

Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its importance

I am an academic researcher in a School of Education in Western Australia and have recently published work (with colleagues) in a peer reviewed academic journal of the readability of COVID-19 information (freely accessible at doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.13066) and how it may affect adults with low levels of literacy.

As an academic working in this space, I am also aware of the last PIACC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) results (now dated, but there is little to suggest much if any improvement) which indicate that a large proportion of adults do not have the literacy skills to fully engage in employment, education and training, and society. Although these data include individuals for whom English is an additional language, there are also large numbers of individuals born in Australia for whom English is their first language that also have a need to improve their literacy skills.

I believe that the government thinks that they can address literacy issues through the schools, and this would obviously be an ideal situation, however this does not appear to be working as well as perhaps thought. This belief is based on the focus in schools of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) and in Western Australia the OLNA (Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment). In Western Australia students must achieve a certain level of literacy and numeracy in order to gain high school graduation. Achievement of the WACE has reduced since 2009 (96.2%) to 2019 (91.3%) (https://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/631355/Annual-Report-2019-20-SCSA.PDF, p. 41 Table 22). The drop is evident as a result of the OLNA introduced in 2016 and has been relatively stable at the lower rate since then.

I am also a tutor with Read Write Now (RWN), an organisation that provides support for adults with literacy needs. I have been a tutor with for over 15 years and have worked with a number of adults with literacy needs. Each student has had different needs and different aspects of their literacy education has been shown to be missing. The reasons for these 'missing' parts of literacy are multiple and varied and are often found when individuals finally seek assistance from RWN. Again reasons for seeking assistance vary with the individual.

Connecting my two roles (as an academic researcher and my practical knowledge of the area as a RWN tutor), a colleague and I conducted interviews with previous RWN clients and found that the benefits of improving their literacy (which happened as a result of their interactions with the RWN tutor) were diverse and included improved work outcomes across a variety of occupations. This research is due for publication in a peer reviewed journal in March, 2021.

My academic work and my practical volunteer work inform my opinion that there is insufficient research into adult literacy in Australia (possibly due to the focus on children's literacy which is where most current funding is available). Whilst the benefits of addressing literacy issues early are acknowledged there are still a number of Australian adults who 'fall through the cracks' during their school years and who would benefit from an increased availability of funding to support adult literacy and numeracy. The main benefits are an increased participation across employment, education and training, and participation in society in general, and this has been borne out in my interactions with individuals who have sought the assistance of RWN in Western Australia.