



No national spotlight on adult literacy?

Adult literacy is so little on the minds of national policy makers that the last remaining vestige of tagged national funding disappeared at the COAG meeting on 29 November 2008. The sad thing is that probably nobody in a position

to make any difference gave a moment's thought to what would be lost when the \$1.5 million dollars of the Adult Literacy National Project got rolled up into the base VET funding for the states and territories. The amount was small, but the impact is significant.

What has been lost in this reallocation of national funds to the states has been a *national* focus: it is the culmination of a gradual erosion of targeted funding for research and development for adult literacy and numeracy. Among the other priorities of the so-called "Education Revolution", adult literacy and numeracy have no distinct place.

Why should the decision-makers care? Well, if for no other reason, all Australian governments should care because literacy and numeracy levels in adults will be a measure that tells the Australian community whether governments have managed to reduce the "gaps in foundations skills" agreed upon as one of the high level outcomes at COAG. The third adult literacy survey—the *Survey of Adult Competencies*—will take place in 2011 as a follow up to the *Adult Literacy and Life Skills* (ALLS) survey in 2006 and the *Survey of Aspects of Literacy* (SAL) in 1996.

ALLS showed that Australia made small, but statistically significant, improvements, particularly at the lower levels, in the 10 years between the first two national surveys. New Zealand did a great deal better in the same time span with a concerted national effort under a national strategy improving the two basic skill levels by eight percent. In comparison, Australia 'integrated' literacy delivery with the vocational training sector—with limited success—and there is now increasing concern about the capacity of industry training products to foster the development of the generic or underpinning "employability" skills including language, literacy and numeracy.

It would not be surprising if Australia makes no gains in adult literacy levels when they are measured again in

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2011. This is because the other outcomes and targets agreed by COAG, will effectively reduce the funding for adult literacy services delivered, since the White Paper of 1991, as a component of the vocational education and training sector. COAG agreements force

states and territories to focus on producing higher level qualifications. 75% of literacy delivery is at Certificate I or II level. Once again, who can tell whether the decision-makers considered the impact on adult basic education services when they took this decision? Perhaps all they had in mind were the lower level qualifications in Training Packages which provide few opportunities for candidates to improve their reading, writing and maths skills.

According to the ALLS survey, 16% of the adult population has reading, comprehension and maths skills so low that they would need to undertake an adult basic education course at Certificate I or II to achieve the kind of foundation and employability skills demanded by modern industry. Where will all these people go to improve their foundation skills and to develop employability skills in the brave

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new world where lower level courses are not funded? Workplaces are not offering to teach them and Training Package qualifications have not been designed for this purpose. These are the people who do not have the language, literacy, numeracy or study skills to enter the system at Certificate III level.

ALLS survey data also tell us that a further 29% of the adult population do not have the formal educational skills to undertake qualifications beyond Certificate III. Where is the growth in higher level qualifications going to come from if the raw recruitment material is just not available? The 'raw material' in this case is the proportion of the population with the skills to successfully undertake higher level qualifications. It is misleading to call this material 'raw' because the skills these people possess are the highly refined product of an educational process. Unfortunately, in only about half the population have they been successfully produced. There is an absolute need for the process of basic education to extend into the adult world and, for any process to be effective, it must have an infrastructure.

In Australia at the moment some of the infrastructure to teach the language, literacy and numeracy skills needed by such a large proportion of the adult population exists in the public provider, TAFE. In some states there is also a well-established, government-funded, community-based provider network. The Commonwealth Government funds literacy programs in workplaces and for registered jobseekers as a result of which, a number of charities and other NGOs have established themselves as language, literacy and numeracy not-for-profit providers. Over the 10 years between the SAL and ALLS surveys this infrastructure has served an estimated 4% of the people with low level skills. The existing infrastructure needs to be consolidated and expanded—not dismantled. More than that, governments need to be seeking innovative ways to engage adults in learning. Literacy learning opportunities for adults must look beyond traditional classrooms and the context of workforce development.

Unhappily, plans for consolidation and expansion of infrastructure for adult literacy delivery do not seem to be part of the national policy focus. With the existing infrastructure in the VET sector under threat, and with no clear plan to develop an imaginatively differentiated, alternative structure to involve the community in learning that serves broader goals, the states and territories will find it difficult to meet the COAG human capital targets. Not only will we lack the capacity to produce the foundation skills that so many people are without, we will also fail to generate the higher level skills—the sophisticated cognitive processing, communication and creativity skills—that are so much in demand and so deplorably lacking.

Governments, and businesses, then should be worried about the lack of policy focus and national leadership on building the educational skills of adults. There should be general concern in the community that skills that are obviously difficult to teach since our education systems fail

to teach them to about 45% of our people, might be left for people to teach to themselves, or to learn by osmosis, or with the help of a volunteer. Adults *can* learn in these ways, but many will not be able to make the giant strides our economy is now demanding. Perhaps instead of putting blind faith in targets as a management process, we as a community should start asking the hard questions about why we are failing to teach essential skills on such a large scale.

Human language practices are complex and diverse; teaching language and literacy is a complex undertaking, and given our success rate, one whose complexity is poorly understood. To address this problem, we could

make a start by ensuring that all teachers employed to teach literacy, in both schools and the post-compulsory sector, study language and become knowledgeable about its structures; the processes by which it is acquired; the extent

to which language practice is a determinant of social and cultural identity; and the impact of language practice on conceptualisations, thinking and learning. Better trained and more knowledgeable professionals are a key part of the solution. In the VET sector the professional skills and knowledge of the best qualified staff have been systematically undermined by the requirement for VET sector professionals to possess a lower level 'teaching' qualification which has less to do with understanding how people learn than it has to do with the requirement for compliance with regulation. It has nothing at all to do with furthering an understanding of language complexity. As a consequence of this and other practices associated with recent reforms and marketisation, teaching in the VET sector has become more a bureaucratic process than a pedagogical one.

Adult educational products and processes in recent years have not been sufficiently differentiated from vocational training products and processes, and arguably, their efficacy has been adversely affected. Clearly language, literacy and numeracy specialist teaching must continue to be a component of vocational training. Without these specialist services in VET, neither of the COAG goals related to deepening the qualification base in Australia can be realised.

To realise other goals—those expressed in the aspirational COAG targets to achieve better health, education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people or those expressed as the goals of the Social Inclusion Agenda—we may need to reconsider the policy decision that defined adult literacy and numeracy purely as an issue for vocational training. There are now opportunities to explore the integration of literacy learning for adults as part of a social compact related to health, justice and other social policy domains.

Perhaps now is the time to start talking about a new education sector for adults, one in which their needs as people, parents and citizens are considered in addition to their capacity to engage with the labour market. We could

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Visioning Alternatives: Strength-based practice, plasticity and potential in ALBE

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Reading can be such an extraordinarily powerful and rich experience—it can take us to times and places we would never experience on our own: from ocean yacht racing to neuroscience laboratories.

