

A response to ‘A Fair Chance for All: breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage’ Interim Report September 2022

Early literacy as an advantage

Previous correspondence

In response to a webinar in April I suggested that early literacy was an indicator of relative advantage. I include the correspondence from that exchange to explain this response to the Interim Report. I note that the Report is pitched at a higher level so pursuing that specific theme is probably fruitless. Nonetheless experience with attempts to eliminate the Matthew Effect in writing and reading during the first three years of primary school provides a basis for reviewing the approach adopted by the Commission.

On 26 April 2022 I wrote to the Commission:

‘Subject: early literacy - speaking, writing and reading English

‘Message: I got an impression during a webinar that you have a thread related to English language literacy. Is there documentation related to that thread? I ask because the Shine Education Initiative that ran in Porirua and environs for a number of years from 2013 paid close attention to the productivity of literacy teaching in Years 1-3. That was a response to the belief that about 25% of children do not attain functional literacy from the current range of approaches used in NZ schools. The evidence-based conclusion from the Initiative was that that group of children could attain or exceed standard norms by adopting deliberately structured good teaching practice for as little as ten minutes per day, without compromising and probably enhancing the competence of others in the same class. We believe this type of fluency makes a considerable contribution to economic inclusion and choice of social roles.’

The Commission’s response

I received the following response from Bronwyn Bayne on the same day:

‘Thank you for your email and for catching our webinar. Yes, as mentioned in the webinar we are interested in the role of literacy and its links to social mobility and economic inclusion as part of our *Fair chance for all* inquiry.

‘We do not have any report or papers we have produced on this but are engaging with various advocates, educators and researchers on this issue. We are aware of the Shine Literacy Project, as well as other evidence-based literacy approaches being used in NZ schools (e.g. the Massey Early Literacy Project and the subsequent interest by schools and the Ministry of Education in explicit, systematic and cumulative phonics based

approaches to early literacy – often termed ‘structured literacy’). We welcome submissions on this issue. As you can see from the ToR the inquiry is focused on breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage, so a submission could focus on:

- How does poor literacy lead to people being trapped in persistent disadvantage – what is the pathway
- 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
- The incidence of poor literacy/reading difficulties in NZ (both amongst children and adults)
- What the drivers of poor literacy outcomes might be
- What is being done to improve this situation and what else needs to happen in NZ.’

These are important questions but, given that the Interim Report makes one cursory reference to literacy, they are probably not worth addressing in this response.

Relevance to the Interim Report

Power

With the indicator of early English language literacy in mind I want to support the contributions of Rob Campbell, Claire Achmad and Derek Gill on 25 October 2022¹. Following the points made by those speakers the literacy case is one where the ‘glass is $\frac{3}{4}$ full’. If it was ‘ $\frac{1}{2}$ full’ there would be considerable public pressure to improve the productivity of primary education because the relative advantage of an influential section of the electorate would be compromised. I suggest that as the disadvantaged proportion of the population falls the influence of that group also falls.

If common estimates are accurate the threshold of tolerance for functional illiteracy is between $\frac{1}{5}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$ of children and young people and most of those who do not achieve functional literacy have the potential to do so. At that level of performance gestures such as those identified in the Commission’s response are deemed to be sufficient to address the problem. I suggest this level of tolerance relates to the frequent references to power in the Interim Report. I note that Box 4.4 does include ‘power with’ (e.g. Amy Allen) which is an important factor maintaining the status quo in this instance.

Upstream issues and practices

The Upstream-Downstream framework (p.4) can be applied to this example. The phrase ‘evidence-based’ used above hides very well-defined differences between the three examples

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHWaugVWfwQ>

cited by the Commission at all levels in the framework. Perhaps one way of assessing the relative productivity of those and other examples is to reorient the list of activity directly related to outcomes to, in order, ‘practices, strategies, policies, resources’. I think that would be more consistent with the way relationships are discussed in the Interim Report. That reorientation would radically redefine what is regarded as ‘evidence’ of productive teaching and learning of early literacy.

Unfair distribution of opportunity

Presumably the final test of practice is whether the principle of mana āheinga has been applied fairly. As I understand it in this context mana āheinga refers to ‘competence, ability, opportunity, entitlement and function’ as contributors to ‘capability’² as it relates to firstly teaching and then learning. Perhaps this comes down to entitlement to opportunity. The variability in the sector, from teacher training to changing fashions and preferences, means that the system is not optimised to consistently provide that opportunity for children, particularly those relying on their school for their introduction to writing and reading.

Productivity and the public contribution

I support Finding 5.2. There would be value in an integrating narrative about shared and individual well-being that is intelligible to members of the public regardless of where we interact with the public sector.

In response to Q5.1 I emphasise the importance of the Tomorrow’s School Review. The framework recommended as a consequence of the Review is a very constructive response to this type of issue. However ‘being rolled out’ gives no indication of the extent to which implementation is achieving the objectives sought by the Commission. I suggest that a critical element in achieving sustainable levels of fairness for gaining early literacy is local and regional practice leadership based on sustainable peer networks³ of junior class teachers with access to examples of exemplary practice and supported by well developed assessment and reporting capability⁴. All the elements required are available although the overall level of teacher status, support and professional development is inconsistent.

‘Unlocking’ is apt but probably applies more directly to the implementation of the activities encompassed by Table 5.1. I believe that if those public contributions met their statutory objectives there would be a very significant reduction in unfair persistent disadvantage. This

² There was a passing reference to Hilary Cottam in the commentary which points towards Sen. Sorting out capability and functioning would be useful. It would also be consistent with Derek Gill’s suggestion that the Commission use the framework promoted in ‘More Effective Social Services’ and Claire Achmad’s reference to rights, particularly the rights of children, which would begin to offset the bias towards charitable activity in the Interim Report.

³ Objective 5 Row 1 on the implementation timeline

⁴ <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/tomorrows-schools-review/>.

⁴ The Beagle information management application provides a good example of what is required.

submission has only addressed one specific indicator. The Commission is well placed to decide on its relative importance and the role of compulsory education more generally, bearing in mind Derek Gill's observations that initial household conditions do not necessarily determine life course trajectories and Claire Achmad's reference to a framework for recognising children's rights⁵.

Recommendation

From this perspective I conclude that the Commission's contribution could include a relatively short list of say 10-20 specific indicators relevant to the productivity of the activities in Table 5.1, with productivity defined as the public contribution to a fair distribution of advantages.

John Cody

Withheld, as the comment is racist, defamatory, &

11 November, 2022

⁵ Consider for example the Human Rights Commissioner's proposition that a 'decent home' is an Article Three right.