



To: Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Inquiry into Adult Literacy and Its Importance

Submission by CLA

Overview

- Early childhood education is far more effective than adult education (though both are needed), and is an economic investment in future national prosperity.
- There will be no long-term, national gains in literacy and numeracy while underfunding of early childhood education continues.
- Focusing on adult literacy and numeracy ignores the main long-term issues, and can be marginally effective, at best.

Whatever policies are adopted for adults will make little difference in the long term. Policies concerning the early years, then the school years, are critical. That is the focus of this submission.

Early childhood learning is absolutely critical: family relationships at that time mainly determine eventual outcomes. The literature on effective learning is substantial and high quality. And ignored.

In passing:

We all know that low literacy and numeracy have profound effects on participation in society, including in the labour market. There is an extremely well-established correlation between literacy and numeracy and socio-economic (SES) status. The Productivity Commission dealt with this in a 2014 staff working paper. National and international studies and tests have highlighted this fact for decades.

The Australian education system is typified by an extraordinarily high level of inequity. Funding per student for independent schools, whose students are selected overwhelmingly from high SES backgrounds, far exceeds that for government schools which must enrol all students who apply and are mainly from lower SES backgrounds. The result is a failure of the system to achieve its stated goals, as made clear most

Civil Liberties Australia (CLA) is a not-for-profit association which reviews proposed legislation to help make it better, as well as monitoring the activities of parliaments, departments, agencies and forces to ensure they match the high standards that Australia has traditionally enjoyed and continues to aspire to.

We work to keep Australia the free and open society it has traditionally been, where you can be yourself without undue interference from 'authority'. Our civil liberties are all about balancing rights and responsibilities, and ensuring a 'fair go' for all Australians.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirms at Article 13 the right of everyone to education, and emphasises the crucial part education plays in the full development of human personality. It further states that education should enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society. CLA strongly supports these ideas and that is why we are participating in this inquiry.

recently in a report *Structural failure: Why Australia keeps falling short of its educational goals* published by the Gonski Institute at the University of NSW.

Low achievement levels derive from early childhood and family situations where parents' involvement in assisting the child intellectually is limited. Sometimes, how children are taught in school makes things worse: for many children, being made to answer maths questions or read specified text in front of the whole class increased the child's shame and made them reluctant to engage in further learning where their failure was perceived as likely to be further "put on show".

In the relationship between SES and learned skills, some people wrongly assert that the problem was not simply a matter of lack of opportunity but heritable: children from a low SES family, especially if from Indigenous or non-English speaking background, were genetically limited, experts once said. That is incorrect.

There are intergenerational impacts of low literacy and numeracy flowing from social and economic challenges: unless there is corrective intervention to support both parents and children, the poorly educated parents raise poorly educated children who have children who lack opportunities to gain enhanced education in a vicious circle.

Children are designed for learning

The huge difference that parents' participation makes in their child's learning is evident in the size of the vocabulary at age 5 when, in Australia, the child enters school. One study suggested children from a low SES background had heard, on average 13 million words whilst a child from a high SES background had heard 45 million. Between 18 and 24 months a child from a low SES group would learn about 30% fewer words than high SES children. It is parents that make the difference through their conversations with the child and in activities like reading to them. Without remediation these gaps persist through school years to adulthood.

The persistent poor outcomes are a significant contributor to unemployment and antisocial behaviour including minor crime and substance abuse, all of which diminish community life and impose an economic cost to the community. Poor health outcomes are an added challenge. In many countries children arrive at school not having eaten that morning: the schools provide hot meals for such children. In Finland and some other European countries, every child is served lunch.

Many indigenous children have chronic diseases affecting the eyes and ears, diseases typical of children in developing countries. Such afflictions adversely affect educational achievement. This situation extends back decades and has not been adequately addressed. Those same children often live in poor housing, lacking water and energy services and adequate maintenance.

Many children in regional and remote centres experience these problems. These facts have been known for decades and are evident in result from NAPLAN with persistent low scores at every level. Very little is done to remedy the situation.

