

APPA Submission to

adult literacy and its importance

Background

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia. APPA represents affiliated state and territory Government, Catholic and Independent primary principal associations, and through these associations, over 7600 primary principals and schools across the nation. It is the national voice on national issues and speaks directly to the Federal Government on matters that concern primary school principals and their school communities.

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APPA is particularly interested in commenting on the following two Terms of Reference:

- **The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;**
- **Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this;**

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1. **The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;**

The APPA National Advisory Council meets regularly, bringing together government, independent and catholic education sector representatives from across all states and territories.

Anecdotal evidence shared amongst this group has consistently reported a direct correlation between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development.

Parents with strong literacy skills, particularly when they are actively engaged with their children in the early years, play a major role in the development of reading readiness, and indeed, readiness for school learning in general, academically, socially and emotionally.

Conversely, it has also been consistently acknowledged by the NAC, that for families where parents are illiterate, don't value reading, or where English is not their first language, additional challenges are faced. There are also further significant challenges that continue to be evident in our rural, regional and remote communities, and in many communities with a high number of indigenous families.

APPA would like to refer to a number of findings from the following studies:

1.1 *The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy*

Kenneth Hemmerechts, Orhan Agirdag & Dimokritos Kavadias in their 2016 research paper - *The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy* - conclude that there is a ...

“positive relation between early involvement in literacy activities (before primary school) and reading literacy and parental education” and that “children from a family with a low SES experience the late type of involvement in literacy activities more than children with a high SES”.

While this article focused on home-based parental involvement in children’s literacy activities in 10 European educational systems, APPA believes these findings are clearly reflected in an Australian context.

Hemmerechts, Agirdag & Kavadias go on to conclude, amongst other findings, that:

- positive attitudes towards reading are more likely for children in higher SES families and who experienced a high level of early literacy involvement.
- Late parental literacy involvement is also related to the reading literacy of children: it is more likely when children have poor reading literacy and less likely when children have good reading literacy.
- The transition of a low early parental literacy involvement to a high late parental literacy involvement is more likely for children with a lower SES than for children with a higher SES. Those children who experience more late than early involvement also have lower reading literacy.
- Home-based parental involvement in literacy and language activities is socially stratified and not independent from external influences.
- The level of parental education tends to have an enduring influence on parental involvement.

Reference:

Kenneth Hemmerechts, Orhan Agirdag & Dimokritos Kavadias (2016):

The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy, Educational Review, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2016.1164667

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2016.1164667>



1.2 When Children Are Not Read to at Home

Jessica Logan, lead author of an online study which appeared in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, and assistant professor of educational studies at The Ohio State University, concluded in 2019, that ...

“ Young children whose parents read them five books a day enter kindergarten having heard about 1.4 million more words than kids who were never read to ... Even kids who are read only one book a day will hear about 290,000 more words by age 5 than those who don't regularly read books with a parent or caregiver”, and

"Kids who hear more vocabulary words are going to be better prepared to see those words in print when they enter school ... They are likely to pick up reading skills more quickly and easily."

In her paper, Logan referred also to a 1992 study, which suggested that children growing up in poverty hear about 30 million fewer words in conversation by age 3, than those from more privileged backgrounds. “The vocabulary word gap in this study is different from the conversational word gap and may have different implications for children”, she said.

"This isn't about everyday communication. The words kids hear in books are going to be much more complex, difficult words than they hear just talking to their parents and others in the home.”
For instance, a children's book may be about penguins in Antarctica - introducing words and concepts that are unlikely to come up in everyday conversation.

"The words kids hear from books may have special importance in learning to read,"

Reference:

Jessica A. R. Logan, Laura M. Justice, Melike Yumuş, Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno.

When Children Are Not Read to at Home. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 2019; 1 DOI: [10.1097/DBP.0000000000000657](https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000657)

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For these reasons, APPA has long been supportive of the work done in many Australian and international schools, together with early childhood groups, to promote activities such as the challenge to recognise the importance of all children starting schooling having been exposed to 1000 picture books in their early years.



1.3 Connections between child and adult literacy regarding learning, skill levels and practices

In a UNESCO background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006 *Literacy for Life*, Mastin Prinsloo researched the *connections between child and adult literacy regarding learning, skill levels and practices*.

