

Literacy and language policies in Australia

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*Lifelong and
lifewide learning
for all Australians*

Abstract

Australia faces a complex, intertwined set of language and literacy issues. Combined with emerging contextual issues, these issues affect access to education and employment for many Australian adults. In this paper, we identify and examine six such intertwined issues. Two of these issues are mainly related to language, specifically for Indigenous Australians and non-English-speaking migrants and refugees. One of the issues relates to the impact of very low literacy rates for rural and regional Australians, particularly as they age and withdraw from the paid workforce. The other three issues are contextual, including the deliberate swing away from public education towards 'the market', the surprisingly low average literacy levels of some Australian adults, and the elevated and increasing levels of youth unemployment. Our paper provides evidence and arguments for much more recognition of and attention to the issues of language and literacy in Australian public policy, research, programs and funding, not only in education but also in many other fields in which language and literacy acquisition and proficiency determine people's life choices, chances and outcomes. This includes opportunities for more positively embracing and building Australia's existing multiculturalism.

Introduction

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) welcomes the invitation to participate in this international academic conference in South Korea. This is an ideal opportunity to learn from researchers and policymakers from many other countries who may be grappling with similar (and different) issues. This paper is written jointly by the Adult Learning Australia (ALA) President, Barry Golding, and the ALA Chief Executive Officer, Sally Thompson. It is presented by Barry Golding on behalf of Adult Learning Australia and might be usefully read in parallel with our *Introductory paper about Adult Learning Australia*.

We address six interrelated issues in the paper. The first two issues are mainly language-related. The third issue, rurality, is mainly literacy-related. The final three issues we discuss – educational marketisation, the low literacy skills of many current workers and elevated youth unemployment – are mainly related to the rapidly changing economic and social policy context in Australia. In the latter part of our paper, we show that these three contextual issues impact particularly on adult language and literacy.

Indigenous and migrant language issues and potential

Our paper deals first with the language issues that affect two quite different groups of Australians for the same fundamental reasons, but in very different locations and cultural contexts. The first group is Indigenous (Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander), First Nation language speakers. It is important to note that most Indigenous Australians speak Aboriginal English and live in Australia's major cities, while smaller numbers of Indigenous people who speak First Nation languages live in rural and remote areas of Australia. The second group comprises recent migrants and refugees who speak languages other than English at home, most who live in the suburbs of Australia's capital cities.

We emphasise that both of the language 'issues' that we tease out below should actually be considered opportunities to Australia's advantage. Firstly, broad acknowledgement and celebration of many of Australia's Indigenous languages could provide all Australians with a significant opportunity and an alternative cultural lens for learning about and interpreting Australian history and contemporary culture, as well as exposing our Indigenous languages internationally. The recent flourishing of Australian Indigenous art and music exemplifies what should also be possible with languages.

Secondly, there are untapped opportunities for more widely celebrating and projecting Australia as a largely multicultural migrant nation. The great diversity of Australian migrant communities in 2014 reflects both the changing fortunes of the nations from which they have either emigrated or fled as refugees, and the changing Australian policies over the years about which migrant groups are welcome to come and live there. The population of Australia, particularly in its major cities, includes significant numbers of people who are skilled and trained in more than one language.

In an era of globalisation and world trade, seven out of Australia's top ten export markets (by value of exports) are Asian nations. China, Japan and the Republic of Korea combined comprise more than half of the top ten (54 per cent of all export value). Only three mainly English-speaking nations are in the top ten (the USA, New Zealand and the UK) and they comprise just 11 per cent of all export value, a figure very similar in magnitude to the combined export value for three other Asian nations: India, Singapore and Taiwan (9 per cent). We argue that there is untapped potential for building on and using the language skills of Australian non-English speakers in facilitating and conducting business, industry and trade, quite apart from enriching contemporary Australian life through a rich and excitingly diverse range of multicultural food, music, art, education, research and culture that has all helped to elevate four of Australia's capital cities to positions among the ten most liveable cities in the world (*The Economist*, 2014), with Melbourne at the top.

