
REVIEW OF THE MELBOURNE DECLARATION



Introduction:

“Literacy is a right. It is implicit in the right to education. It is recognised as a right, explicitly for both children and adults, in certain international conventions. It is included in key international declarations.” (UNESCO, 2006)

Code Read Dyslexia Network Australia was established on 10 October 2017 and is a volunteer-run Not-for-Profit organisation registered with the ACNC.

Our **Vision** is for all people with dyslexia to be understood, acknowledged, empowered and to have equal access to opportunity.

Our **Mission** is to:

- Raise awareness about dyslexia.
- Support and empower those with dyslexia and their families.
- Work with government and other decision-makers to improve the education system and workplaces for those with dyslexia.
- Work to enhance the everyday experience of people with dyslexia.

We would like to see:

- Early screening and identification of literacy difficulties including phonemic awareness screening in Preschool and Kindergarten, and a phonics check in Year One.
- Educators that are knowledgeable about dyslexia and how to identify it.
- Educators using current evidence-based teaching practices.
- Effective evidence-based literacy instruction (explicit systematic synthetic phonics) in schools and high expectation for all students.
- Schools and teachers to be dyslexia aware and give all students equitable access to the curriculum.
- Dyslexia to be de-stigmatised in the community.
- Action to alleviate the potentially devastating outcome of undiagnosed or unsupported dyslexia.

We currently administer two annual Awareness campaigns.

“Light it Red for Dyslexia” runs throughout October (Dyslexia Awareness Month), this campaign aims to bring awareness to the general public and highlight the strengths and challenges faced by people impacted with dyslexia. 47 Landmarks across the nation were lit up with red lights in 2018.

“Get on Board” encourages schools to get involved through engaging students in dyslexia awareness activities. In our inaugural year we saw schools across the country join in the Red Paper Plane Challenge.

Additionally, we provide evidence-based dyslexia information, advocacy and support via our various social media platforms and dyslexia friendly website.

Executive Summary

The Australian Curriculum recognises that schools need to accommodate the learning needs of increasingly diverse students, and there remains a need for students to acquire fundamental knowledge, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy.

The Melbourne Declaration underpins Australian educational policy and guidelines. Despite repeated recommendations for reform to ensure explicit and systematic literacy instruction, education continues its piecemeal approach of a sprinkle of phonics here, some balanced literacy there, with only a few standout schools taking a lead in achieving comprehensive reform.

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.

Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

“The past decade has seen unprecedented efforts in Australia towards achieving greater national consistency in a variety of schooling policy areas. One of the central policy mechanisms deployed towards this aim has been the introduction of standards-based reforms in areas that include curriculum, teaching standards, testing and reporting.” (Lewis, 2017)

We see continued failure of students to achieve reading success in Australia, which impacts on their ability to participate in school learning, achieve academic success and reach their full potential as they progress to adulthood.

A significant contributing factor to this failure is the way we teach our children to read. Whole language ideology believes that learning to read is a natural process, just as learning to talk is, and that by immersing children in oral and written language they will simply learn to read. This conflicts with the science of reading, where the correlation between the spoken sound, the letter name and the letter shape are explicitly taught. Thirty years ago, there was a big shift away from explicit phonics instruction in our schools to literacy being taught by predominant means of whole language.

“While the vast majority of children learn to speak with reasonable facility, a sizeable proportion of children do not learn to read well. In the USA, the figure was often put at between 20 and 25 per cent of the school population (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987), and there appears to have been little change since that time” (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2011). (Hempenstall)

The Australian experience and rates of literacy mirror other countries where the whole language, balanced literacy or the newly badged “phonics in context” approach to literacy has been implemented. We are failing to give a large proportion of children vital literacy skills despite them

being in classroom environments for 6 hours a day, 180 days a year. This is not a small group of children, and we cannot continue to exclude them from the basic human right to literacy attainment.