A frequently heard complaint of employers is that young people seeking to join the workforce lack sufficient or relevant skills. The employer is not prepared to spend the time and effort in delivering further specialised training peculiar to the industry and firm, which

is a significant factor, especially in small and medium enterprises. Even a computer does not arrive at work for the first time fully capable.

Are industrial relations authorities and business and government regulators sufficiently resourced to be able to address these matters? The proposition that improving the contribution of people to the economy is simply a matter of increasing skills levels is both simplistic and dangerous. And what of participation by all sectors of the community, notably women. Not to mention the availability of jobs in the first place.

Every one of the important issues addressed in this overview has been the subject of substantial high-quality studies in many countries.

What will make the difference is self-confidence, the ability to manage sometimes complicated information sets, to cope with ambiguity and not hope for certainty. And the environment will need to foster resilience and ensure a level of redundancy far higher than is the case now. How will the substantial need for retraining be managed?

Almost none of this complex interaction is being recognised by the neoliberal focus on efficiency, competition, choice and so on with its emphasis on small government and expectation of major private sector involvement in much of what used to be – and must be – government business.

The need for greater attention to these matters is shown by the lack of progress in facing change. Even understanding the basic statistics, an integral part of the information before us, is a significant challenge. Many commentators on education reports, for instance, demonstrate both ignorance of basic statistics and of the subjects they are criticising.

Education and Learning

“... since Australia adopted a strategy that promised to improve outcomes, outcomes have continued to deteriorate. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this strategy, organised around “outcomes” and the notion that accountability and competition would cause teachers and schools to lift their game, has been a complete failure, and should be ditched.”

Dean Ashenden (consultant and advisor and Senior Honorary Fellow at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education), [“An end to the industrial model of schooling?”](#), Inside Story 4 May 2018, reviewing the second Gonski Report – “Through Growth to Achievement”, a “Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools”

“... the whole system of public education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance. And the consequence is that many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they're not, because the thing they were good at school wasn't valued, or was actually stigmatized.”

Sir Ken Robinson, [Do schools kills creativity?](#) TED 2006

“Enabling all Australian students to realise their full learning potential, and re-establishing Australia's education system as world-leading, is an ambitious but achievable goal, which requires a commitment to sustained, long-term reform.”

David Gonski et al, “Through Growth to Achievement”, 2018

Present Policies

What is education?

There is a substantial literature resulting from high quality research in many countries. It is highly accessible, but the research has been ignored or inadequately attended to in the framing by government of education policies and practices.

Education is about learning. Learning is dominant in very young children as they play, as they watch and interact with others around them, including their peers and adults. Encouragement of exploration, engagement in creativity, tolerance of making mistakes and finding often that there is no one right answer and certainly no one right path to whatever the answer is. All of these behaviours, if productively learned, will be invaluable in later life. It is called play. (Interestingly, in countries like Finland, the importance of play is recognised, children do not enter school until age 7 and spend the intervening years continuing to play!) In this period the influence of parents and other children is pervasive.

Recommendation:

1. Switch education policy to focus more on learning than teaching.

Australian policy, especially in the past 30 or so years, is characterised by **a concern with teaching but hardly at all with learning**. Policy is dominated by provision of choice of institution which the student attends, which assumes the student and parent are able to make meaningful judgements about quality and suitability of the instruction which will be obtained there and assumes that the choice made then reflects what is likely to be demanded in the child's future. It is significantly unreliable.

Policy is also dominated by debates about competition and measurement, academic qualifications of teachers and so on. Nothing about how schools work as organisations. There are good studies on leadership and the role of school principals but that does not carry through to policy.

The entry of for-profit entities into both the post-secondary and the early childhood area has led to privileging of profit and inadequate attention to quality-of-service delivery. The notion of competition has envisaged choice playing a major role in the longer-term growth of higher quality providers. That ignores the difficulty of making choices and the veracity of the claims made by providers. The new entrants do not have the requisite skills and knowledge and do not provide the resources to acquire them. That cannot be said for the school sector which is supported by parents' contribution and huge sums of government money.

