

TASMANIA'S CHILD AND YOUTH WELLBEING STRATEGY:
The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance submission
March 2021

The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance:

Lisa Denny, Workforce Demographer, Adjunct Associate Professor, Institute for Social Change, University of Tasmania

Saul Eslake, Economist, Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Tasmania

Amelia Jones, Chair, Square Pegs Dyslexia Association

Rosie Martin, Speech and Language Pathologist, Criminologist, 2017 Tasmanian of the Year

Rikki Mawad, Chair, Connect 42

Anthea Pritchard, Co-founder, Tasmanian Leaders Program

Michael Rowan, Emeritus Professor, University of South Australia, Co-founder Education Ambassadors

Becky Shelley, Deputy Director, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania

Introduction

The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance submission to the Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy consultation process addresses the following domains of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework:

1. Being loved and safe
 - 1.1. have positive, trusted relationships with other people
 - 1.2. feel valued and respected
 - 1.3. have a voice and the ability to raise concerns and have these concerns addressed
2. Having material basics
 - 2.1. have access to education and training materials
3. Being healthy
 - 3.1. are emotionally well, happy and supported
4. Learning
 - 4.1. are attending and engaging in education, training or employment
 - 4.2. are supported to learn by their caregiver and education providers
 - 4.3. are participating in early childhood education
 - 4.4. receive assistance for additional needs
 - 4.5. are developing literacy and numeracy skills appropriate to age
5. Participating
 - 5.1. are engaging with peers and community groups
 - 5.2. are an active participant in their own life; including being able to have a say and have their opinion heard and valued
6. Having a positive sense of culture and identity
 - 6.1. have a positive sense of self-identity and self-esteem
 - 6.2. feel like they belong

The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance believes that embedding communication, language and literacy at the heart of policy for child and youth wellbeing, will underpin the long-term economic and social prosperity for all Tasmanians.

Language and literacy skills are the foundations of communication and well-being; economic, societal and personal well-being over the lifespan.

Without language and emotional maturity in the early developmental stages of pre-school, learning to read, write and spell will be at risk, as language directly underpins literacy – and emotional maturity underpins readiness to learn.

Without reading skills above the National Minimum Standard (NMS) for reading as they start grade seven, students are unlikely to be able to access the wider curriculum and are more likely to not complete school.

Without meeting the international benchmark standards for reading in secondary school, young people are unlikely to pursue further education and training.

Without functional literacy skills, young adults are less likely to engage in life, the community and in work.

The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance developed a **Road Map to a Literate Tasmania** which sets out a 10-year plan to achieve 100 per cent literacy in Tasmania by 2031 and, thus, improve the well-being of all Tasmanians and Tasmania.

In addition to recommending the adoption of the **Road Map to a Literate Tasmania**, the Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance submission to Communities Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy consultation process expands on the importance of **language development and emergent literacy skills** and the relationship between **reading ability and well-being** for children and young people in Tasmania.

Language development and emergent literacy skills

Emergent literacy skills are strong predictors of future success in learning and wellbeing.

The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for children in the years prior to formal schooling, provides broad directions in relation to alphabetic literacy learning and teaching, however, around 40 per cent of Tasmanian children do not access early childhood education and care, where the EYLF is embedded in practice. Further, while Tasmania has the highest rate of preschool attendance in Australia, reflecting the state-wide provision of 15 hours of kindergarten in public schools, literacy outcomes are not keeping pace with the national average.

If Tasmanians do not master minimum standard skills in language and literacy, then serious challenges to educational attainment, vocational and social prospects as well as well-being will become apparent. In addition to strong familial, environmental and cultural influences, formal education should provide for Tasmanians to find a fulfilling and productive place in society, particularly in the instance where the external environment does not support language and literacy development.

Language acquisition and use is a key aspect of cognitive development and one that has profound implications for learning and eventual educational attainment. Brain studies of developing children offer important insights into the development of language functions¹.

