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Contents

Published by the NSW Department of Education, Scan is an open access online journal, delivered quarterly. Scan is a leading educational resource that brings innovative change to the lives and learning of 21st century educators and students. Scan informs teachers' practice by encouraging engagement with a wide range of articles, including peer reviewed research, to enhance school and student outcomes across NSW, Australia and beyond. The journal aims to leave teachers inspired, equipped and empowered, and students prepared to maximise their individual talents and capabilities.

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Supporting a student who stutters: what schools can do

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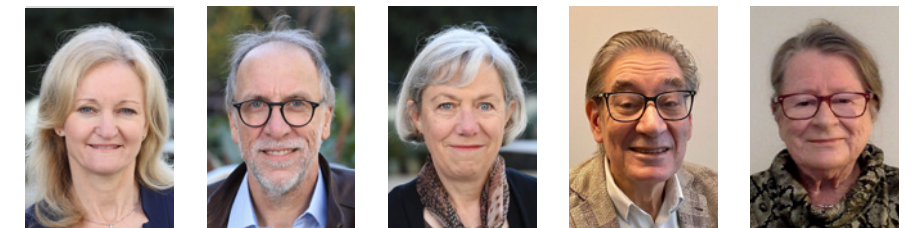
Researchers from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) explain how students who stutter can be supported in the classroom environment.

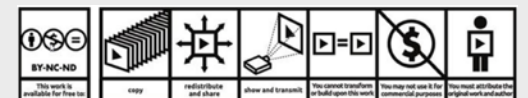As a teacher, can you always know when a student in the classroom has a stutter? How can you support a student who stutters to achieve their full potential at school? Many students who stutter try to conceal their stuttering, so it may go undetected in the classroom. The following article gives an overview of the disorder of stuttering and how it can impact a student in the school environment, and outlines some simple strategies to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

What is stuttering?

Stuttering, or 'stammering' as it is known in the United Kingdom, is a disorder of speech production. It may involve one or more of the following features: repeating sounds and words; speech 'blocks', when words appear to get stuck; and the prolongation of sounds or words. Stuttering may also involve grimacing and muscle tightness around the face and neck during speech. The severity of stuttering varies markedly across individuals. However, for most, stuttering increases in stressful situations, such as talking in front of people, talking to people of authority, giving presentations, and talking on the phone. Overall, those who stutter know exactly what they want to say, but the issue is simply saying it.

Current evidence indicates that part of the cause of stuttering is underdeveloped connectivity in areas of the brain associated with planning and organising spoken language (Onslow, 2022; Packman et al., 2022). Stuttering is a physical condition. It is not caused by parenting practices or anxiety.

The onset of stuttering typically occurs during the preschool years. This is around the time when, or soon after, a child begins to say short sentences as language develops and becomes more complex. Some children will begin stuttering suddenly – sometimes overnight – while for others the onset can be gradual.

Many children will recover naturally from stuttering within a few years after onset, without intervention. However, it is currently not possible to be sure for which children that will occur (Onslow, 2022). Ten percent of all people will experience stuttering at some stage during life, and 1–2% will continue to stutter throughout their lives (Onslow, 2022).

Stuttering is associated with a high risk of developing anxiety-related mental health issues, the most prevalent being social anxiety disorder (Onslow, 2022). It is known that even primary school children who stutter have higher rates of social anxiety than their peers (Iverach et al., 2016). The development of

social anxiety is typically the result of negative social experiences. Many children are teased and bullied because of their stuttering, which can result in the development of serious psychological issues and low self-esteem (McCabe et al., 2010); for school-age children who stutter, this is a really serious problem. Chronic stuttering and the negative consequences associated with it can lead to educational and occupational disadvantages throughout life.

Treatment for stuttering

Stuttering is treated by speech pathologists. Treatment occurs with assistance from a clinical psychologist if the child is experiencing associated anxiety. Treatment during the preschool years, or as early in life as possible, reduces the risk of experiencing the negative consequences associated with stuttering. For young children who stutter, speech pathologists typically train parents to give treatment in the home environment. During the preschool years, and for many children during the early school years, treatment can successfully resolve stuttering or significantly reduce the severity of stuttering.