Parents of children who require and deserve effective reading instruction are left confused and bewildered as to how our seemingly bright children fall further and further behind their peers academically. The child's self-confidence is affected, their ability to access the curriculum is impacted more and more as learning becomes more literate rather than verbal. Parents assume that by sending our bright children to school they will learn to read, yet this is not our lived experience.

What works for at risk readers according independent peer reviewed research and supported by the International and Australian Dyslexia Associations is a structured literacy approach, which explicitly and systematically teaches word identification/decoding strategies. This approach benefits *all* students and is vital for students with dyslexia.

1. What are your expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education?

The review of the Melbourne Declaration is an overdue opportunity to align the multitude of educational policy and education systems that operate nationally to ensure that the best outcomes for all children are actively being sought in a coordinated, constructive and inclusive manner. The volume of papers, recommendations and reports generated over the last ten years that advocate for the systematic introduction of explicit and systematic phonics instruction borders on the ridiculous. Yet despite this, we continue to see our children suffer poor instruction as school's flounder to decipher the myriad of recommendations with little or no clear authoritative guidance.

We are seeking to address the impact educational policy has on enabling our struggling readers to succeed in our increasingly literary world. Not enough is being done to remedy this situation and the time has come for evidence to trump the ideology of the balanced literacy "wait to fail model". We look to this review of the Melbourne Declaration to provide clarity in the literacy space that aligns with best practice.

The evidence is clear, children learn best with a systematic synthetic phonics approach (Hempenstall, 2016) and this type of explicit reading instruction has been identified since the early 2000's as the most effective way to teach reading so that all learners achieve reading success (Shriver, 1999).

1. Despite a recent lift in our PIRLS ranking from 27th to 21st, we still have 19% of our Grade 4 below the intermediate benchmark (Thomson, 2017) and 7% of children unable to reach the "low benchmark" (McGowan, 2017).

A primary school of 500 children, where the focus in the early years is primarily on literacy and numeracy, has 100 children who cannot reach the intermediate benchmark and shockingly 40 of these are unable to reach even the low benchmark. 70,000 Grade 4 children are failed every single year and are sitting at school, day in day out, and cannot access the curriculum in a meaningful way. They will continue to fall behind their peers without the correct literacy instruction approach.

We are failing our children from the beginning.

2. Only 61% of Australian 15 years old students achieved the National Proficient Standard in reading literacy (PISA, 2015). (Clarkson, 2018)

High schools unsurprisingly complain of the literacy levels of many children when they enter the high school environment. These children are left further and further behind, and often disengage from school. One indicator at the school level that a student may be at risk of disengagement is low literacy or numeracy/poor attainment (Dept of Education & Training, VIC, 2018). These disengaged students are at increased risk of behavioural issues, suspension, expulsion and ultimately school withdrawal.

We are failing our children as they turn into adults.

3. *“44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills required for everyday life, making daily tasks difficult.”* (King, Lane, 2016)

We have created a group of marginalised adults who struggle to achieve the functional literacy required to navigate our literary world. They cannot read the doctors handout, the instructions in a cookbook, work out the bus route. Their employment opportunities are limited not because of their intelligence, but simply on the basis that they cannot read sufficiently for success.

We are failing our community.

The Melbourne Declaration must provide clear direction to educational decision makers to ensure that schools are assessing our children early for signs of risk, using evidence based best practice to teach and ensuring reasonable adjustments and accommodations are in place in both the classroom and examinations.

2. Who should the national declaration inspire and/or guide?

The national declaration should both inspire and guide all involved in setting the educational frameworks that support every teacher involved in direct classroom and student teaching.

- The Government and non-government entities that have responsibility for the governance of our children’s schools.
- The Universities who train our teachers.
- The Professional bodies who represent the voice of our teachers as a collective.
- The Parents who positively partner and engage with our educational providers for the best outcome.