Around one in five (19.3 per cent) of all Australians, primarily recent and first-generation migrants and refugees from many other nations and cultures, particularly Europe and Asia, routinely speak a language other than English at

home. In order, the six main languages other than English spoken in Australia are Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Cantonese, Greek and Vietnamese (ABS, 2012).

These two very different groups, remote Indigenous Australians and recent urban migrants, have several issues in common. Firstly, many are currently disadvantaged in the education and training system through having to operate in the English language when they do not typically speak it at home. The abilities 'to read and write in English and to be numerate are critical if young people are to complete their schooling successfully in Australia' (HRSC, 2012, p. 120). While Australian English is *the* language almost universally expected of adults of all ages and cultures, in order for them to communicate in education, the workplace, the media and public life, English-language proficiency is lower amongst these two groups.

Indigenous languages in Australia in 2014

The Australian continent is the home to the oldest ongoing Indigenous¹ cultures in the world, stretching back approximately 50,000 years. There were approximately 250 different Indigenous languages and 600 distinct dialects at the time of first European 'contact'.² Three hundred years after first contact (by 2005), only 145 of these Indigenous languages have *any* remaining speakers. Approximately 110 other unique languages are 'severely or critically endangered' (AIATSIS, 2012, p. 34). Only 18 of the 250 Australian First Nation languages are regarded as 'strong in the sense of being spoken by significant numbers of people across all age groups' (AIATSIS, 2005, p. 3). AIATSIS (2005, p. 68) concluded a decade ago that 'based on current trends, by 2050 ... there was unlikely to be any significant numbers of Indigenous languages spoken in Australia ... of the current 18'.

It should be noted that, in addition to these traditional Indigenous languages, several new 'contact languages' or Creoles, as well as Aboriginal English, have evolved and are currently used by many Indigenous Australians in some parts of Australia (HRSC, 2012, pp. 36–37). On the positive side, a small number of

¹ In Australia, 'Indigenous' refers to First Nation people and cultures, of either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, combined with self-identification. These terms are deliberately capitalised in this paper (other than in quotations), a convention that seeks to honour and respect First Nations and peoples as is customary with all other nations. This convention while deemed respectful and highly desirable, has not generally been adopted by the Australian community or the media.

² 'Contact' is a term used to describe the first meeting of peoples and cultures. In Australia, contact occurred in different places and at different times. While the first European contact between cultures and languages on the Australian mainland goes back to the Dutch in 1606, fisherman from what is present-day Indonesia regularly visited the north-western Australian coast hundreds of years before that. The most recent 'first contact' with Aboriginal Australians was almost 300 years later than the Dutch, involving nine people from the *Pintupi* Nation in the central Australian desert in 1982.

endangered Indigenous languages are undergoing maintenance and revival programs.

There is also increasing recognition of the need to train teachers in urban and regional cities, where the largest *numbers* of Indigenous Australians live,³ to recognise and value dialects other than Standard Australian English, including Aboriginal English.

The United Nations summed up the importance of language with the quote that:

Language is an essential part of, and intrinsically linked to, indigenous peoples' way of life. Languages embody many indigenous values and concepts and contain indigenous peoples' histories and development. They are fundamental markers of indigenous people's distinctiveness and cohesiveness as peoples. (United Nations, 2012a, p. 8)

Despite this internationally recognised importance, and to Australia's national shame, policies which address Indigenous languages in Australia were first and very belatedly developed, albeit obliquely, in 1987. These Indigenous language policies were raised as a side issue in the context of a broader policy document called *National policy on languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987), framed around policies designed to shape 'the nation's 'choices about language issues in the context of Australia's emergent multiculturalism' (HRSC, 2012, p. 46).

Many contemporary Indigenous education issues flow in part from this very late recognition. For context, many other public policy decisions that affect the identity and dignity of Indigenous Australians are also quite recent. They include the parallel, late acknowledgements of Indigenous Australians: first, as people to be included in the national census (achieved through a 1967 national referendum); second, as being eligible to claim Native Title in special circumstances over un-alienated Crown land (after the High Court of Australia Mabo and Wik decisions in 1992 and 1996); and third, and most recently, in 2008 a national apology from the Australian Prime Minister for the pain and suffering experienced by Indigenous Australians through the forced removal of Aboriginal children, over many generations, under previous assimilation policies. The passing of two constitutional amendments in the 1967 Referendum ironically resulted in the erasure of any mention of Indigenous Australians in the national constitution, a wrong that is still to be put right.