The proposition is that competition between providers will improve standards of service delivery. But providers don't concentrate on the quality of teaching, as opposed to research, even in universities. In the vocational education sector, allowing the entry of providers other than government institutions, such as technical colleges, has led to enrolling students in subjects of marginally important skills and in courses poorly taught... as well spending huge sums of government grants with very poor returns.

In universities, corporatisation, managerialism and declines in government funding have contributed to insecure employment for junior staff, excessive reliance on fee-paying

students (leaving units vulnerable to severe economic shocks as in the current pandemic) and more than reasonable concern for courses with higher likelihood of employment. Quality of teaching, increasingly hived off to sessional staff, remains largely ignored.

What began the low literacy levels?

In general, findings of inadequacy of literacy and numeracy are not followed by consideration of what it is that has contributed to the low achievement levels. For example, little consideration is given to why students in regional and remote areas and many First Nations students achieve poorer outcomes than students in cities, or why students from advantaged backgrounds achieve better results.

Summative evaluations such as NAPLAN cannot contribute to diagnosis of the factors contributing to the results because the factors, such as earlier education, quality of instruction and supporting services, are not simultaneously studied/researched.

Students from low SES backgrounds achieve substantially better results in diverse classes, especially where the average SES background of the students is high, than they do in a class of low SES background. This is highly relevant where children believed to be exceptional are separated into comprehensive schools where they are given greater attention. Low results achieved by students contribute to poor average results in aggregated test scores: focusing on students already achieving good results doesn't raise the average score by much.

Poor results in standardised tests most often lead politicians and some media to assert that the results are a "wake-up call", and that there should be a "return to basics". That would seem to mean revision of the curriculum, despite the fact that none of the studies of the data from standardised tests, whether the domestic NAPLAN or international PISA (and similar tests), are concerned significantly with curriculum matters.

Poor policies contribute now to low levels later

The present policies concerning school education significantly contribute to the declining achievement of students as assessed by standardised tests in that they do not attend to individual students, privilege testing, contribute to a negative view of the role of teachers, pay excessive attention to matters such as curriculum, thereby ignoring the nature of learning and ignoring the influence of out-of-school activities.

Oversight by government of education policy involves intervention in the conduct of schools and delivery of learning experiences by people often without adequate knowledge or experience whilst the views of teachers – trained, experienced and knowledgeable – are often marginalised.

The one role that government can uniquely play is to encourage adoption of best practice through sponsoring learning opportunities by principals and teachers. In Singapore staff in relevant government agencies travel the world each year searching out new developments and examples of best practice.

Education must be seen as a long-term policy. Children in the formal system now will be leaving the workforce in about 50 years. We have no idea what the world will be like over most of that time span: consider the changes in just the past 20 years. Therefore it is

critical that the education system help prepare young people to face the future with confidence. That requires attention to such matters as:

- resilience,
- ability to manage uncertainty,
- ability to analyse information, and
- the ability to relate productively to other people.

Those attributes have nothing to do with being able to add up and subtract, or spell correctly, important though they are.

Australian policy has largely ignored the gains from the second Gonski report and early childhood policies have largely focused on participation by women in the workforce: in other words, 'school' is seen in essence as child-minding. Yet such policy diminishes the unpriced contribution of the mother. It in fact diminishes rather than encourages the participation of women in the workforce because the fees for child care exceed the income from employment.

Early childhood

Presently, in Australia child care centres are fee-paying and many are run by for-profit organisations. Many families are unable to afford the fees. The consequences are that many families where the primary carer wishes to work cannot afford to do so because the cost of attendance exceeds the income from employment. These early years for the child/children are also the most challenging for families, often times of the main income earner being in the early years of employment and the early years of paying off housing through mortgage or rent.

Remuneration for staff at child care centres is low and a disincentive for people to enter the workforce. In the event of expansion of childcare/early learning, recruitment and training will be a major issue. Qualified teachers are essential for adequate, let alone superior, learning outcomes! Any substantial expansion would have a major impact on jobs creation.