From the time of birth, children begin to acquire a sequence of skills and competencies, with language being of critical import to foundational life-long skills. This acquisition, or process of language learning, is achieved firstly through social interaction, and then, as children's language skills increase, language acquisition begins to serve an intellectual function, as a tool for problem solving and self-regulation.

Language provides children with conceptual categories that help them to organise information and make linkages between ideas, and with a means of regulating their thinking and their emotions.

Like other aspects of brain development, language acquisition reflects the interaction between heredity and environment. Children's brains are receptive to learn various aspects of language

¹ Duchesne, S., & McMaugh, A. (2019). Cognitive Development. In Educational psychology: for learning and teaching (pp. 94-152). Cengage Australia; Schunk, D. H. (2020). Neuroscience of learning In Learning Theories: an educational perspective Pearson; The Royal Society. (2011). Brain Waves Module 2: Neuroscience: implications for education and lifelong learning.

at different stages in line with their levels of brain development, however, the cultural experiences of infants and children will determine to a large extent which brain synapses they retain.

A sensitive period in language development is between birth and age 5, during which children's brains develop most of their language capabilities. There is a rapid increase in vocabulary between the ages of 19 and 31 months. The development of these language capabilities is enhanced when children are in language-rich environments where parents and others engage and talk with children (oral language). A parallel process should also occur in language development with the development of phonological awareness skills and the capacity to perceive phonemes, which are the smallest units of speech sounds, the pre-cursor to reading, writing and spelling. Phonological awareness includes oral language skills such as rhyming (e.g., "cat-hat"), alliteration (e.g., "big bears bounce on beds"), identifying and counting syllables, and isolating sounds (f is the first sound in the word fish). Children learn or acquire phonological and phonemic awareness skills when they are exposed to them in their environments; if they are absent, then children will not acquire them. Thus, there may be a sensitive period in which synaptic connections are properly formed, but only if the environment provides the inputs. Essentially, children who perform well on sound awareness tasks become successful readers and writers, while children who struggle with such tasks often do not.

The experiences with talking and listening gained during the preschool period prepares children to learn to read and write during the early primary school years. This means that children who enter school with weaker verbal abilities are much more likely to experience difficulties learning literacy skills than those who do not. It is critical therefore, if exposure to language-rich environments is not evident for young Tasmanian children, that access to these experiences is proactively provided through appropriate public services and educational institutions.

Importantly, however, language acquisition and development are not contained to this sensitive period alone, it is a continual process over the stages of development. Acquiring and using language is a coordinated activity. People listen to speech and read text, think about what was said or what they read, and compose sentences to write or speak. This coordinated activity indicates that language development should benefit from instruction that coordinates these functions; that is, experiences that require vision, hearing, speech, and thinking. From school age, and from the perspective of the education setting, evidence-based instruction can, and should, help to facilitate, enhance and expand language development. This can be achieved through reading instruction based on evidence; the Simple View of Reading², as well as through the wider curriculum including numeracy, the sciences and the arts as children progress through their schooling.

There are some early signs that may place a child at risk for the acquisition of literacy skills. Preschool children with speech and language disorders often experience problems learning to read and write when they enter school. Other factors include physical or medical conditions such as preterm birth requiring placement in a neonatal intensive care unit, chronic ear infections, foetal alcohol syndrome, cerebral palsy, developmental disorders (e.g., intellectual

² Farrell, L, Hunter, M., Davidson, M., and Osenga, T. (2019) The Simple View of Reading, Reading Rockets, <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/simple-view-reading>

disabilities, autism spectrum), poverty, home literacy environment, and family history of language or literacy disabilities (for example, dyslexia). Early screening of language difficulties and diagnosis by appropriate allied health professionals is critical in arresting risks to emergent literacy development.