As the school years progress, however, stuttering becomes less responsive to treatment and the type of treatment that is needed changes. For children approaching adolescence, treatment may focus on controlling stuttering, which can include dealing with social anxiety, teasing, and bullying. Generally, though, the earlier stuttering is treated by a speech pathologist the better.

The school environment

The school years are a challenging time of life for a student who stutters. Negative experiences in the classroom and playground, such as teasing, mocking and bullying, can lead to the development of anxiety-related conditions, including social anxiety disorder. It is well known that students who stutter are less likely to complete secondary education or to obtain a tertiary degree. As adults, they are more likely to work in jobs that are below their capabilities, or they may seek occupations that minimise speech communication (Onslow, 2022).

There are many situations in the school environment that can cause anxiety about speaking due to stuttering, such as talking or reading aloud in front of others. As a result, a student may try to hide stuttering, so it may go undetected by teachers. Some ways a student may hide stuttering are by sitting at the back of the class, avoiding eye contact, avoiding asking and answering questions, or giving only short answers to questions. Some students will substitute words in an attempt to avoid using words they know are likely to be stuttered. They may even take time off school rather than give a presentation to the class. A student who stutters may come across as being shy and may not have many friends. Therefore, it is critical that students who stutter are managed sensitively in the school environment.

How can you support a student who stutters?

Teachers play an important role in helping students who stutter at school. The school environment needs to be a place where a student who stutters can reach their full potential. For that to occur, the student needs to feel safe in the classroom. This can be achieved during regular confidential conversations with the student about classroom needs and the general experience of school life.

It is important for a teacher to know if a speech pathologist is assisting a student who stutters. A speech pathologist will be able to provide useful guidance about how to support that student at school. If a student has had no contact with a speech pathologist, discussing this with the student and parents is essential. A referral is not needed for an appointment with a speech pathologist. For some students, the speech pathologist will initiate contact with a clinical

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psychologist if it is thought to be necessary. A speech pathologist can be located using the links at the end of this article.

Typically, a teacher will not be involved directly with the treatment of stuttering but will provide a more general type of support. A student who stutters will benefit from not being rushed when talking. Allow the student time to finish talking, even if it is taking a while or the student is obviously struggling. Don't finish sentences for a student who stutters; all those who stutter find that to be unhelpful. Being told to slow down when talking does not generally help to reduce or control stuttering, so this is not a helpful suggestion for most people who stutter.

The most helpful thing to do with students who stutter is to talk to them. Ask the student how you can help at school. For example, the student may prefer not to answer questions or read aloud in front of the class, or they may feel more comfortable doing these activities in front of a smaller group of students. The student may like to try talking or reading aloud in front of others, but they may find it less stressful if called upon second or somewhere in the middle of the group. However, this will not be the case for every student who stutters, and that is why it is so important to talk to your student about how you can help.

Some students will be happy for you to discuss their stuttering with the rest of the students in the classroom, talking about what it is and why it happens. However, other students will not be so comfortable with this approach. For some children, it can be emotionally traumatic to have attention drawn to their stuttering in front of other students.

It is critically important to establish if a student who stutters is being teased, bullied, or mocked by peers. If this is the case, teachers need to act to stop this immediately. This may include the involvement of the school counsellor.

In summary:
- Talk to the student about how you can best provide support.
- Instigate referral to a speech pathologist if required.
- Give the student time to talk.
- Don't finish sentences or suggest to the student to slow down when talking.
- Allow the student to read or speak aloud privately or in smaller groups if requested.
- Take steps to stop any teasing and/or bullying.

Where to get help

Stuttering is a physical speech disorder, which can cause anxiety-related mental health issues and educational and occupational disadvantages. These issues begin during the school years. Speech pathologists treat stuttering, sometimes with assistance from clinical psychologists. It is essential for teachers to ensure that a student who stutters has contact with a speech pathologist. Teachers can provide general support in the classroom, based on conversations with the child. Such support is fundamental to avoiding disadvantage because of stuttering during childhood.