In this context, the sudden decision in 2009 by the Northern Territory government to reverse the policy and practice of bilingual early school education

³ The largest Australian Indigenous community by population is in Sydney, with more than 40,000 resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

in remote Indigenous communities was met with considerable dismay by many educators and Indigenous communities:

The Northern Territory government insisted that the first four hours of education in all its schools should be delivered in English, putting an end to 34 years of bilingual education in the Northern Territory and to the nine remaining bilingual programs. (Creative Spirits, 2014)

This decision was based on government concern that Indigenous school children were falling further behind ‘mainstream’ children, with an assumption that bilingual education might be part of the problem. As the Northern Territory Minister stated in a 2012 parliamentary inquiry (HRSC, 2012, p. 91), the decision ‘was focused on the clear fact that English was not being learnt, and the unfortunate side effect of that decision was seen as a clear attack on language, which is certainly not our intent’. Despite this policy decision, in 2012 there were still:

... 76 very remote schools in the Northern Territory for whom English was a second, third or fourth language, and in ... over 70 of those [schools] there is a form of bilingual education happening. (HRSC, p. 91)

Five years after the decision to officially depart from bilingualism, average school attendance rates of around 30 per cent in many remote Indigenous community schools in the Northern Territory are being blamed, at least in part, on the removal of bilingual programs. As Professor Michael Christie from Charles Darwin University stated, ‘The use of Aboriginal language in schools brings Aboriginal parents and grandparents into the school and so brings the community and the school together’ (Creative Spirits, 2014).

The ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy was one of the Australian government’s responses associated with the 2008 national apology mentioned above. It agreed ‘to six ambitious targets to address the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment’ (COAG, 2008).

The education-related objectives of ‘Closing the Gap’ were to:

... ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities by 2013; halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018; halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020; and [partly as a consequence] halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018. (COAG, 2008)

While less than 3 per cent of Australians identify as Indigenous,⁴ maintaining language, land and culture is critically important for many Indigenous people. This is particularly the case in vast areas of remote Australia, where Aboriginal

⁴ The proportion of Indigenous Australians who do *not* identify has been estimated at around 30 per cent, meaning that the true figure is likely to be closer to 4 per cent.

traditional owners typically comprise the majority of residents. In these remote areas, 42 per cent of all Indigenous people aged over 15 years speak an Indigenous language at home, and 15 per cent 'had difficulty in both communicating English and being understood by English speakers' (HRSC, 2012, p. 38).

The 2012 *Our land: Our languages* report (HRSC, 2012) had few new answers to the continuing loss of Indigenous languages. While it was positive in suggesting that 'all Australians should have pride in the Indigenous languages of our country [which] bring with them rich cultural heritage, knowledge and a spiritual connection to the land' (HRSC 2012, p. 212), in its concluding comments the report observed that:

Twenty years on from [the Mabo land rights decision] and we have failed to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. Over these two decades, billions have been spent providing various services, assistance and programs for Indigenous peoples. We are making progress, but progress is slow. Over these two decades, we have seen the decline of many Indigenous languages, just as we have seen the rise of Indigenous youth disconnected from their culture, failing at school, lacking a sense of identity or future, and ending up in the criminal justice system. (HRSC 2012, p. 212)

Filling in the 'language picture' between remote and urban Australia

Australia's overall literacy levels are high relative to other countries. However functional literacy remains far from universal. The recent Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey indicates that around one in seven Australians (14 per cent) have 'very poor' literacy skills (ABS, 2013). An additional one in three Australians (30 per cent) have literacy skills at levels that make them vulnerable to unemployment and social exclusion in a modern knowledge-based economy and society.