It's sometime in the mid 1980's and I'm enthralled, re-living Australia II's historic 1983 win in the America's Cup campaign. *Born To Win*, John Bertrand's extraordinary memoir, tells the story in compelling detail. I'm not a sailor at all, and I know next to nothing about yachts and competitive match racing. But this is a wonderful and inspirational book. Like the autobiography of cancer survivor and multi Tour-de-France champion Lance Armstrong, *It's Not About the Bike* (2002), Bertrand's tale is not about the boat. It's a ripping yarn about hard work and heart break, teamwork, resilience and dedication, and ultimately, success against the odds. And as much as anything else, it's about psychology.

There are several passages where Bertrand describes how he, with the support of a professional sports psychologist, "produced a plan for the mental visualisation of victory". Together they helped Bertrand's Australian crew envisage what it would be like when they were on the brink of doing what no other sailors had been able to do in 132 years.

"Out in front it would be different. We would hear the rare sound of a foreign bow wave right behind us, the cries and commands of the American afterguard, the new urgency in their voices that no crew had ever heard before. The tension on our own boat would be high, but the feeling that we had all been there before would have to be part of our psychological makeup ... Remember you cannot go anywhere, if you have not first imagined yourself there."

(Bertrand & Robinson, 1985:144)

Their persistent efforts proved fruitful and remarkably, what they imagined became reality.

Time travel through nearly 25 years and I'm just as enthralled by another account of the positive power of imagination. Norman Doidge (2007) tells remarkable "stories of personal triumph from the frontiers of brain science". In *The Brain that Changes Itself* he tells us how "thinking makes it so".

Doidge provides multiple examples drawn from the scientific literature. He shows how 'mental practice' which involves *imagining* playing the piano, can produce performances almost as good as those preceded by actual physical practice at the keyboard. He describes how, in another experiment,

"Drs Guang Yue and Kelly Cole showed that imagining one is using one's muscles actually strengthens them."

...At the end of the study the subjects who had done physical exercise increased their muscular strength by 30 percent, as one might expect. Those who only imagined doing the exercise, for the same period, increased their muscle strength by 22 percent."

(Doidge 2007:205)

Doidge explains that,

"from a neuroscientific point of view, imagining an act and doing it are not as different as they sound. When people close their eyes and visualize a simple object, such as the letter a, the primary visual cortex lights up just as it would if the subjects were actually looking at the letter a. Brain scans show that in action and imagination many of the same parts of the brain are activated. That is why visualization can improve performance."

(Doidge, 2007:204-205)

Visualisation and imagination are only two of many topics Doidge explores. He demonstrates, through multiple examples, that the human brain has fantastic capacity to re-invent and constantly re-make itself. Challenging what has been popular belief for many years, Doidge shows that *even the adult brain can and does change itself*. He dismantles the common understandings of the brain as a computer, or machine, which after early childhood is 'hard-wired' and fixed. On the contrary, he demonstrates the 'plasticity' of the brain and its capacity for change and redevelopment right throughout life.

All of this talk of yachting, brain scans, neuroscience and 'neuroplasticity' might seem a long way from contemporary practice in adult literacy and basic education. However it seems to me that such research is relevant; as are the extraordinary life stories of achievers such as Bertrand and Armstrong. There are many other names we could add to such an 'achievers' list; Ian Gawler (Allenby 2008) a cancer survivor, counsellor and revolutionary mind-body health practitioner could be one. Or what about Janine Shepherd (1994) whose body was so badly smashed in a road accident that she was "not expected to live, then not expected to walk, and certainly not expected to have children"? All of which she did, besides learning to fly and becoming a commercial pilot and a flight instructor. Or Erik Weihenmayer (2001) might be another name to add to such a list; a mountaineer who has 'bagged' several of the world's highest summits. Not quite so remarkable perhaps, except for the fact that he is completely blind.

We might also consider the stories of individuals who have been successful in life and work *despite* significant and continuing difficulties with literacy. Our research ►

report, *Contradicting the Stereotype* and the accompanying digital stories (Waterhouse & Virgona 2005), show how these individuals identified and built upon their strengths and capabilities to realise their goals. We've suggested that in some ways these individuals might be considered 'positively deviant', but their stories highlight the importance of *multiple intelligences* – including what Gardner (1985) calls 'inter-personal' and 'intra-personal intelligences' and what Goleman (1996) calls emotional intelligence.

These stories are relevant because adult literacy education isn't just about the delivery or acquisition of text management or decoding skills. It's also about personal *identity* – it's about developing *particular ways of being* which are needed to meet the requirements of particular contexts and life challenges. Adult literacy education is about empowerment and 'transformative' pedagogies, and it's about 'making a difference' in people's lives. It is this quest for personal change, *change which sometimes seems impossible*, which makes these various stories, and the brain plasticity research, relevant.

Considerable resilience, perseverance and courage are required to make these sorts of transitions – as is some degree of creativity; a capacity to 'see' what is beyond sight and to imagine an alternative, a different way of being in the world. As Bertrand notes,

"That which you have never even dreamed of is that which you will never attain."

(Bertrand & Robinson, 1985:144)

These qualities are not simply personal and innate; nor are they indelibly fixed. They are also social, interactive and developmental; they can be stimulated, nurtured and amplified. Seligman (1992) for instance, writes extensively about *learned optimism*.

It is the power to imagine and help build visions which sits behind what we have called the 'miracle question' in *Working from Strengths*.

"For example, 'If you woke up tomorrow morning and found the problem had gone away completely, how would your life be different?' This technique assists the client to envisage another world and stand in a different space. The practitioner works with the client to probe the vision. What would look different? What would people say to you? What changes would they notice? How does it feel? What is it like in a problem-free space?"

(Waterhouse & Virgona 2008:33)

Figure 1: The
'Miracle Question'

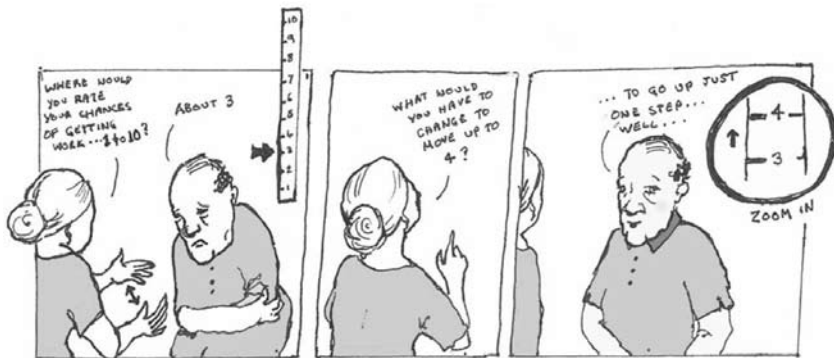


Figure 2: 'The Scale'

This positive visioning helps the individual to see possibilities and begin to move towards them; just as Bertrand helped his crew to imagine winning their historic yacht race.

This approach is consistent with contemporary approaches to change management in adult education. For instance, Mitchell and Young (2001) discuss the challenges of developing a 'high-skilled, high-performing VET system'. Change and change management are recurring themes in their overview. They note that,

"Traditionally change management focused on resistance to change and finding ways to overcome the resistance. Contemporary approaches to change aim at creating visions and desired futures, gaining political support for them and managing the transition ... towards them."

(Mitchell & Young 2001:10)

This contemporary, visionary approach is consistent with what we are arguing in *Working from Strengths* (Waterhouse & Virgona 2008). The simple text provides examples of strength-based practice which we identified through engagement with adult literacy practitioners and colleagues working in the community services sector.

