

About Square Pegs

Square Peg is a registered charity, founded in 2013 by concerned parents, academics and educators to improve recognition, understanding and action on dyslexia in Tasmania. Square Pegs has also advocated strongly with respect to literacy more broadly, in particular the need for improved teacher education, introduction of the phonics screener at the end of Year 1 and implementation of an evidence-based structured literacy pedagogy across all schools. Square Pegs also recognise that the challenges faced by those with dyslexia can be more far-reaching than just a reading and literacy-related disability.

Square Pegs welcomes the Government's focus on identifying strategies for improving child and youth wellbeing in Tasmania and appreciates the opportunity to join this discussion. This submission will focus specifically on concerns relating to the wellbeing children with dyslexia and related learning differences and related a number of the key ingredients of wellbeing, including being loved and safe, learning, participating and being healthy.

About Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning disability. In children, dyslexia affects the ability to develop language skills, impacting particularly on written language and learning to read and spell. Dyslexia is **not** a lack of intelligence, laziness or vision issue.

Dyslexia is common. It accounts for 80 per cent of all students identified as having a specific learning disability. Dyslexia often runs in families and evidence suggests that at least 10 per cent, but more likely to be up to 20% of Australia's population is dyslexic. Lowest figures therefore equates to well over 8,300 current students in Tasmania alone.

Dyslexia is on a continuum. Dyslexia occurs on a continuum from mild to severe and each child with dyslexia will have a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses. At least 4% of children with dyslexia will require some intensive intervention teaching and learning support in school.

Dyslexia is lifelong. However, with the right support, people with dyslexia can become fluent readers and thrive. Early identification and intervention are crucial to ensure children are on a positive learning pathway.

The lack of awareness and understanding has led too frequently to institutionalised barriers and stigmatisation, as well as poor attitudes towards children with dyslexia. This can prohibit them from reaching their true potential and having equity with non-dyslexic peers in their school community.

Dyslexia can present a significant challenge to the individual, his or her family, educators and society. For some, this can result in a lifelong challenge with literacy skills and sometimes numeracy. Dyslexia has been linked also, to intergenerational disengagement with the education system and, for some, the increased risk of interaction with the justice system. This can lead the individual onto a criminal life-path trajectory, the consequences of which can be catastrophic for the individual as well as resulting in significant costs for our community.

If dyslexia is left unidentified and unassisted, it can cause social and emotional suffering and is associated with poorer life outcomes across the social determinants of health and wellbeing.

Children with dyslexia often go without identification or intervention and as a consequence, can often suffer from poor self-esteem, anxiety and academic failure. Without identification, difficulties with reading and writing are most often attributed by others, such as teachers, peers and/or parents, to low intelligence and/or lack of effort. This can lead to mental health issues and significant levels of depression and anxiety, self-harm tendencies and at worst, ideations of suicide. In short, those with dyslexia too frequently suffer eventual negative consequences where mental health issues can seriously impact on the individual's view of themselves.

A number of studies have emphasised the important role parents play in helping their children make sense of dyslexia, particularly in relation to difficulties with learning to read, and prior to the

identification of dyslexia, when it is not clear what is going on, but also, following identification many parents begin to recognise their difficulties and frequently are diagnosed as having dyslexia themselves.

Given the low levels of functional literacy in Tasmania's population, it is critical that children on the dyslexia continuum are identified early and receive effective, evidence-validated reading remediation. In particular also, Tasmania has high numbers of citizens in lower socio-economic groups where parents may be characterised by low literacy levels, and possibly themselves dyslexic but not identified. Often this group of parents may be characterised by; likely to have left school with less, or no, formal qualifications, who often did not complete education beyond year 10, but were often more likely to have completed a vocational training and/or apprenticeships as opposed to formal education.

The Tasmanian experience

A lack of awareness and understanding of dyslexia in the Education System

There is a need to lead the state in raising awareness of ways to address the needs of dyslexia in education, as every teacher is highly likely to have more than one student with dyslexia in his or her class. Teachers are expected to identify and differentiate their teaching to accommodate the child (ren) with dyslexia, yet in teacher education very little or no time at all is dedicated to dyslexia in tertiary undergraduate teacher training.

The requirements of, and expectations on, teachers in mainstream schools to cater for the specific learning needs of students with dyslexia means that it is essential that they are thoroughly trained to meet these challenges. It is important to ensure that better initial teacher education on dyslexia is therefore put in place.

Dyslexia can no longer be dismissed, as the evidence base and science provide a firm basis from which to understand this specific learning difficulty as well as co-morbid or co existing conditions such as Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia or Attention disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

This needs to become a part of *all* teacher education courses at the University of Tasmania. To not prepare our teachers adequately is a great disservice to our educators and our children. Evidence-based teacher education is essential.