Indeed most Australians (around three quarters) are monolingual in English. In the absence of a nationally agreed, main second language, as exists for example in Canada (with French) and in New Zealand (with Maori), most Australians have only a limited, low-level exposure at school to any languages and cultures aside from English. Monolingualism (and relative monoculturalism) are most evident among this third group. The divisions that this situation can and does create between some regions, groups and communities have significant political, demographic and intergenerational implications, which are summarised below.

Monolingual Australians are most likely to live in regional cities and in the outer suburbs of the major cities. As an example, the regional City of Ballarat, where this paper's first author, Barry Golding, works, has around one tenth of the

percentage of non-English-speaking background Australians (4 per cent) compared with inner urban Melbourne, where the paper's second author, Sally Thompson lives, only 100 kilometres away, where the population has 42 per cent non-English-speaking background Australians.

Compulsory voting in Australia, in combination with minority language voters and citizens with lower than average levels of education, lead to Australia having one of the highest levels of spoiled or informal ballots among the established democracies. Alport and Hill (2006, p. 5) noted that while most Australians actually turn out to vote, 'many remain politically excluded due to the fact that their votes are often informal, thereby nullifying their efforts at political engagement'.

These links between literacy, language and democracy are acknowledged globally by the United Nations (2012b, p. 1), which notes that literacy:

... is a transformational process that empowers individuals, broadens their critical thinking and provides them with the ability to act. A person without basic literacy lacks real opportunities to effectively engage with democratic institutions, to make choices, exercise his/her citizenship rights and act for a perceived common good.

Political learning also:

... requires a broad set of skills or else civic literacy, which naturally presupposes functional literacy. The role of literacy in political participation and in the formulation of political opinion has long been recognized by national governments. (United Nations, 2012b, p. 2)

People who live in regions with few Indigenous Australians or migrants from countries other than England or New Zealand typically have very limited first-hand experiences of multilingualism and multiculturalism. They tend to be more resistant to official government policies that encourage multiculturalism and also tend towards what Forrest and Dunn (2006, p. 179) described as a 'new racism' in Australia:

... associated with contested discourses of nation and national identity. Such contestation is evident, for example, in the contrast between Australia as multicultural, in the official rhetoric ... [of governments], or as Anglo (or Anglo-Celtic), in political debate and in the media.

This lack of exposure to multiculturalism can be compounded in schools by the relatively low exposure to the teaching of languages other than English, particularly in many rural and regional schools, because of the difficulty in recruiting qualified teachers of such languages, quite apart from a lack of agreement about which language should actually be taught.

Adult learning and literacy in rural and regional Australia

Young people in rural and regional areas of Australia are less likely than urban youth to finish school or continue on to higher education (university). However, they are more likely to finish a vocational qualification. This reflects the lower numbers in these areas of jobs requiring higher levels of education or training, and also the additional barriers involved in moving to the city to access higher education. Consequently, those rural youth who do gain a university education are more likely to move to the major cities to pursue increased work opportunities (ACOSS, 2013).

There are other, compounding problems with education in rural and regional areas, which tend not only to limit educational access and equity (Thompson, 2013) but also to become intergenerational and gendered by field of study (Golding, Mark & Foley, 2014). Students who do well at rural schools are encouraged to undertake further education and then work in cities. Rural youth are more likely to go straight into work or apprenticeships, often influenced by the limited education backgrounds and lower literacies of their rural parents. Over several generations, families that are 'doing well' in regional areas develop the capacity to afford private education to ensure that their children 'get away'. Those families that are not doing as well have fewer choices, less education and are much more likely to stay and have families of their own. In this way, low literacy tends to become intergenerational in rural and regional areas without interventions like adult education.

Educational equity and access limited by 'private market' policies

The philosophical underpinning of education and training policy in Australia is human capital theory, which was born out of neo-classical economics. This philosophy views education as a rational investment in the self that provides returns to the individual in terms of increased income and returns to the nation. As a result, since the 1980s there has been a movement in Australian public policy away from broadly based lifelong learning policies and programs towards education and training that reflect this more individualistic and utilitarian philosophy.