Many of the strength-based practice 'tools' are conceptual and linguistic. They encourage practitioners and learners/clients to think more consciously and critically about their perspective or point of view. They provide supports for engaging difficult questions and exploring personal meanings and aspirations. 'The Scale' is another example.

This 'scale' is metaphorical, a conversational device rather than a physical instrument. For example, we might ask: 'How important is it for you to learn to read and write? On a ten-point scale, if one means it doesn't matter that much and ten means it is one of the most important things in your life, where would you stand?'

Or such a question could be framed around other objectives: 'How important is it for you to complete this apprenticeship? Or to be a hairdresser? Or to succeed in this job?' Or we might use the scale to explore a learner's perceptions of his or her own journey: 'OK, let's imagine a scale from one to ten. One represents where your reading and spelling were 12 months ago and ten is where you want to finish up. Where would you place yourself on the scale now?'

Offering the scale gives a learner a way to frame and quantify an answer to such a question. We might then ask, 'What do you think it would take to move up another

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Adult numeracy provision and practice in England – a challenge bigger than the sum of its parts

Since **Noyona Chanda** has worked as an adult numeracy specialist at LLU+ (formerly the Language & Literacy Unit), London South Bank University, LLU+ is the UK's largest specialist professional development training and consultancy organisation in the field of adult literacy, numeracy, ESOL and other related disciplines. In 2003, after many years of championing the corner for adult numeracy, LLU+ was funded to set up the Adult Numeracy Professional Development Resource Centre – still the only one of its kind in England. Noyona now heads up a team of 6 numeracy specialists who are engaged in the important work of building capacity in the adult numeracy professional workforce, and developing innovative approaches to improving adults' numeracy. Noyona's current projects include research into adult numeracy for the National Audit Office, numeracy co-ordination across a national quality improvement programme, capacity building within the offender learning sector and managing the revision of the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula. Noyona was a keynote speaker at the 2008 ACAL conference.

Like the Force, the challenge of improving the "numerateness" of the workforce—and potential workforce—has been with us for some time now. The story of how, as a nation, we hate and are anxious about maths, and the need to be somehow better at it, has itself become the stuff of legend. If we're not careful, we may so enjoy the legend that we end up not fixing the problem at all, so the story can run and run! How does that compare with the situation in Australia?

The challenges and issues that occupy our collective minds now are no different from those which were reviewed in the enquiry into school mathematics teaching more than 25 years ago. In 1982, the Cockcroft Report¹ pronounced on its enquiry into the teaching of mathematics in schools in the UK with particular regard to the mathematics required in further and higher education, employment and adult life generally.

The report included some key recommendations for school maths teaching:

1. a differentiated curriculum for learners

"mathematics courses must be matched both in level and pace to the needs of pupils; and therefore that a 'differentiated curriculum' must be provided so that pupils will be enabled to develop to the full their mathematical skill and understanding, a positive attitude towards mathematics, and confidence in making use of it"

2. increased qualified teacher capacity

"... it is essential to improve the overall quality of the mathematics teaching force. This means that active efforts must be made to attract better qualified mathematicians into the teaching profession, to retain those mathematics teachers who are well qualified and effective, and to provide increased levels of in-service support and training."

3. teacher strategies for more effective learning

"computational skills should be related to practical situations and applied to problems. Mathematics teaching for pupils of all ages should include exposition, discussion, appropriate practical work, problem solving, investigation, consolidation and practice, as well as mental and oral work."

4. structures and resources to support the maths teacher

Those who teach mathematics require the support of effective advisory services as well as opportunities for in-service training of various kinds; they also need suitable facilities and equipment in their schools.

In 1999, the working group on post-school basic skills chaired by Sir Claus Moser² proposed a national strategy for adult basic skills which included similar development strands: curriculum (at a range of levels), teacher training to increase capacity, improved quality of teaching and a national Strategy Unit to co-ordinate the implementation of structural and resource support to make it all happen. The Government strategy implemented in response to the Moser report recommendations is titled *Skills for Life – the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*³

And here we are in 2009, still highlighting the same issues, particularly for numeracy. The recent House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report⁴ found that

"The Department has made far less progress in strengthening numeracy skills than literacy skills and still has an enormous amount to do to raise the skills of those with poor numeracy skills to a competent level.... [this situation] is not helped by the low number of numeracy teachers available There are fewer numeracy teachers (under 6,100) than literacy teachers (over 9,300)"

The report recommends

"In developing its numeracy plan, it should focus on how to encourage greater participation, and how approaches to teaching can better meet the needs of those who do not respond to traditional methods of learning."

Reflecting on 30 years of working in the field of adult numeracy in the UK through both Conservative as well as Labour Governments, I can see that the scenario is unlikely to change in the near future. The vision of school leavers achieving the maths they need for further and higher education, employment and adult life generally (as the Cockcroft report enquired into) is still an aspiration. ▶

Current debates in the field of adult numeracy in the UK include the following:

- What is numeracy? Is it the same as, or different from mathematics?
- Does learning mathematics automatically make you numerate? And does being numerate mean that you can apply number skills in a range of life and work contexts?
- What should an adult numeracy curriculum include?
- What are effective approaches to developing adults' numeracy skills?
- Is assessment in adult numeracy helpful or not in the pursuit of "numerateness"?
- How do learners best acquire / improve their numeracy – in discrete provision or when maths is "embedded" in a context of interest or need?

Perhaps the biggest challenge that requires a resolution is the lack of demand. Not only in the UK but across the world, children and adults find maths difficult, meaningless, dull and boring, engendering feelings of anxiety and hate. In the UK there have been at least two national numeracy campaigns in the last 10 years, with short term increases in demand, but no long-term reversal of the negative attitudes towards maths. As long as children continue to be turned off from maths at school, the post-school sector will have to respond with remediation action. And in the adult learning sector, this includes trying to counter the negativity about maths which parents may well be passing down to their children—often without realising it's happening!

A key feature of responsive action is the approaches to teaching which offer an alternative to conventional schoolroom practice. Such approaches build on theories of adult learning and learning styles theory, offering innovative strategies and resources to motivate and engage hard-

to-reach learners. National initiatives such as Math4Life⁵ have made inroads into changing teachers' as well as learners' approaches to mathematics learning at all levels, encouraging thinking skills development and collaborative problem-solving. Other national initiatives such as the Skills for Life Improvement Programme⁶ are engaged in regional and national workforce development to build numeracy teacher and teacher trainer capacity through flexible models of training and related resources.

Now, the current climate of global and colossal financial mismanagement may give us a completely new solution to the issue of adult numeracy supply and demand—maths-rich ex-financial sector workers could be enticed into teaching, and the population at large may feel the urgent need to improve their numeracy skills, not necessarily to improve their job prospects but just so they can understand the world of personal and corporate finance for themselves, to be able to make informed choices and decisions and be alert to sharp practices. And they may want to tell their children the same cautionary tale—better to understand the maths for yourself before someone else make a mess of it for you!

ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Cockcroft Report (1982) Mathematics counts - Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the teaching of mathematics in schools under the chairmanship of Dr WH Cockcroft* London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1982
- 2 *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A Fresh Start, the report of a working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser* London DfEE 1999
- 3 *Skills for Life – the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* London DfEE 2001
- 4 *Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy* The Stationery Office Ltd 1/2009 413527 19585
- 5 www.ncetm.org.uk/maths4life
- 6 www.sflip.org.uk

Call for papers now open for 2009 ACAL conference

From Strength to Strength October 2-3 2009

Pre conference Forum Thursday October 1
At the Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Western Australia

The Call for Papers is now open for the 2009 ACAL conference to be held in Fremantle, Western Australia. We invite ACAL members and friends to assist in identifying the presenters who can best unpack the theme From Strength to Strength. Do you know someone who has expertise in harnessing adult learner's strengths? If so, invite them to respond to the Call for Papers.

In choosing the **From Strength to Strength** theme, we encourage presenters and delegates to focus on how we can utilise a learner's current talents and capacities, whether they be linguistic competence in dialects and languages, a practical problem-solving orientation, interactive social strengths that build strong communities and families, or traditional knowledge that is part of our world's heritage. Innovations, adaptations

and accommodations are critical if we are to cope with modern realities and the ever-increasing pace of change.

Three sub-themes have been identified as the core of the program:

- Language diversity, educational outcomes and literacy
- Building on our strengths
- Literacy, equity, justice and human rights

We intend to provide a springboard from which interested people might make a way to ensure that the Productivity Agenda will encompass the things which create real value in our society.

Western Australia is a glorious place to visit in springtime. To register your interest or submit a call for papers go to www.waalc.org.au/09conf/

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Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory: a brief summary of some issues

Dr Brian Devlin is Associate Professor, Bilingual Education & Applied Linguistics in the School of Education at Charles Darwin University. He was adopted into the Yolngu kinship structure in 1979 as Galkila, skin name Gutjuk, honorary son of Manduwuy Yunupingu's father. He was teacher-linguist at Yirrkala when its bilingual program was accredited then principal at Shepherdson College during the accreditation of its bilingual program as well. He has visited many schools with bilingual programs, sometimes as a member of a review panel. While strongly supporting the right of indigenous communities to include local, vernacular content in the curriculum, in their own languages, he is keen to see more opportunities for young people to take part in leadership forums, international exchanges and parliamentary conventions, here and overseas

"I knew English could open up a world for me. But for me to understand English, I had to go back to my own language, to really understand the intellectual language."

And this, at its heart, is the bilingual argument.

(Djiniyini Gondarra, quoted in Toohey, 2009)

Just as education experts in the 1960s had differing views about the merits of bilingual education, people today still take up opposing positions regarding the language of instruction to be used in primary education programs at remote Indigenous schools in the Northern Territory. For example, 45 years ago Professor Betty Watts and Jim Gallacher conceded that while the bilingual approach would have been ideal, it was just not feasible to implement in the NT (Watts and Gallacher, 1964, p. 7, cited in Devlin & Harris, 1999) whereas Joy Hinslow-Harris argued convincingly that bilingual programs could work if schools employed team-teaching arrangements using trained Indigenous teachers (Kinslow-Harris, 1969). Shortly after being elected in 1972 the Whitlam Government arranged for bilingual programs to start in Angurugu, Areyonga, Hermannsburg, Mililingimbi and Waruwi the following year. It was evidently thought that commonwealth funding and community support would be sufficient to secure their future.

From the outset the bilingual approach to schooling in the NT was justified on the grounds that it was an aid to students' learning. The *Bilingual Handbook* pointed out that the use of a student's first language in a well-organised, well-resourced bilingual program could therefore yield psychological, cultural, social and educational benefits.

As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner explained in his address late last year, "Bilingual schools instruct students in the mother tongue in early years of schooling. They assist students to establish their first literacies in their Indigenous languages while progressively transferring the learning skills and literacies to English" (Calma, 2008).

From 1974 onwards bilingual programs commenced at many schools in remote communities; for example, to name just a few, Shepherdson College (1974), Murrupurtiyanuwu/St Therese's (1974), Yirrkala (1974), Yuendumu (1974), and Lajamanu (1982). In 1990 the NT Department of Education introduced accreditation procedures to evaluate the performance of each bilingual school program using the eight official aims of bilingual education as a

yardstick. A reference group of similar schools was used for comparative purposes to ensure that the programs were being conducted effectively. "Participating schools were told of the benefits that accreditation would confer; namely, official recognition and a permanent allocation of additional resources" (Devlin, 1995). What this exercise generally found was that schools with bilingual programs were performing as well as or better than the comparison schools, although the differences were generally not statistically significant. What the evaluators also discovered was evidence of strong local backing; for example, "On their visits to St Therese's school in 1981 the accreditation team found that there was unanimous staff and community support for the program". Following the Collins Review (NTDE, 1999) the term 'bilingual' was generally dropped in favour of 'two way education program'. By 2008 there were nine schools in the NT with two-way programs.

During the consolidation phase of bilingual education in the NT (1978–1986) there were typically six head office staff guiding the programs. By 1986 there were two, from the 1990s until 2008 there was one person and now there is no one.

On October 14, 2008, without any consultation or forewarning, the NT Minister for Education and Training imposed a new requirement that "...the first four hours of education in all Northern Territory schools will be conducted in English". Although this rule was to be system-wide in its application, its real target was remote Indigenous schools with two-way education programs, for the specific aim of this new measure was "to improve attendance rates and lift the literacy and numeracy results" in those schools (NTG, 2008).

As one would expect, this abrupt change of direction did not occur in isolation. The new decree had been preceded by the forced resignation of the head of the Department of Education and Training the previous week (Adlam, 2008), publication of a scathing report by the NTER Review Board (AG, 2008), which found that "2000 children of school age were not enrolled", and the release of national test results (NAP, 2008) showing that at some levels on some tests 70 to 80 per cent of the remote indigenous school children in the NT were failing to achieve literacy and numeracy benchmarks. Also relevant to the decision was the planned introduction of national curricula, since on November 16, 2008 the Education Minister said that "the

Territory Government was forced to cut teaching hours in indigenous languages because of the coming national curriculum (Langford, 2008).

The Minister's announcement, in other words, was justified with respect to the perceived crisis in the NT and recent national developments (a new testing regime, an imminent national curriculum). Why not applaud it then as an example of sensible and practical decision-making and accept that changed times require a move away from the status quo? The difficulty with this approach is that, however conveniently expedient this argument might be, it simply glosses over several very important considerations. For convenience five of these are briefly enumerated below.

1. The Ministerial decree overrides recent regional partnership agreements.

After years of negotiation the Government signed some regional partnership agreements in 2008. These included some specific promises; for example, the regional partnership agreement signed by community representatives at Yirrkala had pledged support for the staircase model of bilingual education. Why undo all of that patient negotiation by issuing a one-size-fits-all decree, thereby abrogating the agreement and making it difficult for remote Indigenous staff to believe that the Government is acting in good faith? It just doesn't seem logical. Unlike the NT Catholic Education Office, which agreed in 2008 to a policy of guiding schools in their choice of language programs (CEO, 2008), the NT Government has arbitrarily resorted to compulsion. Angered by this change of tack several Yolngu educators came to Darwin at their own expense to meet with the Minister on February 4.