Recommendation: Implement the GAPS test as part of the 4-year-old Child Health Nurse check to identify any language deficiencies in children of pre-school age. In the instance whereby a child starts school at either kindergarten or preparatory without having undertaken the GAPS test, then the test should be implemented within the first two weeks of the school year.

GAPS, the Grammar and Phonology Screen³, is a free, ten-minute test enabling professionals in education, health and social care, to establish whether children have, or are at risk of, the challenge of language difficulties or disorders. The test, for three and a half to six and half year olds, is a quick and simple screening test used to assess the grammatical abilities and key pre reading skills of children. The test assesses whether the child has appropriate knowledge of how to use grammatical rules to create sentences and whether they know the rules underlying how to add sounds together to correctly make words - language skills crucial if they are to understand instructions and learn to communicate in spoken and written form. Those who show difficulty at this level should undertake further assessment from education psychologists and/or and speech and language pathologists for formal diagnoses and recommendations for intervention.

Reading ability and well-being

Not only does the struggle with reading and writing impact educational outcomes and prosperity over the lifespan, it can also have a detrimental impact on well-being.

Reading difficulties are the most common learning difficulty in Australia. Around 10 per cent of children have significant to severe reading difficulties, representing between two and four children in a typical Australian primary school classroom⁴.

Reading difficulties can severely impact children's lives. The notion that children who struggle with reading experience poor self-esteem is widely reported, anecdotally and empirically, and many adults also report that having a reading difficulty had a devastating impact on their self-esteem as they navigated their way through schooling.

Many children, adolescents and adults with reading challenges, but not all, report feeling a sense of shame and frustration about their reading difficulties, and also report poor self-esteem. Many also remain confident, resilient, and optimistic about their academic and employment choices.

The scientific literature confirms that children with reading difficulties are at elevated risk of experiencing emotional difficulties, including poor self-esteem as well as symptoms of both

³ [GAPS - HvdL Foundation](#), [Grammar and Phonology Screening Test | Early Years Measures Databases | Education Endowment Foundation](#) | [EEF](#)

⁴ Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

anxiety and depression⁵. This systematic review and meta-analysis concluded that the links between reading difficulties and emotional health difficulties are very real⁶. The relationship between poor reading and average self-concept was both reliable and moderately strong. Self-concept is an individual's belief about themselves, which is developed through experience and interactions with their environment in different domains of life, such as academia, school, work, home, social life, and physical appearance.

There is considerable evidence now that the self-beliefs children develop about their learning affect achievement motivation and achievement outcomes. Children who experience initial and ongoing learning difficulties often develop a cluster of negative self-beliefs that impede efforts to provide effective remediation. This cluster involves developing negative academic self-concepts, loss of self-esteem, diminished beliefs that they can bring about successful learning outcomes, and an overall view that trying hard doesn't work so it's better not to try but to just give up.⁷

Associated with low self-esteem for considerable children with reading difficulties are behavioural difficulties and social-emotional challenges, that is, being disruptive in class, being withdrawn or lacking in concentration, or other behavioural disturbances. Research shows that although students may be assessed with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), this may actually mask the real problem, which is that the student is struggling with basic literacy skills⁸.

We need to ask the question; are the behaviour issues causing the reading problem or is the reading problem causing the behaviour issues?

The impact of reading difficulties on wellbeing also permeates into higher education. A recent study of university students found that those with a history of reading difficulties had lower academic achievement than those without a history of reading difficulties, are more likely to withdraw from their first year of study, and are at higher risk of not completing their degree.⁹ The difficulties encountered by university students often involve poor reading fluency (accuracy and speed of reading) and low reading comprehension. The research also found that university students with reading difficulties not only struggle academically at university, but they are also vulnerable to experiencing anxiety.

Without effective intervention, negative reading self-concepts spread to generalised negative academic self-concepts, that is enduring reading problems tend to spread to the wider curriculum. Persistent early reading difficulties typically result in ongoing academic underachievement and negative trajectories related to school engagement, behaviour, and attendance.