Failure or delay in identification of students with dyslexia

In schools across Australia identification predominantly occurs through a discrepancy model, noticed when a student's performance falls behind that of his or her peers. Then, school-based testing looks to identify their difficulties with schoolwork. Testing then is frequently a response to either academic failure, or challenging behaviour, both negative situations.

When assessment occurs too late, or only happens when there is a very obvious and significant gap in the student's knowledge, this wastes valuable time in terms of learning opportunity and building on skills through appropriate intervention programmes. Private assessment across Australia range from \$1500 to \$2500 on average. In Tasmania, this may not be an option for the family in the lower SES group and many families would find such a cost prohibitive.

The wait time for school psychologists can be years. Individuals therefore have to fund their own diagnosis and subsequent support. On a user pays basis, only the financially secure can afford this. This leaves many Tasmanians with nowhere to go. Early identification is essential because intervention is more effective than remediation – once a gap in learning is established, it is very difficult to close the gap.

Dyslexia is a 'hidden' learning difficulty because children with dyslexia are not as evident

Dyslexia is the 'hidden' learning difficulty as many dyslexic children mask their difficulties, so they are overlooked. This again relates to awareness training for in service teachers, in identification, and

understanding of teaching strategies that support learning for the child with dyslexia. Dyslexia can be accurately identified in the early years if the correct screening and assessment procedures are used. Sadly, struggles begin as early as Year 3 and anxiety kicks in at a very early age. Schools are ill prepared and educators too poorly informed about identifying and addressing specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or dyslexic type learning needs.

There is a need for professional development for teachers in instructional practices that have been demonstrated as effective through high quality research evidence. Interventions should address the skill components of; phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension, the five core elements of effective reading instruction.

Children with dyslexia are receiving inappropriate support not specific to their needs

Learning support knowledge and practice is not current with the findings of dyslexia education. Many support teachers (literacy and numeracy) are incorrectly using a 'whole word' approach and other inappropriate or ineffective programmes as an intervention of children with dyslexia.

This is counterproductive. Training in structured literacy and the science of reading is required. In particular, effective reading intervention for children with dyslexia requires direct, explicit and systematic phonics programs. Spelling also needs to be taught through multisensory methods that have proven efficacy with dyslexic children.

There is very little provision of inclusive and assistive technology

Assistive technology can compensate and support the dyslexic students' deficits. Examples of assistive technology such as, audio books and e-text, laptop or Tablet; Software is now fitted to most computers that allow voice to text, and text to speech programmes. Apps and programmes are widely available, and can be used in schools by all students, but particularly useful to children with dyslexia. Assistive technology is readily available and can be used in a class without prejudice, or embarrassment, particularly if all children have access to them whether dyslexic or not.

Such technology however, is not consistently available in Tasmanian schools. Teachers are not well-informed and there is a lack training about the use of specific programs that would help support children with dyslexia.

Dyslexic students are underachieving

The education system is inequitable for dyslexic children. Children with dyslexia have many cognitive and often creative strengths, are good at problem solving in novel ways, have good intrapersonal skills and make good leaders, but they have little opportunity to shine during their school years. Despite education in Tasmania professing to support Inclusive education philosophies, policies do not always transfer to practice, the responsibility falls on classroom teachers' schools to support students with difficulties.

As a consequence of the many obstacles faced by children with dyslexia during their school years, a dyslexic student's results rarely reflect their true abilities.

Dyslexia is included in the Federal Disabilities Act and Disabilities Discrimination Act but is not correctly being interpreted in the Education System

Square Pegs believe improving community attitudes is critical for those with disabilities to feel accepted and valued as members of our society. Dyslexia is one of the most dominant disabilities within our society, yet there is a significant lack of awareness and understanding of the condition. Poor attitudes towards people with dyslexia, can prohibit them from fully participating as equal members of the community. It also leads to discrimination through ignorance, and individuals living with the anxiety of their disability becoming known.

A key instrument of change could be institutional policy development, in respect of the Equality Act (2010) of which disability is one of the nine protected characteristics, and dyslexia being a disability. Policy should clearly state a duty on schools to make reasonable adjustments for students with dyslexia and that support the legislative demands of Australia's anti-discrimination law.

The definition of "disability" in both the federal *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Education Standards 2005 clearly define dyslexia in section 4 (1) (f) of the former and standard 1.4 (f) of the latter as:

... 'a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction'...

The Disability Standards in Education (DSE) seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. Many schools are not meeting their obligations under the legislation and are discriminating against children with dyslexia. Many schools seem unaware of their obligations.

Square Pegs believe that self-advocacy is achievable for children with dyslexia, who know best, what works for them in terms of strategies to support their learning. Whole school communities must develop a tolerance and an ethos that celebrates diversity, and an understanding about dyslexia. If children with dyslexia are going to become confident adults and be proud of dyslexia as a part of who they are, and **not** something to be ashamed of, or embarrassed by, then schools need to provide a safe environment where disability and difference are celebrated.