2. Rules relating to the language of instruction are more easily understood and implemented when they are supported by a policy framework.

As far as the remote Indigenous schools are concerned the NT Department of Education and Training is operating in a policy vacuum. It does not have a language policy. Instead of operating from a flexible, agreed position that has been arrived at through consultation and consensus, it is forced to impose the Minister's blanket rule, "four hours of English in the morning", without any clear idea of how this will work. To placate those who have spoken out, various temporary arrangements are being put in place in some schools.

3. Policy decisions need to be informed by sound evidence.

On November 26 2008 the Minister tabled a document in the legislative assembly purporting to show that students in schools in bilingual programs were not achieving as well as their peers in comparable bilingual schools (MFE, 2008). The document showed no such thing; in fact it concealed half of the data and what it did include was too selective, invalid and unreliable to be taken seriously. My criticisms of this poor quality data document have received a positive response from NT DET and I am hoping that a more accurate comparison of the data will be arranged over the next few months. The government has yet to produce the data which justifies the claim that "Bilingual schools are not performing as well as their (sic) non-bilingual schools across the standard measures of school performance" (MFE, 2008).

Incongruously, the Minister also advised the legislative assembly on November 27, 2008 that "except for an anomalous result for numeracy of Year 9, the outcomes are, at best, no better at bilingual schools than they are at so-called English only schools". The lack of consistency is hard to understand.

4. The announcement has been followed by disingenuous assurances that the Government is not dismantling bilingual education, even though it clearly is.

On November 27 the Minister assured the Legislative Assembly of her determination to "fund and promote, for the long term, the most effective possible Aboriginal language courses to take place in as many hours as possible in the afternoon" (LANT, 2008). Even if we accept at face value the Minister's assurance of a "sincere and wholehearted commitment to maintaining and strengthening regional Aboriginal languages" and that schools would be encouraged to run structured and rigorous "Aboriginal language classes for as many hours in the afternoon as the students and staff are willing to hold them" (LANT, 2008), the implied reasoning still seems to be that since the children are more alert, motivated, and ready to learn in the morning that is the right time to immerse them in English, whereas the non-peak learning time should be reserved for the vernacular, the children's first language. It's as if the mornings are too precious to be wasted by letting students learn in their first language.

5. The Government's strategy has divided people who should be working together with a sense of common cause, and distracts attention away from serious issues such as poor attendance.

Since less than 20 per cent of students at remote rural schools are in two-way education programs, it is inappropriate and unfair to focus on them as if they are the main reason for the NT's poor showing on national test scores. Raising this as an issue at this time is just a red herring. The effect of this divide-and-conquer approach is to open up rifts between people who should be working together with a sense of common cause. Remote schools generally, regardless of program type, need much more support and attention if the Government is serious about improving student learning outcomes, lifting rates of attendance and increasing the number of Indigenous people trained to work as linguists and educators.

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Continued on page 14 ►

A Reason to Go There

Geoff Pearson is a workplace language and literacy trainer and consultant and is Director of his own Perth-based RTO, Agenda Communications. He has 30 years experience both in Australia and overseas working as an ESL teacher, researcher, training materials developer and training program designer. In 2005/6, Geoff was asked to provide reading and writing skills training to the Deaf members of staff at the WA Deaf Society using an Auslan interpreter. This product – “The Grammar Disc – Pah!” – is a result of that experience.

Feature

Imagine if you had to teach reading and writing skills in English without ever making any reference at any point to any part of the sound system. It's the stuff disturbing dreams are made of.

Where would you start? Why would you ever bother?

When your learners are all profoundly Deaf, you have little choice. However, once you accept the challenges of such an operating environment, it can lead to some surprising changes in methodology – changes that might also prove useful for the hearing learner.

The “Pah!” in the title is an Auslan expression meaning “At last!” and expresses how long Deaf Australians have had to wait for a resource that finally focuses on their needs when it comes to learning the rules of English grammar. It perhaps also appropriately expresses how long the language and literacy field has waited for an e-learning resource that explicitly covers the basics of grammar in a visually engaging and interactive style.

The resource contains 16 lessons and two review lessons and makes absolutely no reference to the sound system as it takes users through the rules governing:

- all the major word groups (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, determiners and conjunctions),
- five basic sentence patterns, and
- seven of the language's tenses.

In the process, the lessons link each of the grammatical areas explored into eight practical, work-related reading and writing skills. These include:

- reading and writing instructions and polite requests
- reading workplace signs
- writing short messages
- writing progress reports
- writing resumes
- writing accident reports and
- discussing future plans online in writing.

All instruction is conveyed on-screen in Auslan by two instructors. Captions and professional voiceover are also provided as options, so that any combination of the three instruction modes is possible at all times.



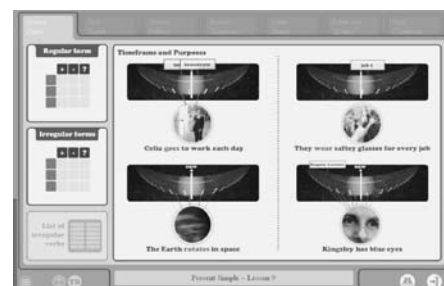
The Grammar Disc – Pah! is a DVD-Rom-based, language-learning resource due for release in April this year.

Because the resource's primary target group is Deaf adults, all of the material is presented in a highly visual manner. This includes:

- workplace video footage and stills photographs from 11 Australian workplaces across a broad range of industries;
- a range of high-quality computer-generated graphics, and
- light-hearted video and stop-motion animation clips with two actors (These are used amongst other things to encapsulate visually such tricky-to-teach language points as abstract nouns, articles, static verbs, and countable and uncountable nouns).

Each lesson follows a similar pattern of presenting a series of language points using the above tools. This is followed by a review of the major language and literacy points before leading into a practice component, where users are invited to complete a series of interactive exercises related to the lesson.

Many of the exercises are game-like in nature, from “beat-the-clock” item-clicking, to memory games, seek-and-click, sentence completion, gap-fill, multiple-choice questions and simulated onscreen chatting and other workplace activities. Many of the exercises also use video clips and photographs as memory joggers and feedback mechanisms. Whenever necessary, there is a “Help” button, and there is always encouraging feedback for every answer.



The resource also contains three in-program and post-program reference tools:

1. A new sign and grammar term **Glossary**. The program required the development of more than 60 new signs for the Deaf, for all the grammar terms used in the resource. The Glossary presents all the new signs linked to the grammar terms and definitions. This can be used for reference at any point.
2. A **Structure Bar Reference**. From Lesson 3 onwards, the program teaches the basic sentence patterns and structure of English. To support this, the Structure Bar was developed to enable the Deaf to “see” the structure and patterns of the sentences presented. This tool uses colour-coding and a variety of symbols on a bar that sits directly below sample sentences. This indicates the order of words, the roles of different words in the sentence and the types of words performing each task. Any of the structure bars can be clicked on at any point and the Structure Bar Reference will appear. This is where the user can clarify their understanding of any of the sentence elements.
3. A **Tense Reference**. *The Grammar Disc – Pah!* takes the ESL teacher’s traditional tool of the “timeline with the arrow head at each end” and turns it into a 3D moving graphic called the TimeTube. Against this, all the tenses are explained using video clips and extra graphics.

