students because they promote **good evidence-based teaching or reading and spelling**. When we get teaching right for students with Dyslexia - the bonus is, we get it right for all students!

We need more parent power. We've learned that politicians only listen if they think their position in parliament depends on it. Unfortunately, reading disabilities hasn't received anywhere near the public attention they deserve. It's our mission to raise this public awareness. If Government won't listen, we will make them listen.

If you have an interest in working with our group, please email Bill, Dyslexia SA or Code Read and these groups will keep you informed about what they are up to so you can join them!