Prinsloo cites a further paper, by Stein and Mamabola, titled '*When pedagogy is not enough*', which argued that

"when children come to school, or adults go to adult literacy classes, teachers often don't relate to their home background, or identify their struggles. They suggest that home background, rather than being seen as a problem, has to be engaged with in one way or another by educators, as that which references a matrix of social relations, social conditions, and potentials for social action."

Prinsloo concludes, in order to be effective, adult literacy education programs must engage with the everyday literacy practices of the parents and children concerned.

He comments on programs which developed an activity where cultural knowledge was written down by literate family members, relatives or neighbours, and where these writings became part of the reading material that family members used. The parents' familiarity with the content then facilitated their reading of the material, and increased the reading interest of inexperienced adult readers.

Prinsloo also acknowledges that:

- Family literacy can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and dependency.
- Family literacy improves the educational opportunities for children and parents by providing both learning experiences and group support.
In the process, family literacy provides parents with skills that will improve their incomes. It provides disadvantaged children with educational opportunities that can enable them to lift themselves out of poverty and dependency.
- Data indicated that children whose parents reported literacy difficulties had a 72% chance of being in the lowest reading level in school tests (compared to 25% of children in the lowest reading level overall). However, "the vast majority of children in the lowest reading level did not have parents who admitted to literacy difficulties"

... 'Parental literacy difficulty' cannot be used to identify all the children who are likely to have literacy difficulty in school, as such an assumption would miss too many children.

It is also well-known that only a fraction of adults who might be thought to have reading difficulty present themselves for learning programmes aimed at their own literacy, while no doubt most parents would like their children to succeed.



... only one fifth of those parents who had reported literacy difficulties had attended an adult literacy class, while almost all parents indicated they would participate in a programme that they believed would help their children.

Prinsloo refers to:

- PALS (Parents As Literacy Supporters), a program designed by Anderson and Morrison in collaboration with program participants ... which aims to work with caregivers in supporting young children's development amongst First Nations Communities in Canada.

After some initial successes in their program, several First Nations Communities have now invited them to work collaboratively in modifying and implementing PALS to meet their needs. They identify key issues that confront them as they begin this process.

First, PALS has a focus on various forms of texts while First Nations communities have a very strong oral tradition and they are trying to determine how to value and promote both simultaneously.

Second, there has been considerable language loss among First Nations people. Given the complex relationships among culture and identity and language and literacy, they see the development of a culturally responsive family literacy program in this context to be a real challenge. They note that in the past, schools have contributed to the erosion of language and culture in First Nations Communities.

They see the challenge as being that of developing a model of schooling that promotes "school literacy" and at the same time promotes cultural maintenance of the communities.

They identify complex issues as regards what the nature of the knowledge is that results from such collaborations, including the ownership of research knowledge.

Reference:

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.133.582&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life.



1.4 **The Effects of Adult Literacy on Children**

Thomas Sticht, International Consultant in Adult Education (Ret.)

At the beginning of this year (2018), I wrote a piece titled “*Still Needed: Massive Injections of Adult Literacy Education to Improve Children’s Reading Skills!*” I noted that more than forty years of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, from 1971 into 2015, indicated that there had been no improvement in reading scores for 17-year olds.

I also noted that, “With hundreds of billions of federal (US) dollars invested in Early Head Start, Head Start, kindergarten, elementary, and middle school special reading programs, over the last 40 years, we have consistently witnessed failures to improve the average reading scores of 17-year-olds, who are on the cusp of adulthood and, for millions of them, on the brink of parenthood. Meanwhile, expenditures for adult literacy education have been and still are trivial.”

Based on extensive research showing that investments in adult education could result in improved reading scores for both parents and their children (Sticht, 2010; 2011), I argued that perhaps with massive injections of adult literacy education in the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States, it might be possible to finally improve reading scores of children from their entry into school all the way up through their graduation from high school.

Unfortunately, data now available indicate that instead of getting massive increases in literacy education for adults, the last decade from program year (PY) 2008-09 through PY 2017-18 has shown large decreases in both adult learner enrollments and in teaching personnel in the AELS.