Further information and resources

For further information about stuttering and for useful resources, please refer to the following links. The short film 'Wait, wait, I'm not finished yet …' is a resource recommended for teachers to understand the experiences in the school setting of younger and older children who stutter.
- Australian Stuttering Research Centre
- Australian Speak Easy Association (ASEA)
- *Wait, Wait, I'm not finished yet …* Short film for teachers [20:40 minutes]
- Speech Pathology Australia: find a speech pathologist
- Stuttering Unit: South-Western Sydney Local Health District

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The journal for educators

Writer biographies

Joanne Rossbridge

Joanne Rossbridge is an independent language and literacy consultant working in both primary and secondary schools and with teachers across Australia. Her expertise, and much of her experience, is in working with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Joanne is particularly interested in educational equity as well as student and teacher talk, and how talk about language can assist the development of language and literacy.

Dr Hang Khong

Hang Khong is a Research Assistant for the Q Project and Teaching Associate at Faculty of Education, Monash University. She earned her Master of Educational Studies and PhD in education at the University of Queensland. Her research interests include teacher professional development and professional learning, teacher education, classroom talk, lesson study, school reform, school leadership, and technology integration. She is passionate about supporting teacher learning both formally and informally, particularly in school-based contexts through the Lesson Study for Learning Community.

Blake Cutler

Blake Cutler is a PhD student and Research Assistant in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His doctoral studies are focused on how the quality use of research can address issues of social injustice for queer people in Australian schools. Prior to joining the Monash Q Project, Blake was an experienced music teacher across primary, secondary, and instrumental settings. Blake tweets at @blakeacutler.

Writer biographies

Dr Jo Gleeson

Joanne Gleeson is a Research Fellow with the Q Project in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Joanne draws from cross-sectoral professional experience in executive human resource management, business consulting, careers counselling, education and education research. Her research is focused on improving adolescents' career identity, employability and education-work transitions.

Dr Mark Rickinson

Mark Rickinson is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His work is focused on understanding and improving the use of research in education. He is currently leading the Monash Q Project, a five-year initiative with the Paul Ramsay Foundation to improve the use of research evidence in Australian schools.

Dr Lucas Walsh

Lucas Walsh is Professor of Education Policy and Practice, Youth Studies, in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. He is currently a chief investigator on The Q Project and director of the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP).

Dr Genevieve Hall

Genevieve Hall is an experienced teacher, teacher educator and professional learning expert. Her previous roles include working as an Education Consultant for the Asia Education Foundation at the University of Melbourne on designing, implementing and evaluating professional learning programs for teachers and school leaders. She has also worked as a Lecturer and Curriculum Lead at RMIT University and a Teaching Associate at Monash University where she has educated preservice teachers about current learning theories and pedagogies to prepare them to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers through evidence-informed practice.

Richard Short

As Storyteller-in-Chief at Story Factory, Richard designs and facilitates creative writing programs for young people and teacher development programs for adults. Prior to joining Story Factory in 2012, he taught at secondary schools in the western suburbs of Sydney. His first collection of poetry (written under the pseudonym Rico Craig), *Bone Ink*, won the 2017 Anne Elder Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the 2018 Kenneth Slessor Prize. His subsequent collections include *Our Tongues Are Songs* and *Nekhau*. Richard has also lectured in tertiary courses, performed at poetry events, and was a judge for the 2021/2 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. (Photograph: Pax Valentine)

Sophie Parsons

Sophie Parsons is a teacher, writer and illustrator. She has taught across all stages in Australia, leading whole school visual arts programs. Sophie has been facilitating investigative learning programs since 2017. Passionate about supporting high potential and gifted students, Sophie has created numerous NSW outcomes-linked resources to support differentiation through inquiry-based learning. She has also co-written 2 previous articles, Investigative Learning, our Journey at Balmain Public School (PDF 2.5 MB) and Facilitating Growth in Literacy Outcomes through Investigative Learning (PDF 2.4 MB).