This is used in the lessons as the main purposes of each tense are taught. However, the Tense Reference also allows the user (and the ESL teacher) to compare the form and usage of different tenses at the click of a button.

When it was first started, *The Grammar Disc – Pah!* was primarily intended to be a learning tool for Deaf adults. However, the two years of development by a 42-strong team of educators, Deaf consultants, instructional designers, technologists, artists and graphic designers has produced a resource which has the potential to offer a great deal to more mainstream target groups.

It is interesting to consider that being forced to address the needs of particular learners can be the catalyst to change the way we think about our teaching; change that also has the potential to improve the way we teach all learners.

The Grammar Disc – Pah! Was funded by the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program through DEEWR and developed by Agenda Communication Pty Ltd, WestOne Services, Josie Hodgetts and staff from the WA Deaf Society.

A website is under construction and will be online to coincide with the resource’s release in April 2009. In the meantime, further enquiries should be directed to Geoff on (08) 9330 8989. ■

The National Symposium on Assessing English as an Additional Language/Dialect in the Australian Context

On 20-21 February this year, the School of Education at the University of NSW hosted a national symposium which brought together Australian researchers, educators, assessment experts and policy makers around the theme of assessing speakers of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). Invited participants were drawn from a range of educational settings including schools, the New Arrivals Program, higher education, English Language Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), English programs for adult migrants (the Adult Migrant English Program, and the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program) and the Vocational Education and Training sector.

The symposium was co-convened by Chris Davison and Helen Moore (UNSW) and co-sponsored by the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA), the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL). ACAL is committed to working collaboratively with other professional organisations to address cross sectoral language and literacy issues, and was delighted to have this opportunity to join ACTA and ALAA in supporting this initiative.

The first day consisted of presentations on current issues in EAL/D assessment, locating these first in their historical and wider policy contexts, then moving to explore specific issues, and finally seeking to draw out commonalities and differences in regard to assessing different EAL/D learner groups. ACAL was represented by its Vice President, Kita Scott, who gave a presentation on assessment in the LLNP.

On the second day, different groups worked to develop

statements and proposals that can be used in particular policy contexts and across a range of domains. A number of issues emerged. One was the diversity of EAL/D learners (Indigenous, migrant, refugee, international; adults and children), their language backgrounds (traditional Aboriginal and other languages, Indigenous Creoles, non-standard varieties of Australian English, and African and Indian-sub-continent varieties of English), and their previous education and literacy learning.

A key question in both school and adult sectors was how well curriculum frameworks and outcomes statements reflect the complexities of language learning in relation to basic conceptual development, learning to think in English, and developing literacy skills. It was widely agreed that, on the one hand, existing assessment and reporting frameworks oversimplify and distort what is actually entailed in EAL/D learners’ English development and, on the other hand, create huge complexities and demands on practising teachers. In regard to adult Indigenous, migrant and refugee students, the disconnect between the CSWE and the NRS frameworks and the Australian Qualifications Framework emerged as a major concern, depriving these students of the support they need after these programs to pursue relevant learning pathways.

The symposium program, participants, presentations and workshop recommendations will be posted on the UNSW School of Education website <<http://education.arts.unsw.edu.au>>. The easiest way to locate this is to google “national symposium on assessing English as an additional language”. ■

Financial Literacy for Female Prisoners – Report on a Pilot Project

Chris Schluter works for Career Employment Australia. She has been implementing and researching literacy/numeracy programs in the VET sector for the past 13 years. For the past 7 years her focus has been on co-ordinating programs in prisons, research and designing best practice methodologies for corrective services. She is passionate about the delivery of education to all particularly those unable to access programs through traditional delivery modes – people isolated in our community. Her favorite saying is “Bloom where you are planted” through the vehicle of education. She holds a Master of Education (International Education).

Two community organisations and the Queensland government through Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) joined together for this project. Soroptimist International is a worldwide organisation committed to advancing the status of women and human rights for all. The Brisbane branch has been working for the past 11 years with women in two female prisons—the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC) and the Helana Jones Correctional Centre (HJCC). Career Employment Australia Inc. (CEA) is an innovative community-based not-for-profit organisation that has been assisting offenders and ex-offenders for over seven years and other disadvantaged people for 27 years. Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) has been conducting VET programs since 1995 and has been implementing advanced rehabilitation programs for prisoners. Queensland was the first state in Australia to introduce mass literacy and numeracy screening of male prisoners on remand.

Aim of the Project

The project was designed to provide incarcerated women with the financial literacy skills necessary to be successful in their transition from prison to the community. For CEA, financial literacy is about enabling people to make informed and confident decisions regarding all aspects of their budgeting, spending, saving and their use of financial products and services, from everyday banking through to borrowing, investing and planning for the future.

Rationale

Poverty is a major dilemma for female prisoners in Queensland. According to a Sisters Inside report:

“Poverty is an issue that directly affects many women in prison. One study showed that 80% of women prisoners had debts averaging \$A 3,417 (Stringer, 2001). Hand in hand with poverty come low levels of literacy, education and employment. As a result of poverty, drug and alcohol problems and mental illness, many women have dubious housing arrangements before incarceration, living on the streets, in caravan parks, in boarding houses or in situations of domestic violence. The increase of debts during incarceration exaggerates this unstable living environment.” (p2)

Report on Women and Housing in Queensland accessed 6/2/08 on www.sistersinside.com.au/media/housing.doc

Farrell et al (2001) note that almost half of female prisoners had been unemployed prior to their incarceration and that

the financial status of their families worsened during their custodial period. The link between poor financial literacy and poverty has been well documented (Hartley & Horne, 2005). A number of Australian studies suggest that the lowest levels of financial literacy were found amongst the people with the lowest levels of education (Year 10 or less) with a gross income of less than \$20,000 per year with savings of less than \$5,000.

Prisoners identified money management as a preferred program at Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (Farrell et al, 2001). 89.9% of the female prison population had been convicted of drug-related offences which were related to monetary issues.

“I was asking for a money management program (at Helana Jones Correctional Centre), because I said the reasons were.....you’ve got the girlslike 89.9% of women in prison today have got drug-related crimes which to me always means money” (Farrell et al, 2001, p16)

Financial programs have, to date, not been part of the formal education programs at BWCC or HJCC. This has been due to budget restraints. Elements of financial literacy however have been incorporated into intervention programs such as “Transitions: Release Preparation Program”. These programs are targeted at the individual needs of the prisoner. QCS embraced the financial literacy pilot as the benefits were clear for the prisoners and would aid pre-release programs.

A financial management program conducted at Parramatta Transitional Centre had the aim of providing female offenders with realistic financial skills and expectations upon release, particularly for long-term offenders (Lynch, 2000). The program included the following topics:

- opening and operating a bank account under strict financial protocols
- using an ATM
- developing and adhering to budgets including the realistic cost of rent, food, electricity, gas, telephone rental, vehicle maintenance, clothing etc
- the process of saving money.

The benefits of this program were that prisoners established bank accounts and long-term prisoners became accustomed to using ATMs and standing in queues—something which was foreign to many of them.

