

Submission - Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training on adult literacy and its importance.

I am contributing to the inquiry as an individual adult literacy practitioner who is concerned that the leadership in this area in Australia has not risen to the challenge of questioning outdated and discredited teaching approaches and strategies which, accordingly, should have altered teaching practices to reflect current research, to ensure better outcomes for adult literacy learners.

My submission addresses points 6 and 7 in the terms of reference in relation to the core skills of reading and writing: *The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally*; and *International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience*.

I have worked as an adult literacy practitioner for over twelve years in the Tasmanian public library system and I am currently in a senior position with the responsibility for leading literacy professional learning in the sector. My comments are predicated on the following:

- There is a large body of peer-reviewed research that has unequivocally identified the five elements needed to become an efficient reader (and writer): phonological (including phonemic) awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. These five elements are underpinned by oral language skills.
- Research led by French neuroscientist, Stanislaus Dehaene, has shown that adults develop the same brain structures as children when learning to read.

I noted that in the first public hearing of the Inquiry Dr Malcolm Roberts stated that ‘current programs are not significantly reducing the number of people with low LLND skills’. Over the past fifty years ‘whole language’ approaches and strategies to teaching reading have been in vogue both in Australia and internationally. These strategies did not include the systematic development of phonological awareness or phonics knowledge. The situation in Australia has not changed today. A scan of adult literacy websites in Australia will not retrieve resources promoting the development of phonological/phonemic awareness or phonics knowledge in adults.

What you will find, however, are resources, such as those on the Reading Writing Hotline [Student Resources](#) page that instruct students to guess at unfamiliar words. This is not an evidence based approach. You will also find on almost all adult literacy sites a link to the [Literacy face to face](#) resource, a text that has not been updated since it was first published in 2006. This text provides incorrect and misleading information under the heading *How do we read?*, contains no reference to phonemic awareness, and overtly downplays the importance of phonics.

This approach is out of step with our international colleagues who have developed resources that reflect current knowledge and best practice, such as Britain’s [Post-16 Phonics Toolkit](#) and [Citizen Literacy](#) project, and the United States’ [ProLiteracy resources](#)

The rather harsh point I am making in my submission is that the leaders in the field of adult literacy in Australia have fallen short in keeping up with developments in the sector internationally, developments that should have revolutionized practice in line with contemporary research, ensuring Australian learners, especially our young people, have access to the best evidence based learning to give them greater opportunities to participate in work, education and community life.

References:

Dehaene, S., Cohen, L., Morais, J., & Kolinsky, R. (2015). Illiterate to literate: Behavioural and cerebral changes induced by reading acquisition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 16(4), 234–244. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3924>

Kilpatrick, David A. *Assessing, preventing and overcoming reading difficulties*. (2015). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.



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