This philosophical movement includes increased emphasis on: workplace-based learning, competency-based training, industry hegemony over the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, and entitlement (also known as 'voucher') systems for allowing individuals to access government-supported training in an open market. It also includes a shift away from funding public institutions of

learning, such as institutes of TAFE (Technical and Further Education⁵) and universities, towards individual subsidised places within private training organisations and increased course fees paid by individuals.

Adult language and literacy policy is also part of this broad shift in emphasis away from public provision towards an education and training 'market'. The 1987 *National policy on languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987) is widely recognised by Australian literacy experts as the last and only significant government attempt to come to policy terms with Australia's language, literacy and numeracy needs in the context of globalisation, multiculturalism and economic change.

The following Australian language and literacy policy, the 1991 *Australian language and literacy policy* (Lo Bianco, 1991), had a much narrower focus on English language and literacy, but still included a focus on literacy as a social and civic good. It was 21 years before Australia released a new national document on language, literacy and numeracy (SCOTESE, 2013). This in itself indicates the lack of emphasis that successive Australian governments have placed on basic adult education for all citizens.

In 2013, the Australian government released the *National foundation skills strategy for adults* (SDCOTESE, 2013). The decision to call it a 'strategy' rather than a 'policy' is suggestive of a diminution of status for the area under consideration. The strategy also presents a much-restrained and highly individualised view of adult language, literacy and numeracy. For example, the strategy is confined to the basic literacy skills required by workers as a 'foundation' for vocational education and training, rather than literacy for all citizens for civic and social purposes. It also confines itself to formal competency-based curriculum and does not include support for non-formal or informal literacy programs. While it mentions community-based non-formal learning, this is only as a pathway to the formal VET system and there are no goals or funding set aside for this type of provision.

In addition, the strategy is only applicable to the education and training systems of the state, territory and Australian governments, and does not address the influence of literacy across health, welfare, justice and community policy areas. Given that it is targeted to those who are 16 to 64 years of age, it also ignores the growing cohort of Australians older than 65 who are no longer required under Australian law to retire at that age, and whom the international PIAAC (2013) survey confirms have the lowest levels of literacy among the adult population.

⁵ The TAFE (Technical and Further Education) sector has been Australia's public vocational education and training provider since the mid-1970s.

The main outcome of the Foundation skills strategy has been a centralised, employer-driven Industry Training Package with compulsory vocational content even at the most basic level. While well intentioned, and long overdue, the strategy ties the right of all Australians to be able to read and write and use numeracy at a basic level to their employment or jobseeker status. It assumes that those adults currently in the job market or actively looking for work are the only Australians worth investing in.

Adult Learning Australia (ALA, 2013) holds serious concerns that such a narrow approach risks condemning the many thousands of adult Australians who are too old to work, too sick to work or too occupied with caring responsibilities, as well as those who want to work but have given up hope of joining the labour market, to lifetimes of low functional literacy and social disengagement. Aside from ignoring the intergenerational nature of literacy and the many benefits to society from having a literate population, narrowing the focus of literacy to work alone creates significant downstream costs to governments in terms of increased costs of income support, welfare, health and wellbeing services.

Older adults 'locked out of life' by low literacy levels

While Australia's overall literacy performance in the recent PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) survey was strong relative to other participating countries, a significant problem was identified with the literacy and numeracy levels of older Australians. The PIAAC survey (PIAAC, 2013) found that the percentage of the population at or above Level 3 (the level considered high enough for effective participation in a modern, knowledge-based society) for literacy and numeracy declined rapidly from the group aged in their late 40s onwards, reaching its lowest point with the 64 to 75 age group, in which only a quarter had skills at Level 3 or above. This contrasts with the situation in many European countries, where literacy problems were more strongly evident among young people trying to enter the workplace and less evident among older citizens.

There are a number of theories about what might be causing the literacy underperformance of older Australians. One theory is that Australia's previously very strong agricultural sector and heavily protected manufacturing industries provided high volumes of unskilled work that did not require high levels of literacy at the time when today's 50- and 60-year-olds left school. The shift towards a less protected, more knowledge-intensive and service-based economy in Australia since the 1980s means that younger age groups have had to develop higher levels of literacy in order to enter and remain in the workplace. Another related theory is that Australian school participation rates and class sizes and the quality of school education have all improved significantly in recent years,

resulting in younger Australians having better literacy skills than their parents and grandparents.