In 2006, CEA developed a contextualised unit as part of the Course in Vocational Literacy (39180QLD) the curriculum ►

currently taught in Queensland Corrections. This unit focussed on:

- developing a budget
- completing loan applications
- direct debit
- rental and credit card forms
- understanding “Interest-Free Deals”
- critically analysing pawnbroker loans.

The unit is 20 nominal hours and upon successful completion students receive a nationally recognised Statement of Attainment and a separate testimony stating what the program covered. The following topics from *Australian Government Financial Literacy Competency Standards (2006)* were also included:

- develop and use a savings plan
- develop understanding of debt and consumer credit
- facilitate customer understanding of personal financial statements.

The Pilot Project

One course was conducted at the BWCC for three hours a week for seven weeks. BWCC is a reception, assessment and placement centre that has secure and residential prisoners. Another course was delivered at the HJCC for seven hours a day for three consecutive days. HJCC accommodates low-risk female prisoners in home style quarters. Both prisons have accommodation facilities which allow for prisoners to have their children reside with them in custody.

At the BWCC almost half the women were aged between 26 – 30 years, while at HJCC 90% were aged between 41 – 50 years. Literacy and numeracy levels were measured using the National Reporting System (NRS). At BWCC 45% were at NRS 2 or below for numeracy while at HJCC 35% were at this level.

The program at BWCC achieved a 55% pass rate: 11 students commenced the course and six completed. Two students were withdrawn due to release from court. Two further students withdrew on the basis that the course was not what they expected. Another student was withdrawn as her accommodation changed. At HJCC there was a 100% pass rate possibly because the course was conducted over three days compared to seven weeks duration at BWCC.

Feedback

Student feedback from the course was positive. The most useful aspects of the course for the students were identified as:

- preparing a budget and using a budget planner
- setting short and long-term financial goals
- types of debt – particularly interest-free loans and pawnbroker loans

Several offenders reported being disappointed at not being able to participate in the course and enquired as to when another course would be offered.

Students further recommended that future courses include:

- more information on the use of credit cards
- credit card costs and debt
- fast money loans: Pawnbroker loans, Cash loans, Instant Cash Advance loans, Short term cash advances etc.

Students suggested that prior to future courses, prospective students undertake a self-paced learning guide on budgeting. They felt this would better prepare them for the more detailed information given in the course. At HJCC, where approx 50% of the students were in for fraud related offences, custodial staff felt that this course was an important part of the prisoners' rehabilitation plan.

Program Future

This project set out to educate female prisoners on basic financial literacy principles and to aid in the breaking of the poverty cycle. Given that over 77% of the crimes committed by the women on the courses might be attributable to financial issues (fraud, theft, break and enter, drug/possession) then the program would appear to have been appropriately targetted. All stakeholders suggested that the program had achieved its outcomes. QCS, CEA and Soroptimists are convinced that the program should become part of the Prisoner Intervention Programs in Queensland Corrective Services and would like to continue the model of a partnership. Despite the many benefits of this program—to prisoners, their families and to society as a whole—there is no secure funding to ensure its future delivery.

We are now seeking sponsorship to develop a student workbook as advised by our original course participants and we need to identify corporate or government funding to support on-going delivery of what was a very successful program. ■

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ACAL promotes co-operation among interested organisations and individuals, both government and non-government, by undertaking and encouraging appropriate study, research and action.

Back issues are available from the ACAL website: www.acal.edu.au

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2009 VALBEC conference

Registrations are now open for
***Navigating Laneways: finding new ways
to work in adult literacy, language and
numeracy***

2009 VALBEC conference

Friday 8 May, 9.00- 4.30pm

Pre conference workshops

Thursday 7 May, 3- 5.30pm

**At William Angliss Centre, La Trobe St
Melbourne.**

The conference title reflects the many complexities and constraints that practitioners find themselves steering through and around in a changing, and increasingly regulated, education and policy environment. The signposts and maps of the past that have provided direction to the teaching profession and the wider ACE and adult education fields have been revised and rewritten so that new ways of working are required. The Australian Core Skills Framework, the re-accredited CGEA and the policy decisions rolling out of the Securing Jobs for your future – skills for Victoria reforms have impacted on teaching and learning and program provision.

The conference program will provide an opportunity for issues and concerns to be discussed and navigated through for greater knowledge and understanding.

A focus on the practical and applied ways of teaching and enhancing learning through stimulating workshop activities will ensure participants embark on spirited professional conversations and interactions beyond the day. The ongoing development of a skilled workforce is critical in the current environment so that affirming good practice and finding new ways of working are fundamental to the aims of the conference.

The 2009 VALBEC conference will again provide an opportunity for practitioners to engage in professional conversations and be inspired and energized in a collegial environment. Practitioners will be driven to explore new ideas and effective approaches to deal with changing student cohorts, workplace conditions, accredited curricula and vocational pathways.

See the VALBEC conference website for program details
Registrations open soon.

*For further information contact Don MacDowall, Conference
organiser or Lynne Matheson, Conference convenor.*

Email conf@valbec.org.au

Phone 03 9546 6892

VALBEC, Box 861, Springvale South VIC 3172 ■

COAG decision on adult literacy funding – a Commonwealth Government perspective

***Jen Coughran is the Director of the Adult
Literacy Section at the Department of
Education, Employment and Workplace
Relations (DEEWR).***

The adult literacy landscape has shifted significantly in recent years. A growing recognition by both government and industry that English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) are critical foundations for education, training, employment and community participation; and the advent of the Australian Government's Social Inclusion policy agenda, have led to a greater focus on LLN.

This has been reflected in the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG's) participation and productivity policy agenda which identifies foundation skills, and explicitly LLN, as central to skills and workforce development. COAG has committed to work towards the outcome the working age population has gaps in foundation skills reduced to enable effective educational, labour market and social participation. COAG's policy document is a high level recognition of the critical role of LLN, and determination to improve Australia's LLN performance by 2020. This new focus on LLN has also been evident in:

- the treatment of workforce LLN issues in the Australian Industry Group report, *Skilling the Existing Workforce*1e;

- the funding allocated to both the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program and Workplace English, Language and Literacy (WELL) Program for additional training places for Indigenous people as part of the Northern Territory Intervention;
- the new Employment Services will include a new outcome payment for LLN training conducted in remote areas from 1 July 2009;
- the additional WELL places available from 1 July 2009 for Indigenous Employment Program participants; and
- the Australian Government investment in the development, publication and roll-out of the Australian Core Skills Framework.

There has been a perception in some quarters that the COAG decision to roll the \$1.5million Adult Literacy National Project (ALNP) allocation into the base of state/territory funding from 1 January 2009 indicates a reduction in support for adult LLN, particularly at the national level. The potential loss of the Reading Writing Hotline, professional development activities conducted by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, Innovative Projects and other activities previously funded under the ALNP has caused significant stakeholder concern.

These funds have not been lost rather they now sit with state and territory governments who have flexibility, under the new National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development, to determine how best to allocate them. Given the new arrangements and the potentially imminent closure of the Hotline, the Australian Government has made an interim commitment of \$170,000 to allow the Hotline to continue operating while decisions about its future are made at state level. ■

News snippets

No national spotlight on adult literacy?

