

Submission from Learning Difficulties Australia
to the
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
Inquiry into the prevalence of different types of speech, language and
communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia

21 February 2014

Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

- a. the prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and swallowing difficulties in Australia;
- b. the incidence of these disorders by demographic group (paediatric, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities);
- c. the availability and adequacy of speech pathology services provided by the Commonwealth, state and local governments across health, aged care, education, disability and correctional services;
- d. the provision and adequacy of private speech pathology services in Australia;
- e. evidence of the social and economic cost of failing to treat communication and swallowing disorders; and
- f. the projected demand for speech pathology services in Australia.

Submission

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals who provide support for students with learning difficulties.

Language difficulties are a major source of learning problems, and of students with learning difficulties approximately 80 per cent have difficulties with reading. There is clear evidence of a link between early oral language skills and the subsequent development of reading skills. Children with poorly developed oral language skills at preschool and at beginning school level are at risk of developing later problems with reading.

There is therefore an overlap between the work of speech pathologists, whose major area of interest is oral language, and specialist teachers who provide support for students with reading difficulties.

The purpose of this submission is to support the need for speech pathology services in Australia, particularly in terms of the early identification of children with language problems, in order to implement interventions to assist such children and to prevent or ameliorate subsequent reading problems. The submission addresses mainly point c. of the Terms of Reference, relating to the availability and adequacy of speech pathology services provided at Commonwealth and state level in the area of education.

The main points we wish to make in our submission are as follows:

- 1 There is a strong relationship between early oral speech and language difficulties in children and problems with learning to read and write. The relevant oral language learning difficulties are usually evident well before school entry, but the problem may become more accentuated at school age, as language skills have to be used in the written modality. The literacy problems experienced by children with oral language disorders can affect learning to decode, being able to comprehend written text, and being able to formulate written responses.
- 2 Speech Pathologists, who are trained to diagnose and treat oral speech and language difficulties, can be a useful part of a school literacy team in the following areas:
 - Providing timely relevant information about children's preschool oral language development and associated risk factors for literacy learning;
 - Supporting teachers in making relevant adjustments to their classroom curricula and the classroom environments. This may be relevant both in the early stages of learning to read and in later years, where there are strong language demands affecting learning across the curriculum.
 - Providing (or supervising) small-group or intensive intervention (at the Tier 2 level) to students who have not succeeded in the regular classroom reading instruction program for the initial teaching of reading (at the Tier 1 level), following the Response to Intervention model which provides support at different levels of intensity according to the needs of the student (see, for example, article on *Ensuring That All Children Learn to Read*, by Kevin Wheldall, attached.)
- 3 There is a tendency in Australia for Education Departments in most States and Territories to assume that Speech Pathologists can contribute only in the area of oral language, and very few Speech Pathologists are active members of school literacy teams. LDA believes that more routine collaboration between Speech Pathologists and educators could improve literacy outcomes for all students. LDA supports adjustments to the Australian school workforce, and to both teacher and speech pathology training programs, that would allow this kind of professional collaboration to occur.

A listing of relevant References is attached.

Australian studies are marked with an *

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Listing of Relevant References

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