Square Pegs Dyslexia Survey

Square Pegs released a survey in February 2021 for people with dyslexia, parents, educators and others, to help us understand the experience of children with dyslexia and their families in Tasmania. To date, 121 responses have been received. Some key results are:

- 54 per cent of parents and 50 per cent of educators who responded do not agree that their school or organisation has a clear policy or procedure for responding to dyslexia, while only 26 per cent of parents and 23 per cent educators agree;
- 52 per cent of educators who responded do not agree that the wait time for an in-school education assessment for dyslexia is reasonable, compared with only 14 per cent who agree;
- 54 per cent of educators who responded agree that their school/organisation support early assessment of children that present with possible learning disabilities, while 23 per cent do not agree;
- 52 per cent of parents who responded do not consider access to assessment timely, with a significant number indicating wait times of 1 - 3 years;
- 61 per cent of respondents indicated that they had accessed private intervention for their child as their school had been unable to provide appropriate intervention;
- 43 per cent of parents who responded do not agree that their child's teacher has a good understanding of dyslexia, while only 21 per cent agree;
- 44 per cent of parents who responded do not agree that the school provides useful information about their child's academic growth, while 26 per cent agree; and
- 61 per cent of parents agree they need more information and support in order to advocate effectively for their child with dyslexia.

Q: What needs to happen to improve outcomes for children with dyslexia in Tasmania?

Key themes from respondents include:

- teacher training in dyslexia (indicators and accommodations);
- early assessment
- effective teaching of reading;
- better communication; and
- Better targeted funding and resources.

Initiatives required to ensure the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people with dyslexia

Initiatives that our organisation considers should be a high priority for the Government:

1. To be effective **the Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance [Roadmap to a Literate Tasmania](#) must be implemented in its entirety and given sufficient funding and resources to ensure success.** It is heartening to finally be getting policy makers and government on board in the cause that Square Pegs have been campaigning for since 2014 and we look forward to working to support the implementation of the Roadmap, of which Square Pegs is a co-author. The implementation of the Phonics Screening check in all schools is a positive step in the identification of children who are struggling with phonemic sounds and corresponding letters. This will also identify those 'at risk' of dyslexia. This plan will help to identify gaps in essential reading skills early and provide for immediate, effective remediation (structured, explicit, multisensory instruction in synthetic phonics), rather than waiting for children to fail. It will also ensure that teachers will be appropriately trained in the teaching of reading and improve access to educational psychologists and speech pathologists.
2. That the Department of Education **continue to fund teachers on the Post graduate Teacher Development Initiative-Inclusive Education Specialisation qualification**-that includes the *Educating Students with Dyslexia Module* and is delivered through the University of Tasmania.
3. That the role of **dyslexia consultants** be developed (similar to the Autism Consultants that are currently located in each Learning Service) to provide assistance and advice to schools and parents/families on how best to support the 4 per cent of children whose progress is seriously impacted by dyslexia and also the (at least) 10 per cent of children with dyslexia in total.
4. develop a **mandatory Dyslexia Policy/Procedure** to ensure that the response to suspected or formally identified dyslexia is robust, consistent, effective, sensitive and most importantly kind, and, across all schools.

This should include;

- information and advice be made available for teachers and parents to ensure early identification of children with dyslexia – there is currently no DoE Parent Fact Sheet or Policy relating to Dyslexia (or Specific Learning Disabilities)
- training for teachers and support staff regarding dyslexia and related learning differences as well as the appropriate assessments, adjustments and accommodations
- time is critical as children are most responsive to remediation before 8 yrs., assessments should therefore be more timely
- appropriate, specialist and targeted support should be made available when and where it is needed - currently many parents are told schools 'have nothing to offer' and 'no

funding' to assist children with dyslexia – despite the roll out of the 'needs based' funding model

- it should be clear that the Department's inclusive practices extend to children with dyslexia - dyslexia or SLDs are not currently mentioned in any of the materials relating to support for children with disability - this should be addressed sooner, rather than later
 - assistive technology experts should be made available to support students in effective use of assistive technology
5. provide **funding packages for families** to enable them to access appropriate assessment services, remediation, counselling and assistive technologies where they are not available, and in a timely manner through the education system, to ensure that children with dyslexia can access the curriculum and participate in learning; and
 6. **allocate funds to Square Pegs as for a like-for-like organisation** (e.g. SPELD in other states and territories/or as the funding model of Autism Tasmania) to provide independent advice, information and support to children and families navigating the challenges of dyslexia.

We know that community attitudes must change for those with dyslexia to feel more accepted and valued members of our community. Square Pegs believe it is imperative that we look at ways to improve the community's attitudes towards those with dyslexia and other learning disabilities so they too can live healthier, happier more connected lives within our community.

Amelia Jones, Chairperson and **Dr Judith Hudson**, Ambassador
on behalf of Square Pegs Dyslexia Support and Advocacy Inc.

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