◀ Continued from page 2

move beyond the human capital paradigm and consider both other purposes and alternative means for developing the educational skills of adults.

Countries that performed more successfully than Australia in the 2006 *Adult Literacy and Life Skills* survey developed the educational skills of their adult populations by adopting some or all of the following:

- Identified policy goals
- Dedicated funding
- Focus on staff skills
- Dedicated research facility.

ACAL calls for a new national approach to the development of the educational skills of our adult population that retains the infrastructure that already exists in the vocational training sector and establishes other initiatives and programs that support the intellectual, creative, and social aspirations of individuals and their communities. We anticipate that a fully articulated strategy for adult education can be developed as major plank of the national Social Inclusion Agenda, but as yet, social inclusion goals are not appearing in the COAG agenda. ■

Visioning Alternatives: Strength-based practice, plasticity and potential in ALBE

◀ Continued from page 4

point on the scale? What would you need to do?' This question will reveal the next step, although we must always be mindful of a person's need to control their own destiny. As a colleague of mine commented on people's resistance to change; 'It's not that we don't want to change, it's just that we don't want to *be changed* by others.'

The intention in strength-based practice is for the person to go away with a plan of what *they* will do to create change in their circumstances. The agency for change is not handed over to the professional/practitioner. Development is the responsibility of the individual, the client – the learner.

However as strength-based practitioners we can help to imagine possibilities, believe that they are possible and identify the steps which need to be taken to make them real. ■

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Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory: a brief summary of some issues

This is an important time to become an advocate for adult literacy and numeracy.

How can you do this?

- 1 Get informed – subscribe to ACAL eNews; read about the latest COAG agreements and targets www.coag.gov.au ; get the data and the relevant statistics for your area from the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS) www.abs.gov.au
- 2 Join a literacy organisation – see the ACAL website www.acal.edu.au for information on the state-based literacy councils affiliated with ACAL
- 3 Write to, or visit, your MP – voice your concerns about what's happening in your area and the implications
- 4 Write to the Minister and Shadow Ministers of Education in your state
- 5 Write to the Federal Minister and Shadow Minister
- 6 Write to your local paper
- 7 Phone talkback radio
- 8 Encourage students to do the same

Federal MPs:

<http://apps.aec.gov.au/eseach/>
<http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/senators/>
<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/index.htm>

How to address an MP:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/Library/TUTORIAL/address.htm>

Lobbying guide & kit (AEU):

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Tafe/Lobkit.pdf>
<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Tafe/LobGuid.pdf>

Tips for visiting politicians can be found in the AEU Lobbying Guide

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Tafe/LobGuid.pdf>)

Dear Editor,

How very sad to be writing in this last edition of Literacy Link – a magazine that has informed and supported adult literacy and numeracy workers for more than thirty years, thanks to the commitment and vision of so many who have freely given their time and energy to keep it going.

It is very hard to fathom why this Labor government, with its admirable agenda for social inclusion, have redistributed the small amount of federal funding for the Adult Literacy National Project that provided such an important element of coordinated national focus for such a small investment.

With this gloomy news, it is tempting to think that adult literacy policy in Australia has failed. It is true that there has not been a specific named adult literacy (or numeracy) policy since the early 1990s. Australia's approach of embedding literacy learning in broader policy domains may have lessened the visibility of adult literacy learning in Australia, but it has arguably achieved wider engagement than would otherwise have been possible. Adult literacy and numeracy have been incorporated in broader policy settings, such as welfare to work and training reform. So, can adult literacy policy be said to be succeeding in Australia? What kinds of evidence would enable the answer 'yes'?

The list is long but should include:

- active engagement in literacy matters by professions other than teaching
- widespread employer support for literacy learning opportunities in workplaces and in work-time
- appropriate opportunities for learning in a range of contexts
- development of social capital
- a serious commitment to standards
- visible improvements and the visible reporting of them, enabling policy makers to allocate resources to enhance effective practice

- a trained, well-paid workforce
- a sustainable policy commitment.

As noted earlier, until the change of government in 1996, Australia was well on the way to meeting such conditions. A hiatus followed, and this led McKenna and Fitzpatrick in 2004 to renew the call for action and outline a framework necessary to achieve a coherent policy commitment to adult literacy and numeracy. The dimensions of this framework are:

- policy contexts and concepts - improving national leadership expanding research and development, encouraging need and performance analyses
- program development and delivery – developing diverse models of delivery, expanding resource development, encouraging innovation, widening referral and dissemination services
- regulatory frameworks, product development and quality assurance – refining evaluation models, promoting consistent reporting frameworks, exploring new funding models, deepening quality assurance systems
- issues for the teaching workforce – enhancing professionalism, developing adult learning contexts, improving certifications and building capacity (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

The need for a coordinated national strategy that explicitly spotlights on adult literacy and numeracy is as strong as ever. This is not the time to lose focus.

Dr Rosie Wickert

McKenna, R. and Fitzpatrick, L. (2004). Building Sustainable Adult Literacy Policy and Provision in Australia: A review of international policy and programs, Adelaide, National Centre for Vocational Education Research.



Message from the President

It is with great regret that I must let you know that, for the foreseeable future, there will be no more issues of Literacy Link. ACAL has been distributing, free of charge, around 1800 copies of Literacy Link to individuals and organisations all over Australia since 1998. Production and distribution costs were covered by grants from the Australian Government. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for their long-standing support for ACAL initiatives.

With the loss of the Adult Literacy National Project, DEEWR no longer has a fund from which to provide grants to ACAL. The national funding which they recently lost also paid for the Reading Writing Hotline which, at the time of writing, cannot be guaranteed a future because no on-going source of funding has yet been identified.

ACAL activities will not cease with the loss of Literacy Link. Most importantly the ACAL National Conference, which is not dependent on government funding, will certainly be held again this year. In 2009, the ACAL National Conference will be held in Western Australia. Details can be found at <http://www.waalc.org.au/09conf/>

The Call for Papers is now open and closes on 19 May.

For those of you who do not already know, ACAL is an organisation run by individual volunteers willing to take on executive roles, and supported by the network of state-based adult literacy councils, also run by volunteers. The

ACAL Committee, and our associates, prepare briefings and papers to advise the national government on matters that impact on adult basic education; we write letters and lobby politicians; and we organise events (with and without government funding). Our work is entirely reliant on the goodwill, time and effort of the committed individuals who volunteer for committee work and take an active role.

Unfortunately, like many other not-for profit organisations reliant on volunteers to do the work, ACAL is struggling to maintain a labour force. Fewer people are willing to volunteer for active committee work. This is in part because people are working longer hours in their paid jobs, and most ACAL Committee members also have an active role with their state councils. Another reason is that the adult literacy and numeracy workforce is ageing—so are the activists. We need more, and younger, ordinary members and more people to volunteer for active roles.

I would encourage you all to consider joining ACAL as an ordinary member. We need a larger pool of collaborators and supporters if we are to maintain or increase our effort to promote the cause of adult literacy and numeracy to all governments in Australia. You might also like to join your state adult literacy council—see below for details.

There has never been a better time to join your professional organisation and bring your voice and your energy to collective action!

Margaret McHugh

Register now to receive ACAL eNews at info@acal.edu.au

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