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The journal for educators

Writer biographies

Ariana Davis

Ariana Davis has refined her expertise in experiential learning tasks through more than a decade of experience in Primary and Early Childhood classrooms. Ariana has facilitated the introduction of Investigative Learning at Balmain Public School across Early Stage 1 and Stage 1. To support other teachers setting up inquiry-based learning classrooms, she has also presented at the UNSW *Ignite the Spark* conference and *COLAS* (Community of Leichhardt Area Schools), and has co-written 2 previous articles, including Investigative Learning, our Journey at Balmain Public School (PDF 2.5 MB).

Stijn Denayer

Stijn Denayer is the CEO of All Together Now. He has over 15 years of international experience in the human rights field, working on issues such as discrimination, racism, right-wing extremism and hate speech. Before stepping into the CEO role in late 2021, Stijn managed All Together Now's projects and programs relating to right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories. Previously, Stijn worked for the Indigenous Law Centre (UNSW) and for Unia, the National Human Rights Institution of Belgium, as well as several human rights organisations in South Asia and the Middle East.

Ramy Sedrak

Ramy Sedrak is a facilitator, researcher and community engagement worker. He has over 10 years' experience supporting community and youth engagement, anti-racism and social cohesion. Over the last 6 years, he has worked with All Together Now on projects relating to far-right extremism. Previously, Ramy worked with several community organisations in NSW and has a background in the legal sector.

Mali Jorm

Mali Jorm is a leading innovator in information management in schools. Passionate about design, marketing and psychology, Mali is an affirmative educator who has worked with primary, secondary and adult education students. They bring a research-driven mindset to library services, curating innovative programs with excellent student engagement and circulation outcomes. Mali brings together diverse skills in media, teacher librarianship, game design and visual communication to create exciting information spaces and products. Find Mali at the *Three Spheres of Library Skills*.

Jillian Wyatt

Jillian Wyatt is a public school teacher and leader with over 20 years' experience working in a range of school settings. Throughout her career, she has taught gifted students, coordinated gifted programs and led professional learning to strengthen teaching practice. Jillian has post graduate qualifications in gifted education and is passionate about engaging and challenging all students. As a HPGE specialist, Jillian is currently working with the Teaching Quality and Impact Directorate to improve student learning outcomes and to support implementation of the High Potential and Gifted Education Policy across NSW.

Associate Professor Robyn Lowe

Robyn Lowe is a Senior Researcher at the Australian Stuttering Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney. Her work is focused on increasing access to speech and anxiety treatments for children, adolescents, and adults who stutter. Robyn's research interests include exploring anxiety associated with stuttering and its impact on the maintenance of speech treatment benefits. Robyn has a number of peer-reviewed scientific publications and has presented at international conferences.

Writer biographies

Professor Ross Menzies

Ross Menzies is a clinical psychologist at the Australian Stuttering Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney. His research has focused on anxiety and its management. Ross has over 180 publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals. He has published 12 books and over 30 book chapters. Ross is the former National President of the Australian Association for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (AACBT) and is Australia's representative on the Board of the World Confederation of Cognitive and Behavioural Therapies (WCCBT).

Associate Professor Sue O'Brian

Sue O'Brian is a Senior Researcher at the Australian Stuttering Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney. She initially trained as a speech pathologist and has many years of clinical and research experience with adults and children who stutter. Sue has over 100 publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals, and she has contributed to several books on aspects of stuttering.

Professor Mark Onslow

Mark Onslow is the Foundation Director of the Australian Stuttering Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney. His research interests are the epidemiology of early stuttering, the mental health of those who stutter, the measurement of stuttering, and the nature and treatment of stuttering. He has over 200 publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals. He has published six books and 37 book chapters. Mark was joint recipient of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association Kawana Award for Lifetime Achievement in Publication.

Professor Ann Packman

Ann Packman has worked at the Australian Stuttering Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney, since its inception in 1996. She has also worked as a speech pathologist with people who stutter and their families, and as a university educator. Ann has over 190 publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals and is the first author of a book, now in its second edition, on causal modelling of stuttering.

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