

Love, listening, language - building everything!



“I believe in kindness. Also in mischief.”

~Mary Oliver~



Literacy Advisory Panel

‘Setting the Scene’

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SETTING THE SCENE

I have contributed to other submissions within the Setting the Scene community consultation. The focus of this submission is adult literacy.

TOMORROW’S ADULTS

The change we wish for Tasmanian adult literacy levels 20 years from now, begins now. It begins with today’s early learning for children. With adult literacy in mind then, the Literacy Advisory Panel must recommend strongly for active development and widespread resourcing of:

1. Relational support that brings modelling and direct instruction of secure parent-child attachment, emotional regulation, violence minimisation, and language stimulation, to families of infants and young children.
2. Screening of children’s speech and language at age 3½ years followed by pathways for further assessment and direct support for children who do not pass screening – this includes support for their families.
3. Scientifically informed instruction of reading and writing in the early years of schooling and throughout schooling – specifically, this means direct, explicit instruction in all the subskills of reading, writing.

“Frederick Douglass taught that literacy is the path from slavery to freedom. There are many kinds of slavery and many kinds of freedom, but reading is still the path.” – Carl Sagan



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4. Structured, direct and explicit development of oral language for all children, adolescents, and young people throughout schooling. This must support trust and security of *relationship* to be effective – understanding that trust-building takes time and investment.
5. Warm, place-based, relational support for families at-risk.

THE ROLE OF CONNECTION

Many Tasmanian adults struggled to learn to read when they were children at school. This may have been because of undiagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions that interfered with their language and phonological processing development. It may have been a result of trauma and neglect. Often, it has been both.

Struggling at a complex task is an emotionally dysregulating experience. But positive, accepting relationship can reset such dysregulation¹. It is a necessary though not sufficient condition of successfully supporting people to learn to read as adults.

The other necessary condition is direct, explicit instruction informed knowledgeably by the scientific evidence about how humans learn to read and write². Struggle can be transformed into success through the carefully individualised combination of warm connection and efficacious, non-judgmental, direct instruction. Experience of genuine clarity and success in a complex activity that has formerly brought shame and trauma can be experienced as a transformational moment for adults learning to read. These are also moments of healing. Evidence bases arising from sociology, criminology and neuroscience have converged in identifying that positive, trustful relationship and

How come no
one's taught me
this way before?

~ Adult Literacy Learner~

1 Powell, B., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K. and Marvin, B. (2014) *The Circle of Security Intervention: Enhancing Attachment in Early Parent-Child Relationships*, New York, The Guilford Press.

Perry, B.D. (2018). The impact of neglect, trauma and maltreatment on neurodevelopment: Implications for juvenile justice practice, programs and policy. In A. Beech, A. Carter, R. Mann, & P. Rotshtein (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of forensic neuroscience*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

2 Daehane, S., Cohen, L., Morais, J. & Kolinsky, R. (2015) Illiterate to literate: behavioural and cerebral changes induced by reading acquisition, *Nature*, Vol 16, pp 234-244.

Ehri, L.C. (2004) Teaching Phonemic Awareness and Phonics: An Explanation of the National Reading Panel Meta-Analyses, in McCardle, P. & Chhabra, V. (Eds), *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research*. Paul H. Brookes, Baltimore.

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connection to family, community and culture, provide resilience and healing³. Struggle to learn a complex skill such as literacy, when supported and overcome through non-judgmental instruction⁴ and connected relationship⁵, brings not only the empowering freedom and agency of literacy itself, but also the healing benefits of connection.

Attending to Tasmania’s adult literacy problem of both today and tomorrow is more than what we might typically think of as learning to ‘read and write’. It is uplift to social progress – to freedom⁶. Such uplift and invitation to freedom is in potential in all places where literacy is learned and no matter the age of the learner.

After the assessment and explanation of the results, my kind and nervous client, suddenly stood dramatically to his feet and with welling eyes and outstretched arms said “Thank you. Now I know that it’s not because of me. It’s not because I’m dumb. I just couldn’t do it. I didn’t really want to do this assessment because I thought ‘what’s the point’, but now I’m glad I did because I finally understand. You have given me a way to understand myself. And it’s enough. Even if I don’t do anything now at my age, it is enough to understand. And maybe my story can help someone else not to have to face what I had to face”.

~ Adult Literacy Learner ~

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Structured social inequity has *created* and currently continues to *create* adults with literacy challenges – people who struggle to decode, who do not have robust vocabularies, nor strong knowledge of conventions in print. We, society, have *created* the disadvantages these adult learners have borne.