Initial teacher training to include the “Big Five”

A recent Australian study found that *“preservice teachers demonstrated a substantial discrepancy between their general confidence to teach early reading and spelling, and their content knowledge of this area, leading to the conclusion that few preservice teachers had sufficient expertise to be effective teachers of early reading and spelling.”* (Kemp, 2017).

We firmly believe that new graduate teachers want to follow evidence based best practice, but their initial teacher training is not giving them this essential foundational knowledge. Their initiation to teaching practice is guided by a workplace induction into existing custom and practice which influences their ability to impart reading skills to our Foundation to Grade 3 learners. Graduate

teachers deserve to understand the science of reading and evidence-based practice so they can make informed decisions about how best to help all learners, but especially the failing readers before it is too late.

Amongst the findings of 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) 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.* (Coltheart, 2010)

It must become a mandated AITSL requirement that all initial teacher education programs in Australia include training in the basic five key elements that are critical to the development of reading, as identified in The Report of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000)

1. phonemic awareness
2. phonics
3. fluency
4. vocabulary
5. comprehension

Explicit and systematic and accumulative phonics in foundation years

Frustratingly there is still an ongoing failure by all levels of government to mandate (or for that matter even influence) the embedding of explicit, systematic and accumulative phonics in the foundational years of a child's education.

It was a recommendation in the NITL (2005) that *“teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.”* (Rowe, 2005).

Yet here we are some 14 years later covering the same ground about the best way to teach reading whilst our literacy rates continue to flounder with a significant long tail of reading failure. It is time for the conversation to end and effective reform to be implemented. Too many schools believe they teach some phonics, through balanced literacy approach, when realistically PIRLS performance continues to demonstrate this approach is not working. You cannot expect to do the same thing and get a different result. It is time for mandated change.

Phonics Screening Check

Many experienced and capable educators will strongly believe that they already teach phonics. Evidence, such as the recent trial of the phonics screen in SA, shows that despite their very best intentions this is not the case. *“The first annual phonics pronunciation test of 4406 students by Flinders University experts found Reception students could only correctly pronounce an average of 11 of the 40 samples while Year 1 students had an average of 22.”* (Purcell, 2018)

The phonics screen will provide schools with quantitative data around the efficacy of their teaching methodologies and assist with early identification of children who are at-risk readers. This will allow for reflection on current practice. It will also enable appropriate intervention and support to be put in place. Early intervention for the at-risk reader is crucial.

The source of opposition to this screening tool is generated by those with vested interests in protecting their reputations (having pushed the Balance Literacy with sprinkle of phonics approach). It is confronting to have quantitative data demonstrate the enormity of the failure of this approach. This is not a high stakes “test” but an in class, one on one, 5-minute screening tool that provides immediate data to the teacher, the school and the parents. It must be nationally introduced!

3. How has the *Melbourne Declaration* impacted or influenced you?

The Melbourne Declaration has had an enormous impact on every child in every school who struggles to read. The ongoing ideological influence of the balanced literacy cohort has ensured that 19% of children fail to grasp basic literacy skills and fall further and further behind. Though many independent advisory bodies have continued to support the implementation of the recommendations of the 2005 NITL to “provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction” we are yet to see this implemented in a considered or strategic manner. We have some stand out schools (such as Bentleigh West Primary School, Melbourne) taking a lighthouse leadership role whilst educational governance bodies refuse to act decisively. Most schools are operating in a balanced literacy, phonics in context paradigm, to the detriment of our children’s literacy outcomes.

This “choose your own adventure” approach leads to unsupported learning difficulties and enormous mental health consequences for children and adults.

The impact of illiteracy cannot be underestimated and begins early and carries along the continuum. Anxiety, depression, disengagement, school refusal, acting out, suspension, expulsion, abandoning education (Why continue to go to school when you believe you are dumb and can’t access the curriculum?).

Indeed, up to “52% of young male offenders have clinically significant (yet previously undiagnosed) language disorders” (Snow, 2014). Illiteracy has lifelong negative impacts for the individual, families and the community.