The lobby organisation ParentHood has advocated early childcare education and care be provided free to Australian children, particularly those aged three to five, and that parents be offered up to a year's support to stay at home to care for their children. It commissioned Equity Economics to investigate the proposed economic impact. [The Report](#) was published late February 2021.

It found "national GDP would increase by 4.1% by 2050, or in dollar terms add \$166bn to the economy, almost double that of coal exports." [The report concluded](#) that if government policies also focused on having women return to the workforce, equalising women's participation with men, Australia could have GDP increase by 8.7%, or \$353bn in total, in just three decades." UNICEF in 2020 ranked Australia 32nd out of 41 nations for child well-being. Women's participation in the workforce is well behind many other countries Nordic and many European countries as well as parts of Asia, according to Gender Equity Victoria.

The Minderoo Foundation, in a program called "Thrive by Five", is calling on the Federal Government to invest in a universally accessible, high-quality early learning system, delivered by a skilled and supported workforce. They say:

“Such an investment, supporting the important role played by families, will set Australia up for a prosperous, equitable, and sustainable future as we recover from a devastating pandemic. It will do this in three ways: enhance brain development and capacity, enable parental engagement in employment and civil society, and, if backed up by additional services, reduce significant budgetary pressure by addressing problems in health, education, mental health, maltreatment, disability, justice, and unemployment.”

Schools and learning

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” – John Dewey

This quotation from a leader in educational philosophy encapsulates the view that school is not the principal source of education, that learning does not start when the child enters school and that education is the aggregation of experiences.

Prominent educator and speaker Sir Ken Robinson points out that the nature of teaching in the classroom, lacking any attempt to understand individual interests, and its continual focus on standardised tests, has driven many children out of school. Preparing for the tests has caused unreasonable stress and narrowed the taught curriculum. Most especially it has reduced attention to subjects outside numeracy, literacy and STEM such as music, dance and so on.

The dinosaur answer

In some schools classes do involve learning the “right” answer but not necessarily the method by which it is obtained or why it is right and what they thought is wrong. Children do care and are pleased when they are right. Think of young children fascinated by dinosaurs asking professional palaeontologists about the sizes of dinosaurs and proudly telling them they are wrong when their answers are not what they believed to be true!

In later life, it is important to be right. Being wrong eventually encourages a perception that the subject is too hard, or worse, that the student is not clever enough. It is a tragedy that many of the behaviours, which are typical of young children in the first few years, are less encouraged, even discouraged, in later life in the schoolroom and through excessive attention to academic success in the nightly struggle with homework and the after-school tyranny of sport and cultural activities. Many of the reasons advanced to explain the outcomes of that end up as simplistic assertions. Common targets include math and history. The refrain “nobody likes math” is common. And it is wrong.

The parrot problem

A young teacher at a western Sydney school, Eddie Woo, established his own YouTube presentation channel WooTube. On it he places videos of him teaching a class about math concepts. It has attracted millions of viewers. He does not emphasise the one right answer, he engages the students in finding answers, he is enthusiastic. Trust and student engagement are critical to effective learning. Compare this with the consequences of regimes like NAPLAN which has spawned a huge profit-making industry of simple books of tests and similar publications teaching students to repeat information “parrot fashion”. *(Are parrots arguably more intelligent than many of the authors of these texts?)*

School education mostly treats all children as if they are the same, with the same interests, same learning styles and so on. It has been termed the industrial model of education. The following outlines the nature of learning and related matters.

As people complete each phase of their education, they should be more aware of the learning which they have so far experienced and more skilled at employing successful learning behaviour. That means wanting to learn more. It applies equally to academic and practical areas of knowledge and skill. As the student advances, given the opportunity, they will identify the subjects and skills which they find most appealing to them. Not everyone will become adept at mathematics or writing. Ken Robinson calls this “finding their element”.

Successful learning involves exploration of subjects through discussion, through what has been called “accountable talk” or “argumentation”. Learning involves moving facts and ideas from temporary memory to long-term memory. Amongst the important influences on this process are the skills and knowledge, but above all the behaviour of the instructor (teacher) and others involved in the learning environment. It is not simply content knowledge of the teacher which influences student learning, it is the teacher’s pedagogical skill, their ability to know how to impart the knowledge.

