

The importance of literacy and numeracy

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Literacy and numeracy are fundamental to any individual's capacity to engage meaningfully in contemporary society – to find and remain in employment, to access a wide range of essential services, to raise a family, or to participate as a citizen in our democratic processes.

Nowadays, of course, only a tiny proportion of our population are completely illiterate or innumerate – in the way that a much larger proportion were, say, 200 years ago, or that a large proportion of the population of the world's poorest countries still are today.

However, a disturbingly large proportion of the population of many so-called 'advanced' economies, including Australia, are 'functionally' illiterate or innumerate. That is, they may have basic reading, writing and numerical skills: but they cannot apply them to accomplishing the tasks necessary to make informed choices and participate fully in everyday life. Those tasks include things such as filling out a job application; understanding workplace health and safety instructions; reading a medicine label, or the nutritional information on a packet of food; applying for a home loan; comparing the prices of two differently-sized but otherwise similar products to determine which represents better value; or helping children with their homework.

According to the most recent survey of adult competencies undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics just over six years ago, as part of an international program co-ordinated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, about 44% of Australian adults attained less than 'Level 3' literacy (at which they can, among other things, 'identify, interpret or evaluate one or more pieces of information and make appropriate inferences'). And 54% of Australian adults attained less than 'Level 3' numeracy (at which they have 'a good sense of number and space', and can 'work with ... proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form', among other things).

The proportion of Tasmanian adults attaining less than 'Level 3' literacy and numeracy was higher than in any other state or territory, and above the national average by at least 4 percentage points in each case. Conversely, the proportion of Tasmanian adults demonstrating the highest levels of literacy and numeracy was the lowest of any state or territory.

This is partly a result of our older-than-average population, since both in Australia and in other countries older people typically have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than young adults. But it is also a reflection of the traditionally lower levels of educational participation and attainment by younger Tasmanians compared with their counterparts in every other state and territory.

And this has real consequences for the living standards of Tasmanians, throughout their lifetimes, compared with those of other Australians.

Research by the World Literacy Foundation suggests that people who are 'illiterate', in the sense intended here, earn between 30% and 42% less over the course of their working lives than those who are literate – largely because, if they are able to find work at all, they tend to remain in 'entry level' jobs rather than climbing career ladders and pay scales as more literate people typically do.

Illiteracy also affects people's health. Illiterate people are more likely to adopt poor nutritional and hygiene practices; are more likely to engage in behaviours potentially injurious to their health; and are more likely to have workplace-related accidents.

Illiterate parents tend to have lower expectations and aspirations for their children – which makes it more likely that illiteracy (and innumeracy) becomes entrenched across generations.

And research has clearly established links between illiteracy and crime rates, juvenile delinquency and recidivism.

Tasmania's above-average rates of functional illiteracy and innumeracy are a significant contributor to our below-average rates of participation in employment, our below-average productivity, our below-average incomes, our below-average health outcomes, and our above-average dependence on income transfers from other Australians.

If we are to make progress on any or all of these fronts, we need to bring the capacity and performance of our education system up to the standards of the rest of Australia. But that on its own won't be sufficient, not least because it won't do anything to help those Tasmanians who left school – in many cases before they should have – in years and decades gone by. We also need to be putting more resources into programs like 26Ten, which seek to provide tailored pathways for adults to improve their literacy and numeracy.

As with many other personal or social afflictions, illiteracy and innumeracy are often unfairly stigmatized, making it even more difficult for people who haven't acquired these skills during or after their time at school to seek help, or help themselves. We need to develop and promote programs which treat people with dignity and respect, so that they can participate fully in every aspect of modern society, as is their right.