More than a trillion dollars of educational spending on children’s education in preschool and K-12 over the last forty years in the United States has not improved the reading achievement of 17-year-olds. As these young adults continue to age, millions of them are unable to read at levels needed to gain further education or self-sustainable and family-sustainable employment.

Living in economically underserved neighborhoods (Chetty, et. al, 2018), suffering from the three D’s (dread, deprivation, dependency) they do not, and many cannot, invest their time, energy, and money in educational activities for their children. Parents without books in the home or the time, energy, and ability to read extensively with their children or visit libraries, go to museums, and meet with teachers, the children languish educationally. The cycle begins again.

And so, at the end of 2018, I make the same plea that I did at the beginning of the year: We need to make massive injections of adult literacy education in our nation if we are to raise the reading achievement levels of high school graduates through the intergenerational transfer of literacy from parents to their children. We must remember that the real head start for children, starts with the heads of their parents!

Reference:

Posted by [Jennifer Vecchiarelli](#) on November 30, 2018 in [Facts & Research](#), [Advocacy](#)



APPA believes funding should be increased for adult literacy in Australia, but programmes must be built and based around holistic family engagement, meaningful cultural connections, and directed uncompromisingly to those areas where inequity has remained unaddressed.

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2. Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this;

It is evidently clear from APPA's perspective, that children in families with higher literacy skills, have managed better through 2020 and the impact of COVID-19.

As face-to-face learning switched to remote learning, (and in some jurisdictions backwards and forwards a number of times), the capacity of parents and caregivers to understand, engage with, manage and facilitate learning tasks, especially for younger students, followed closely the trajectory of their own levels of literacy.

It must also be stated, however, that APPA has also observed more clearly than ever over this period, the continuing gap that exists for low SES families, indigenous families and families living in rural, regional and remote locations.

The availability of IT resources, essential for effective transition into remote learning, access to reliable high bandwidth broadband internet access, together with the necessary family support to use IT remotely in an effective and safe manner, have all been pronounced factors through the COVID-19 experience.

APPA would like to refer to a number of findings from the following ACER study:

2.1 Literacy learning in a pandemic

ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr Sue Thomson, writing for *Teacher* magazine argued that

“pre-existing equity issues that affect achievement levels - for example, access to technology, the home learning environment and a student's computer skills - were likely to be exacerbated by remote learning ...

... the research shows that our disadvantaged students are less likely to have a computer at home or a quiet place to study,” Dr Thomson wrote.

“The impact of such factors will probably be compounded by a prolonged period of remote learning, with potential consequences for achievement in all areas, including literacy.”

Unsurprisingly, missed learning opportunities are [linked to lower reading literacy](#).

‘Even a small number of missed learning opportunities can have a big impact on achievement,’



‘Despite the best efforts of students, parents and carers, teachers, schools and systems, there’s little doubt that 2020 has been a highly disrupted year of schooling.’

What can parents and teachers do to minimise the effects of the pandemic on literacy levels?
Encouraging a love of independent reading is a great place to start.

[Research](#) points to the importance of reading to children from a young age to encourage literacy skill development; although it is school-aged children most affected by the move to remote learning, it’s never too late to start.

Another [study](#) based on data from 27 countries including Australia found that children growing up in homes with lots of books had a significant academic advantage over their bookless peers.

What’s more, if parental role modelling is one of the biggest influences on child behaviour, recent [Australia Council for the Arts research](#) revealing that 72% of Australians read books for pleasure – up 17 percentage points from 2016 – is heartening.

With many parents still working from home while students learn remotely, we have a greater opportunity than ever before to be involved in our children’s learning – but it’s a challenging time for all concerned.

One of the most important things parents can do to support their child during the pandemic is to [care for their own wellbeing](#) – and to ask for help when they need it.

Reference:

<https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/literacy-learning-in-a-pandemic>

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APPA believes literacy learning and development in all its various definitions, must be seen in the context of a holistic educational environment.

To address the growing needs around childhood anxiety, in particular those that have emerged through the COVID-19 journey, resources must be released immediately to provide professional support for children, their families, and school communities.

You can only ask for help and receive a response that counts, when help is readily available to access at the time it is needed.



Malcolm Elliott

President

12 March 2021