⁵ McArthur, G. M., Filardi, N., Francis, D.A., Boyes, M.E, & Badcock, N.A. (2020). Self-concept in poor readers: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *PeerJ*, 8:e8772.

⁶ Francis, D., McArthur, G. (2020) Poor reading, poor self-concept, and anxiety: A review of the evidence and some practical advice, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

⁷ Chapman, J. (2020). Learning to read is about words AND mind, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

⁸ Nicholson, T. (2020). What do you call someone who is disruptive in class?, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

⁹ Soares, S. and Badcock, N. (2020). Does reading anxiety impact on academic achievement at university?, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

However, although rates of emotional difficulties are indeed higher among struggling readers, recent research also found that many children with reading difficulties are very resilient¹⁰.

Summary of risk and resilience-promoting factors

| Risk Factors | Resilience- promoting factors |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Academic failure • Shame, stigma and feeling ‘different’ • Experiences of being bullied • Peer relationship problems • Teacher training (early literacy) • Unsupportive teachers and school staff • Transition to high school • Financial cost and lack of resources • Lack of government recognition (and associated funding/resources) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early diagnosis • Identifying any child strengths • Positive general self-concept or perception • Strong relationship with parents • Strong relationships with friends/ peers • Strong and supportive teacher relationships • Supportive school environment • Connection with school |

Source: Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

The consequences of reading difficulties leading to poor self-esteem and behavioural issues can include disengaged and disruptive behaviour, suspension and exclusion, early school leaving, under- and unemployment, and engagement with the youth justice system¹¹.

There is an urgent need to support children with reading difficulties at multiple levels – taking into consideration the unique experiences of each child, as well as the important role of family, peers, teachers and schools, government, and broader society in understanding the emotional impacts of reading difficulties on wellbeing.

Recommendation: Implement the Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance’s Road Map to a Literate Tasmania and adopt and implement as an immediate priority the recommendations of the [Primary Reading Pledge](#) and invest in the resources (human and physical) and capacity building required to achieve the goal of close to zero Tasmanians starting grade 7 at or below the national minimum standard (NMS) for reading by 2031

¹⁰ Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

¹¹ Graham, L.J., White, S.L.J., Tancredi, H.A., Snow, P. C., & Cologon, K. (2020). A longitudinal analysis of the alignment between children’s early word-level reading trajectories, teachers’ reported concerns and supports provided. Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Summary:

The Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance believes that embedding communication, language and literacy development at the heart of policy for child and youth wellbeing, will underpin the long term economic and social prosperity and wellbeing for all Tasmanians.

Recommendations:

- 1) Implement the Road Map to a Literate Tasmania**
- 2) Implement the GAPS test as part of the 4-year-old Child Health Nurse check to identify any language deficiencies in children of pre-school age. In the instance whereby a child starts school at either kindergarten or preparatory school without having undertaken the GAPS test, then the test should be implemented within the first two weeks of the school year.**

Examples of existing Tasmanian Government initiatives which the Tasmanian #100percentliteracy Alliance recommendations would enhance the wellbeing of children and youth in Tasmania include:

- Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS)
- B4 Early Years Coalition
- Youth Support Programs
- Youth Justice Services
- School Health Nurses
- Universal Newborn Hearing Screening
- Tasmania's Strategy for Children: Pregnancy to Eight Years 2018-2021
- Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs)
- Launching into Learning
- Working Together Supporting Early Learning
- Learning in Families Together (LIFT)
- Connected Beginnings
- Communities for Children
- Child Health Association of Tasmania (CHAT)
- Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy
- Years 9 to 12 Project
- Flexible Learning Programs
- Extension of Schools to Year 12
- School Based Traineeships
- Vocational Placement Pilot Project
- Developing Independence Certificate
- Accessible Island: Tasmanian Disability Framework
- Tasmania's Multicultural Policy and Action Plan 2019-2022