It’s just ruined my life

~ Adult Literacy Learner~

As one man in his forties recently said to me of his inability to read “It’s just ruined my life”. He attributed his behaviour problems at school to feeling “dumb” in the classroom because he couldn’t “get” what reading was about. He traced his emotional triggers into anxiety and rage, to these childhood experiences. To this anxiety and rage he attributed his marriage and other relationship breakdowns. He also attributed his decades-long experiences of being in-and-out of drug addictions and his brushes with crime, to the emotions that accompanied his experiences of these early childhood struggles. He explained all this while holding anxiety about his relationship with his son which he sensed was also now at the brink of breakdown.

³ Morrison, B. (2007), Schools and Restorative Justice in G. Johnstone and D. Van Ness (eds), Handbook of Restorative Justice, Cullompton: Willan, pp325 – 350.

Oehlberg, B. (2008) ‘Why Schools Need to be Trauma Informed’, Trauma and Loss: Research and Interventions 8(2): 1-4.

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⁴ In mentioning instruction I am always referring to direct, explicit instruction supported by evidence in peer-reviewed literature.

⁵ Full article: [Just Sentences: Human rights to enable participation and equity for prisoners and all \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com)

⁶ Douglass, F. (1845) Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Oxford World’s Classics, pub 2009

Freire, P. (1970), ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, NY, pub 2005



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~Mary Oliver~

This story illustrates so many damaging social problems that could have been averted from age five in the classroom. Less was broadly known about how to support his problem when this man was age five. But now we are without excuse. We can and must close the spaces in our social structures into which people might fall and suffer such indignity, loss of agency, and amplification of risk of harm to others.

Now we are
without excuse.

INITIATIVES

We need initiatives that:

1. Build a public narrative that owns its responsibility for equity in learning to read and write, acknowledges past errors, draws a line in the sand, commences extensive training and retraining of its practitioners, and moves on.
2. Say ‘Sorry’ to those who have been harmed by not having gained literacy skills at school.
3. Say ‘We did not know how to teach you when you were a child. We did not then have the tools that are now available, nor the systems to make it possible for you to learn to read and write.’
4. Place no blame on the learner nor on their teachers – rather, initiatives that actively removes blame from these individuals and instead places it with the institutions and their histories. In the past we did not have the knowledge we now do. Or we did not have the will. But no institution should continue to press-on doing or protecting an outmoded and unsuccessful status quo. It should be joyful to be truthful and follow the evidence.
5. Support the institutions to accept this responsibility wholly, just as we have begun to see happen in relation to institutions and child sexual abuse.
6. Support the uptake of this acceptance with the same dignity as good scientific process; namely, that we view the evidence, implement according to it, observe and measure, adjust according to evidence, continue to iterate, and actively bring trust and relational joy to the process.
7. Educate the public about structured social inequity so that the public has increased power to call-out paternalistic, punitive, blame-shifting responses within our social institutions.

Engaging with such public narrative requires skill in *spoken language*. Language creates the tools for personal processing. Its use in safe spaces has the potential to be transformational – for the individual and society. Therefore, we also need initiatives that:

8. Support dignified opportunity to use language for sharing insights arising from personal experience, to discuss social change, skill acquisition, and personal reflection and healing.
9. Bring safe, relationally connected, accessible, reflective dialogue on all the above points to groups of affected individuals, and across diversity. Such groups support



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participants’ uptake of language that builds understanding about social complexity as well as supporting empathy for self and others. They should also include direct instruction of language.

10. Train and mentor practitioners to give direct instruction in language
11. Develop amongst policy makers greater understanding of the fundamental agency-producing value of language. This is to support their ability to do their work with a clear understanding of the potential for learners’ growth in language. And to understand this potential in a way that is not diminished by interpretation through a lens that the learner is limited or ‘capped’ in potential.
12. Active development of friendship groups, visiting programs, with direct instruction of social skills.
13. Development of programs that teach the broader community about social-skills differences and how to accept and understand them without discomfort or causing shame.
14. Develop the same types of programs and supports equitably in rural areas. Identify local leaders and nurture them.
15. Actively educate about trauma and violence and its lasting effects. Develop dialogue programs with these topics at centre. Implement them abundantly. Do not pitch such programs in competition with each other but offer a large variety with a variety of facilitators and guests. It is variety of relational experiences that increases social capital – and social capital and the ‘relational milieu’ support healing of trauma⁷. Support local leaders to give opportunity to raise community members. Wrap all this activity with shared story and deep listening.
16. Bring the public and persons of influence into prison programs and reflective dialogue groups to share story – to allow the experiences of shared humanity and story to influence, with compassion, across difference. This, done consistently and widely will gradually erode the stigma of prison that is currently so limiting.
17. Build understanding that it is our socially structured inequity that creates the community’s sense of need for mass-incarceration prison and then relegates people to it. Actively discuss and share story on these topics. Actively reflect and share story on privilege and where it comes from. Actively create opportunity for prisoners to tell about their pasts and the oppression they have experienced. Build institutional programs to say ‘sorry’, heartedly, to individuals affected by crime. Actively build training programs and jobs pathways for people coming out of prison. And of course – safe housing.