Most people would now understand that effective “instruction” does not involve the teacher at the front of the class reading a set of statements. Indeed, one approach to instruction involves the student outside the formal school environment reading set texts and perhaps exercises exploring that text. The time in the more formal environment of the classroom is spent discussing the material they have been studying. Many parents would not be familiar with this approach unless their children tell them. The work outside class is not considered homework; indeed there is evidence that homework, as it is practiced, does not advance learning.

Mistakes can signpost progress

Amongst the many extremely important observations Robinson frequently makes is that the children now at school will reach adulthood many years in the future and we have almost no idea what that future will be like yet “we are supposed to be educating them for it”. Secondly, that children have an extraordinary capacity for innovation. Robinson says, “Music, dance, art and poetry along with humanities and history are those things which speak to the nature of what it is to be a human being and the understanding of how to make one’s way in the world. Children should have the opportunity to do other things, not as a default, but as an entitlement. More than that since creativity involves bringing lots of different things together to produce something innovative and since any activity of that kind involves a degree of trial and error, making mistakes is a part of life. Unfortunately, schooling and worklife eschews mistakes.”

When young climate activist Greta Thunberg first came to prominence adults said she should be in school or even attacked her for speaking out. Yet any time young people have the opportunity to speak publicly it is clear they are very capable of articulating what they think and in words that make a great deal of sense, often a great deal more than those of adults. Ignorance of the capacity and agency of young children is ignored by many in positions of influence who themselves are more ignorant than those they criticise.

There are schools which run innovative, student-centred programs. What marks advanced learning is involvement in activities outside the classroom such as exploration of the natural environment. John Marsden, writer, teacher and founder of schools emphasises the importance of first-hand experiences. He writes (in *The Art of Growing Up*, Pan MacMillan, Sydney 2011), “To a large extent students end up in schools where the curriculum dominates and other more traditional approaches prevail because of the attitude of parents and excessive parental control which limits young people’s experiences... Children can only grow emotionally, socially, spiritually if we step back and let them be adventurous.”

One of the important realisations from successful learning is recognition of the satisfaction that comes from achieving a meaningful grasp of an area of knowledge, whether it is how to calculate the solution to quadratic equations or what it was that drove Shakespeare’s Hamlet to do what he did.

Curiosity did not kill the Cats

Fundamentally, children must be in charge of their own learning journey. Students are all different and each learns in different ways and at different speeds. Some who seems slow to understand may turn out to be successful in later life. Equally importantly, as stories of people who go on to be successful in later life show, the influence of supportive teachers who encourage students in the direction they, the student, has chosen, is profound.

Roger Penrose, who shared the Nobel Prize for physics in 2020 for his calculations on the existence of black holes, was slow in maths class. But his teacher allowed him the time to complete his tasks. John Gurdon won the Nobel prize for physiology or medicine: he was told by his teacher he would never succeed in science. The principal characteristic of young Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani, who won the prestigious Fields medal, was her untiring curiosity. Gillian Lynne was considered slow at school but went on to be a world leading choreographer and dancer responsible for some of the most famous musicals such as “Cats”.

The characteristics of effective school education

The research literature concerning school and education is huge, of very high quality, and extremely rigorous. If there is one common feature it is that too many people who know less than teachers have influence on what happens in schools.

The second common feature of the research is the substantial agreement between the conclusions from the studies, whether it is the United States or Finland or South Korea or New Zealand. Policies in many countries, including in Australia, rarely agrees or aligns with what the research advocates.

It is helpful to review the main points of a lecture in the TED series by Ken Robinson and relate that to the most recent comprehensive review of education in Australia.

One of Robinson’s early TED talks was entitled “How to escape education’s Death Valley”. Like all of his talks his main conclusion are interspersed with humour which engages the audience. The applause at certain points in his talk indicates where there is agreement. It is extremely instructive because his main point are a concise summary of effective school education. All attracted substantial applause.