An alternative theory is that Australia's utilitarian approach to work and learning, coupled with low levels of workplace participation among older Australians, has resulted in generations of older Australians with low skills and limited access to continuing education. Most Australian adult education is now workplace-based. Some researchers have suggested that this unwillingness to support broader notions of lifelong learning reflects the 'deep vein of pragmatic utilitarianism that underpins Australian popular culture' (Axford & Seddon, 2007, p. 416).

Along with this strong workplace focus on learning, Australia's workplace participation rates for older Australians are quite poor. Australia, like most developed countries, has a rapidly ageing population, but it lags well behind OECD countries like New Zealand, Japan and the USA in workforce participation by older workers. At the moment, there are five working-aged people in Australia to support each aged person. However, by 2050 this is projected to fall to only 2.7 people of working age to support each Australian aged 65 years and over. Under current projections, workforce participation is also likely to drop further, with the overall economic impact calculated to cost an additional six per cent of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) if Australia does not make some substantial policy changes (Productivity Commission, 2013).

Even when older Australians are able to remain employed, there are biases against providing workplace-based education to older workers. A recent national survey found that formal workplace training reduced by around 6 per cent for those over 55. The drop-off in participation in formal education for the over 55-year-olds is even more dramatic. Fewer than one in 20 workers over 55 in Australia are participating in formal training at any level, compared to almost half of all 20- to 25-year-olds.

Young people, learning and work

Australia managed the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) better than most advanced economies and overall unemployment has been relatively stable. However, like most OECD countries, in Australia the capacity of young people to enter the workforce has become much more difficult post-GFC and there are parts of the country with very high levels of youth unemployment.

Australia has a good school system and most young people complete secondary school. However, 17 per cent of young women and 27 per cent of young men do not finish school (Beddie & Nechvolglod, 2007). A significant proportion of this

group of school non-completers consists of Indigenous young people and/or those from rural and remote communities and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Leaving school early has long-term negative effects, including those on employment, income and health across the lifespan (Teese, 2007).

Public policy in Australia in relation to disengaged youth tends to focus on skilling for work or on welfare issues such as drug and alcohol prevention. However, practitioners in the field identify the development of independence, confidence and aspiration in youth as the most pressing need (CPELL, 2009). There are many strong programs across Australia that operate in these areas, but they tend to be offered by charities and the philanthropic sector, and struggle for government support, recognition and long-term stability.

It is financially very difficult for young people in rural and remote communities to make the transition from school to higher education. As result, regional and rural youth are significantly less likely to hold a higher education qualification than their urban counterparts.

The newly elected (since 2013) conservative Australian government has recently announced its intention to implement much harsher obligations for unemployed young people, including removing access to social welfare payments for up to six months if a young person is not in work or training. A number of Australian welfare agencies, charities and church groups have publicly expressed concerns that these policies would increase the likelihood of this generation of young unemployed people sinking into poverty and social exclusion.

Discussion

Given these acute 'real life' policy and practice issues discussed above, it is useful at this point to draw back and take a 'helicopter' view of education and training as they are practised today in Australia. Specifically, we will critically analyse what we argue is the alarming disconnect between contemporary theories about literacy education in schools and the way that literacy teaching is still conducted by many literacy practitioners in adult and vocational education and training.

The most recent and comprehensive literacy text for teaching to pre-service teachers, *Literacy in Australia* (Flint, Kitson, Lowe & Shaw, 2014, p.12) note that 'The industrial model of schooling has outlived its usefulness in preparing students for their future'. Based on a raft of contemporary evidence and research and now widely accepted in Australian literacy education circles, Flint et al.'s first principle around teaching literacy in Australian schools is that literacy practices are socially and culturally constructed. Effectively, young people 'learn how to do literacy as a result of being a member of a group' (Flint *et al.*, 2014, p.

13). Flint *et al.* comprehensively debunk the out-dated 'autonomous model' of teaching literacy in schools, which positioned literacy as an individual exercise to bring the individual's literacy 'deficits' up to the specified 'skills levels' through predetermined reading and writing exercises and worksheets.

