

# Get the job done early

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That nearly half of the adult population in Australia is not functionally literate for today's demands is certainly cause for concern. How can a country remain prosperous and deliver on productivity if one in two of its adult citizens cannot read and write at an acceptable level? Not only is this level of illiteracy a burden on the individuals themselves and on society (often in the form of welfare payments), but it poses a massive opportunity cost. This country is not big enough to have only half of its adult population contributing to its development.

That things were better in the past is always a tempting conclusion and one that should not necessarily be rapidly drawn. But something that has always struck me is that all of the older people I come in contact with seem to be able to read and write well-structured and grammatically correct sentences. What's more, those sentences are often written in a beautiful script. This seems to be the case irrespective of socio-economic background, and no matter how long these individuals had attended school. My father left school on his 14th birthday to become an apprentice surgical instrument maker in London. This was not by choice. He was an academically curious boy and probably scholastically gifted, but this held no sway with his father who sent all his sons "to the bench". This was the family trade. My mother left school at 15 to become a secretary, as many women in her generation did. Neither completed secondary school, yet both could read and write with a high level of proficiency. Similarly, my husband's family, who were poor by any standards of the day, are all highly literate and continue to be excellent writers.

I am not harking back to the past unnecessarily. But what the older people in my life have in common is that they all had primary schooling. They were taught to be literate (and numerate) when they were in primary school. There was no certainty that they would participate in many (if any) years of secondary schooling and so the job had to be done and dusted in those primary school years.

There is a lesson here for us. Just because we typically now have children and young people in school for 13 years does not mean that we should take too much time about making sure they are literate and numerate. There should still be some urgency around this. While we know we can teach older children to read, it takes a lot more effort and the lost opportunities for reading can never be recovered. The early years are the years when this instruction should take place. As we now know from neuroscience, the brain is highly receptive and plastic at this point, and this is the time when learning to read needs to occur. Our brains are not wired for reading which, as we know, is a relatively recent cultural invention. The window for ensuring that all children learn to read is not huge and we should keep this in mind when we plan for instructional priorities in the early years of schooling. If we can teach this essential skill to all children by the end of their first three years in school, we will have a different country in the future. What could be more important than ensuring that children have well-developed literacy skills to face the demands of the 21st century?

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