- Treat all students individually
- Structure the curriculum to cover a wide range of subjects
- Encourage curiosity in learning and creativity
- Treasure teachers and trust them
- No standardised testing!
- Support those students experiencing difficulties

The features are found in the school education practices of Finland, Korea, those parts of China participating in PISA, Singapore and, notably Estonia and Canada and some other countries.

They are not found in schools in the United States or the United Kingdom. Or in Australia.

It would be absolutely wrong to think these are just the views of one or two people. The coincidence between the points endorsed by Robinson and the principal recommendations of the second review of education in Australia are profound. The panel chaired by Gonski included distinguished educators: the report is extensively supported by the best of the relevant literature.

When the Coalition Government decided to support the first Gonski Report, which dealt with school funding issues, then Minister for Education Simon Birmingham decided, according to education policy advisor and consultant [Dean Ashenden](#), they needed a report on effective teaching and learning strategies. The Gonski Panel was asked to focus on practical measures that work. Ashenden correctly observes:

“The review was required to focus on school and classroom practice when most of the problems, including problems in practice, have their origins elsewhere.”

The report, “[Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools](#)” was delivered in April 2018.

The report observed:

“Taken together, and implemented in a sustained way, these reforms will reverse the decline in student outcomes in recent decades, and prepare current and future generations of school students to succeed in life and 21st century careers...”

The central thesis of the report is that the current practice of seeking overall improvement in learning outcomes across the entire system is in essence an industrial model comparable with a factory assembly line designed for the efficient production of identical items. It should be abandoned.

Instead the focus should be on each individual student, each of whom should be expected to gain a year’s progress as a result of a year’s schooling. Emphasis should be placed on formative evaluation of individual students. The present model NAPLAN, an end- of-year standardised test (summative evaluation) taken by all students in alternate years, should be replaced by frequent formative evaluation conducted for each student by the teacher in the classroom. Every student is expected to “grow and succeed in a changing world” by maximising individual growth and attainment.

Five critical actions were identified as needed for school systems and schools to create a cycle of continuous improvement; innovation is needed to achieve these ambitions. “Schooling should enrich students’ lives, leaving them inspired to pursue new ideas and set ambitious goals throughout life.” The introductory section of the report concluded, “Academic achievement is only one dimension of education and not the sole measure of success.”

“One driver of the decline is variations in early childhood learning that result in very different starting points of children entering school. Unless these learning gaps are addressed early, they increase over the course of a student’s schooling. The gap between students for an advantaged background and those from a disadvantaged background grow from 10 months in year 3 to around two and a half years by year 9.”

One of the most important features of the Report is its focus on the student as an active participant in individual learning: indeed, as a partner in their own learning journey. Relationships with parents and teachers as partners will help them reach their own potential: it increases agency – ownership and responsibility – and creates positive learning habits.

The report observes that on average Australian teachers spend less time on professional learning and collaboration than teachers across OECD countries. Research supports a concept of a school as a professional learning organisation with a high level of collaboration, shared practice among teachers working together and coherent activities for professional learning.

Principals are seen as instructional leaders and not merely as administrators; principals should constantly strive to improve staff performance in the skill and knowledge areas critical to the organisation. Presently, accountability mechanisms focus on administrative requirements rather than educational ones.

Conservative reaction to the Report included assertions such as putting psychobabble over cognitive science, being jargon-filled and denied the evidence claimed for formative evaluation. Educators in many cases were positive, speaking of “a breath of fresh air”.

To a very significant extent, the government ignored the main points of the report: standardised tests continue, a review of the curriculum has started and the funding of non-government schools has further increased.

No gains will be made in literacy and numeracy, or anything else of importance, so long as this situation, coupled with poor support for preschools, continues. A focus on adult literacy and numeracy ignores the long-term, and is marginal at best. You might increase the reading skills of 100 or 1000 people a year...but you will be missing the opportunity to supersize the learning, understanding and life-work enjoyment of generations. Please choose more wisely than you have in the recent past. ENDS

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