We argue that this autonomous model of teaching literacy *to* the individual (rather than *through and for* the wider benefit of the group), in order to address individual deficits, not only persists in many schools and school teachers but remains the cornerstone of many remedial competency-based literacy programs offered within the similar 'industrial model' of Australian vocational education and training. Our key concern is about the loss of teachers and the devaluing of the values and pedagogies of adult and community education. In essence and by contrast, in best-practice adult education the teachers value what the learners bring and contribute to the group.

Adult identity as learners is particularly enhanced when they are granted what sociologists call *agency*, the capacity to act independently and make their own free choices. By contrast, the creation of an education 'market', with highly organised and predetermined curriculum and assessment, leads to learners being regarded as individual clients and consumers of a product, rather than being empowered to learn in groups, as is consistent with the situated community of practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that is more common in adult and community education.

As Kral and Schwab (2012, p. 48) concluded:

... a divide has grown between those who see school as the primary site for learning and others who have developed a social theory of learning ... encompassing a view of learning through social practice. ... When learning is viewed as situated activity and the focus is shifted from the individual skills acquisition to focus on competence and expertise, one can clearly observe that learning is derived from 'participation in the social world'. (Kral & Schwab 2012, p. 48)

The industrial model of VET focuses instead on the 'deficits' that need to be addressed individually through remediation in order to bring the individual 'client', who is increasingly regarded as a 'customer' (who pays for their course), up to an assessed standard, so as to achieve an industry-accredited qualification with atomised industry competencies assessed against nationally recognised workplace 'standards' and qualifications.

There are other, less prescriptive and mechanistic ways of acknowledging and acting on where and how learning takes place. We give two examples from recent Australian research into learning at two polarities: by remote Indigenous youth (Kral & Schwab, 2012) and in community settings by older men with

limited formal literacies (Golding, Mark & Foley, 2014). Kral and Schwab (2012, p. 69) concluded that, in remote Indigenous contexts, successful outcomes for young people:

... have been obtained through collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the learning process, rather than top-down, formulaic training delivery. ... [The facilitators] show respect for and interest in the language and culture of the learners, favour side-by-side delivery and do not judge the learner's performance.

Golding, Mark and Foley (2014), in their *Men Learning Through Life* study, focused mainly on learning in community settings by men not in paid work, and concluded that:

Any adult with limited experiences of formal learning can become disengaged and alienated as a consequence of limited literacies ... not being able to learn to adapt to change through life limits not only younger men's ability to work, but also to partner and enter loving relationships, raise children and maintain health and wellbeing.

ALA is concerned that the industrial, deficit-based model of literacy now gaining dominance in Australia does not allow adults to develop the literacies required to embark on a lifetime of learning and to manage change in an increasingly complex, technologically enhanced globalised society. Further, we are concerned that the social determinants of health (WHO, 2003) that determine people's life outcomes are being ignored in language and literacy policy.

Conclusion

We conclude that, while Australia faces a unique, complex and intertwined set of language and literacy issues, recent government responses are at best partial and piecemeal. At worst, restricting positive literacy and language interventions to workplace training contexts and backing away from properly supporting Indigenous language retention and recovery are likely to exacerbate the existing problems and work against the obvious social and economic benefits of Australia as a multicultural and multilingual society.

We conclude that low functional literacy and multi-lingual issues are affecting access to education and employment for many Australian adults, particularly as people age and withdraw from the paid workforce. We conclude that future government policy interventions need to reverse the current deliberate swing away from public education towards 'the market', actively address the low literacy and numeracy levels of some Australian adults, and find new strategies to combat elevated and increasing levels of youth unemployment.

Finally, we conclude that there needs to be much more recognition of and attention to the issues of language and literacy in Australian public policy,

research, programs and funding, not only in education but in many other fields in which language and literacy acquisition and proficiency determine people's life choices, chances and outcomes. This includes more positively embracing and building on existing opportunities offered by multiculturalism, as well as Australia's diverse but rapidly disappearing Indigenous language heritage.

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