⁷ Perry, B.D. (2018). The impact of neglect, trauma and maltreatment on neurodevelopment: Implications for juvenile justice practice, programs and policy. In A. Beech, A. Carter, R. Mann, & P. Rotshtein (Eds.), *The Wiley–Blackwell handbook of forensic neuroscience*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.



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BUILDING LITERACY CAPACITY

People who have reached adulthood without having gained literacy skills always have backstories and life situations that are complex, never simple. Yet currently in adult literacy programs these complex situations are met as if they must be simple. Volunteers, workmates, and other practitioners with minimal training, supervision, or mentoring, are engaged to deliver the complex concepts within teaching reading and writing to the most complex of learners. For the relational comfort and security of the learner this can be excellent, but relational enjoyment is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient.

Just because someone can read doesn't automatically mean they will know how to teach someone else to read.

~ Adult Literacy Instructor ~

To be efficacious and deliver the strong, measurable, and entirely realistic outcome of 100% literacy, the training of volunteers must include scientifically informed method for how to instruct reading and writing. Moreover, the volunteers' activities need to be mentored, supported, and directed, by practitioners who have solid understanding of these processes. Such practitioners can support the volunteers and any inexperienced practitioners to deliver each complex instructional process well. The volunteers can be coached and given feedback and positive encouragement in their own human dignity and right. This all redounds to excellent relational and instructional support for the very complex nuances and individual differences of the learners.

We need initiatives that:

1. Provide specialist support to adult literacy programs in Tasmania. Currently, there are no referral pathways to check hearing, vision, optic convergence and tracking, language, phonemic processing, medical factors, and much else. These complex learners need the dignity of full pathways of evaluation and support.
2. Deliver dignified, scientific assessment. Excellent assessment using validated tools will deliver data needed for decision-making both at individual and policy levels.
3. Follow assessment with tailored, structured literacy intervention consistently and reliably in all initiatives.
4. Not only deliver instruction in the ways that work, but that stop doing it in ways that don't work. Resources currently allotted to methods without scientific evidence should be halted and instead turned to delivering training in efficacious methods. This means:
 - a) teaching reading and writing using clinically informed direct instruction
 - b) supporting learners to gain new understanding about themselves and the reasons they have experienced language and literacy challenges – to build their self-advocacy
 - c) linking these understandings to their personal histories and learning profiles

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- d) supporting learners to process these combinations of insights in language to create courage, hope and curious motivation
- e) linking the new learning to real life experiences and goals

Using volunteers to support adult learners has elements that can work. But it also introduces challenges that must be managed. Volunteers should be trained and mentored to deliver structured literacy intervention. Doing this will expand pro-literacy hope and knowledge within the general population. The more we teach grassroots practitioners and volunteers the skills of how to teach reading and writing from the scientific evidence, the more we will build a society-wide understanding that these skills are complex – but they *can* be taught and learners *can* succeed well. Moreover, these same skills need to be dignified and understood in policy as being complex – but possible to accomplish.

As we do this, and conversations of success and reciprocal joy are shared around Tasmanian dinner tables, we can change the pervasive narrative and set of assumptions that someone who has difficulty learning to read is somehow deficient and ‘dumb’. I write ‘dumb’ because this is the word adult learners and children with literacy acquisition challenges have learned to use about themselves. If it shocks us to see the word in print, this could be motivation for us to be more shocked that we are permitting any individual to feel that it is a word that describes them.

There has never been a time in history in which we have had both the tools of instruction relevant to all learners together with the social will to bring 100% literacy to all learners. Talking about this possibility and potential with excitement and hope is the necessary attitude to bring to the barrier of hopelessness and exhaustion that some practitioners feel – while also deeply respecting and supporting their tiredness without judgment. The skills to make warm and respectful relationship simultaneously with goal-driven scientific development of a learner’s literacy are reciprocally rich and energising. This is the hope and experience we must, and *can*, bring to all learners, volunteers, and practitioners.

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