Parents who can advocate for their children, often will provide additional support outside the school system at enormous personal financial costs, resulting in the ongoing inequality in literacy outcomes between rich and poor.

Education should provide equitable access to literacy for all, not just those that can afford access to private intervention.

4. What do you consider are the **three most important** economic, social and technological changes that will shape the future of education in Australia?

Assistive Technology in the educational setting

Assistive technology is designed to help students who have learning disabilities function in the classroom by providing some compensation for their learning disability. Whilst such technology does not eliminate the learning disability, nor the need for explicit evidence-based in class instruction, it does enable the student to capitalise on their strengths and minimise the impact of their learning disability.

Assistive technology can include the use of audio books (ear reading), text to speech applications, speech to text applications, assistive technology for spelling, note taking technology and assistive technology for grammar. Use of such technology allows students with dyslexia to demonstrate their capabilities and organise and store classroom notes.

Too often students are denied access to assistive technology, limiting their capacity to fully access the curriculum and thus achieve to their full potential. Many institutions limit such use as they falsely believe that it provides an unfair advantage to the dyslexic child, rather than providing equality. Just as we do not expect a child to function without support for a physical disability, nor should we expect a child with a learning disability to be denied access to the supports required to fully participate.

Accommodations

Children with dyslexia work harder than their classroom peers to remember and apply classroom information (Australian Dyslexia Association). These children are often of average to above average intelligence and in most cases have poor working memory. Accommodations in both the classroom and test situations enables them to perform on a level playing field to their non-dyslexic peers.

Accommodations such as:

- additional time
- rest breaks
- scribes and readers
- use of assistive technology
- Separate room in test and exam situations

are often denied to dyslexic students. There is no consistent approach to providing the accommodations nationally and denial of reasonable accommodations causes students and their families enormous stress and disadvantage. Dyslexia is a hidden disability, but a disability, nonetheless. Just as you wouldn't deny a child in a wheelchair ramp access, a dyslexic child requires fair access to reasonable adjustments.

Barriers to success for adolescents as they progress through their schooling include the restrictive and confusing regulations around what accommodations can be used during NAPLAN testing, and the impact this has on undertaking tertiary or accredited Year 11 and 12 studies to gain formal recognition and thus negative impacts on the ability to progress to higher education.

Accommodation applications are variably assessed depending on the State in which you are studying. Most require the submission of a recent full and costly psychological assessment. This is a

further barrier to many students because of the high cost involved in undertaking such assessments, as most require private funding. Additional teacher/principal assessments, sample submissions and other health care professional reports are also required. It is a complex process and schools are often unsure of the process for applying.

Each State has differing requirements and assessment of accommodation requests. Streamlining these requirements nationally would provide clear and consistent access to reasonable accommodations.

5. How can a national declaration best reflect that Australians need to continue to participate in learning throughout their lifetime?

Teachers undertake onerous professional development annually; it is essential that this professional development aligns with evidence-based practice and has some mandated components specifically related to teaching literacy. The Melbourne Declaration should include mandated requirements across the F-12 teaching cohort. Other professions are required to provide evidence of training and assessment in mandated skills such as basic life support for healthcare professionals, and it is reasonable that teachers also undertake regulated training in core competencies to ensure their knowledge is assessed as up to date and aligned with evidence-based practice.

CONCLUSION

The review of the Melbourne Declaration offers a unique and timely opportunity to align the Australian Curriculum and the State policies to ensure that our vulnerable readers are given every opportunity to succeed in both literacy attainment and educational success. We cannot keep doing things the same way and expect a different outcome. We know what works for all children to get them reading and succeeding. Delivering education according to ideology rather than evidence borders on negligence.

“When we know better, we do better.” Let’s do better!

www.codereadnetwork.org

E: info@codereadnetwork.org

 @CodeReadDyslexiaNetwork

 @CodeReadNetwork

 CodeReadDyslexiaNetwork

ABN 69 621 888 122