

Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry: A fair chance for all.

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Submission made by: -

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Context

New Zealand has a sad recent history with respect to literacy and numeracy instruction in the school setting – and the ongoing repercussions of that in the workplace.

Our recent sad history is exemplified by the denial by the Ministry Education of the existence of dyslexia until 2007. This failure to purposefully address dyslexia as an issue has further exacerbated the poor literacy outcomes.

New Zealand has been a case of “we don't know what we don't know”. As a nation we have little understanding of the full ramifications of undiagnosed and unsupported dyslexia and related neurodiverse conditions on success in education, and in the workplace.

For a long time, the education sector has relied on Reading Recovery as the only tool to address the challenges of poor acquisition of literacy skills in primary school. Reading Recovery does work for some children, but it does not work for the majority of children with dyslexia.

Some key definitions and concepts

1. Dyslexia should be considered as a condition where intelligent people struggle with text. They struggle with reading, writing and spelling.
2. Dyslexia impacts 10% of the population worldwide, irrespective of culture, language and ethnicity. In addition, another 5% have related neurodiverse conditions like ADHD, Dyscalculia, DCD, Irlen's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder
3. A child with dyslexia grows up to be an adult with dyslexia

4. Dyslexia should be considered as a difference – not a disability.
5. Dyslexia comes with a list of skills and talents – along with the challenges with text.
6. It is estimated that at least 50% of the low literacy in adults is the result of undiagnosed and/or unsupported dyslexia.

Responses to Specific Questions

1. How does poor literacy lead to people being trapped in persistent disadvantage – what is the pathway?

The pathway is as follows:

Confident successful parents who value education prepare their children for school – well in advance of them starting.

Success at school leads to improved self-esteem and confidence.

However....

Other parents do not make an effort to socialise their children to school

Failure at school leads to diminished self-esteem and confidence.

Lack of success and enjoyment of school increases the chances of truancy and early dropouts from school.

Low incomes mean less ability to fully engage in school. Fewer school trips, lower likelihood of having the technologies etc that assist children to excel at school. Poorer families are less likely to be able to afford programmes like Kip McGrath. They are also less likely to be able to afford a dyslexia assessment.

(there is evidence of this in the NZQA figures of Special Assessment Conditions for exams like NCEA 1, 2 and 3. The majority of Special Assessment Condition approvals are for students from Decile 8, 9 and 10 schools.)

- A report on the Corrections website showed that: -
At least 50% of prison inmates showed up as having dyslexia. Most were not aware of it. A disturbing number of prison inmates had dropped out of school very early. Many before they started Intermediate school. Many more before they commenced secondary school.
https://www.corrections.govt.nz/resources/research/journal/volume_7_issue_1_july_2019/supporting_neurodiverse_learners_in_new_zealand_prisons
- Many parents who did not like, or succeed, at school often send unhelpful messages to their children, (Messages like “I was dumb at

school, and I did alright”) The impact of this is that some children enter school with an expectation of doing poorly.

2. The impact of poor literacy on lifetime outcomes (economic, health as well as social and cultural) at the individual level but also at the aggregate level of the economy/country.

Text and numbers are everywhere. It is not possible to fully engage in New Zealand society without adequate literacy skills.

This plays out in multiple areas of society: -

- Inability to fill in forms
- Inability to fully comprehend the health and safety instructions at work
- Lower ability to engage with the internet.
- Lesser ability to apply for jobs, or seek promotion
- Less likely to take up Professional Development opportunities.
- Less likely to be able to adapt to new technology.
- Not able to gain workplace qualifications, or pass registration examinations if the person is a plumber, gasfitter etc.
- Reliance on a partner, or parent to engage with the health system, or socially.

3. The incidence of poor literacy/reading difficulties in NZ (both amongst children and adults)

New Zealand’s results on the PISA reports are not strong. (Other people are more informed about the details of this than I am)

Also, the recently released Education Hub report on New Zealand’s literacy levels show how bad the problem is.

My experience and expertise is with adults. Sadly, the adult literacy story is the result of issues at primary and secondary school.

Repeated international surveys reveal the problems faced by adults in the workplace. Three international surveys show that the problem has been with us for a long time: -

- The IALS survey from 1996
- The ALLS survey of 2006
- The PIACC international survey of 2016

These international surveys all tell the same story. Around 40% of the New Zealand workforce do not have the capability to perform their jobs effectively. For numeracy the figure is higher.

(Note: A lot of effort was put in by the officials at Ministry of Education to present the figures in the most positive way, but the underlying story is – a large number of kiwi workers do not have the skills to carry out all the function required in the workplace.)

This would include: -

- Being Health and safety compliant
- Taking workplace training and being eligible for promotions.
- Adapting to new technologies as they are introduced into the workplace.)
- Further evidence of the nature of New Zealand's poor performance in literacy is provided by the results of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Tool (LNAAT) administered by NZCER for TEC.

What the drivers of poor literacy outcomes might be

There are many causes of poor literacy outcomes. The main ones are: -

- Poor and inconsistent instruction of reading, writing and spelling in our primary schools. (See the Education Hub report of 20 March 2022)
- A major disconnect between primary school and secondary school's methodologies with respect to literacy instruction. At primary schools the focus is on literacy tuition. At secondary schools' literacy turns into English (an academic subject to prepare students for higher education.) Many young people do not get the point of analysing poems or Shakespeare and turn off English – because they do not get the point of it all. The same applies to Numeracy. When arithmetic at primary school turns to mathematics at secondary school – a lot of young people turn off -because they do not get the point of algebra, trigonometry or geometry. In actual point these branches of mathematics are very important – but they are not well sold to young people by maths teachers.
- The school curriculum is being watered down by the addition of so many other requirements. Quality literacy and numeracy instruction are the most important outputs from the education system, but literacy and numeracy are being crowded out by other subjects and other priorities.

- There is no accountability in the compulsory sector with respect to poor literacy outcomes. Often young people with poor literacy and numeracy outcomes drop out of school. The schools don't worry a lot – because low scoring students make the schools exam data look bad. There is an incentive to move those students on. The culture of “passing the buck” is rife in the current system.

What is being done to improve this situation and what else needs to happen in NZ

1. What is currently happening

The government currently administers and funds the Workplace Literacy and Numeracy fund (WLN fund). Multiple millions are spent on upskilling the workforce. It is effective – but it is only holding the line – because more young people with low literacy are entering the workforce.

The repeated international surveys are evidence of that.

2. What should happen

- a. There should be more accountability at the school end. Ironically young people who take on industry training have to undertake the ALNAAT as part of their off-job training. (See above). It is silly to administer the ALNAAT when the young person has already left the institution (secondary school) whose job it is to provide effective literacy instruction. If young people had to pass the LNAAT – or equivalent before they could leave school, that would focus the minds of both the schools and the young people.
- b. Employers need to be encouraged to take a more active part. Literacy skills are like fitness – if you don't use it – you lose it. Literacy is also very content specific. The literacy requirements for each sector are very different. Employers should take some responsibility to assist their staff with the specific literacy requirements of their sector.
- c. There should be specific agencies responsible for adult literacy improvement. There was once a National Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy at Waikato University. The responsibilities were transferred to Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence. Ako is a very professional organisation and does a good job. However, to adequately address adult literacy and numeracy issues a specific organisation is required, that includes representation from the Unions and from the Business community.

- d. The recent ROVE reforms did not specifically address adult literacy and numeracy issues, and the institutions set up do not specifically cover off literacy and numeracy. A dedicated adult literacy and numeracy institution should be set up – with well defined goals. Having literacy and numeracy as part of the brief of other agencies does not work.



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