



RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY UNIT

POLICY REPOSE

THE LITERACY AND NUMERACY GAP FOR DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE

**Jesuit Social Services submission to the
Australian Government's Language, Literacy and
Numeracy Program Services consultation**

July 2008

For further information, contact:

Michael Gourlay, Policy Director, Jesuit Social Services
Phone: (03) 9427 7388 Email: michael.gourlay@jss.org.au

Introduction

This submission focuses on the literacy and numeracy issues of a significant cohort of extremely disadvantaged young people aged 15 to 28 years who, amongst other difficulties and disadvantages, have left school early (Year 10 or earlier).

Through the 'social enterprise' kitchen, arts studio or other employment and training programs of our Gateway program (note: we are an RTO), the various justice focussed programs of Brosnan Youth Services and our dual diagnosis service, Connexions (mental health and drugs and alcohol), we engage with young people with a range of inter-related, complex needs. These tend to include a history of interrupted schooling, little or no positive experiences of employment, substance abuse, mental health difficulties and/or other disabilities, and in many cases, involvement with the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, very few of the young people we see have family support readily available. Indeed in many cases, family experiences such as domestic violence or sexual abuse have been significant contributors to the young person's current difficulties.

By any measure, the young people we support are amongst the most disadvantaged citizens of our society. Our submission is guided by their experience.

Addressing literacy and numeracy issues as part of a 'whole-of-life' approach

A key aspect of our approach to working with people experiencing disadvantage is a commitment to understanding and appreciating the totality of every individual.

Rather than thinking about support from the perspective of separate issue 'silos' eg. mental health, disability, drug and alcohol misuse, housing, criminal justice, literacy and numeracy, employment, etc. we work in partnership with people to build a 'whole-of-life' approach to the way services and support are provided. Our holistic approach to supporting people is sometimes referred to as a 'joined-up' or 'wrap around' approach.

Our holistic integrated model of support successfully engages disadvantaged young people by:

1. Providing and building personal support with relationship-based interventions
2. Addressing health, welfare and housing needs
3. Providing flexible opportunities to develop accredited skills
4. Providing settings where employment skills can be practised
5. Linking young people with mainstream training and employment opportunities

The Literacy and Numeracy Gap for Disadvantaged Young People

In our experience, literacy and numeracy issues are often a key barrier to young people successfully engaging with mainstream training and employment opportunities.

The current system of literacy and numeracy programs for disadvantaged young people is both under-resourced and poorly designed. In particular there is an over-reliance on 'school-type' classes. This delivery format does not appeal to disadvantaged young people with a negative history of school experiences. Many disadvantaged young people simply won't entertain attending such courses, or if they do, a high rate of failure is experienced.

In addition to maintaining the best of the current system, we believe that the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program should implement new approaches specifically designed to assist disadvantaged young people with literacy and numeracy issues.

The core of this new approach should be:

- Support for the provision of literacy and numeracy assistance within 'youth friendly' flexible learning environments, with the capacity for young people to develop their literacy and numeracy skills based on their preferred individual learning styles, with links established to other 'whole-of-life' support as required for each individual.

Young people ‘slipping through the cracks’

We note and commend the identification in the discussion paper of the need to address ‘young people slipping through the cracks for various reasons throughout their schooling’ as a key future challenge for Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program services (page 4).

We also note and support the considerable recent investment by the Australian Government to support schools with strategies to achieve better literacy and numeracy outcomes for school-age children. Through the National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy we will continue to support improved literacy and numeracy strategies for school-age children as a priority.

Social Inclusion and ‘Joined-up’ Programs and Policy

We welcome the acknowledgement in the discussion paper that language, literacy and numeracy will ‘play a key role in driving the Australian Government’s social inclusion agenda’ (page 4). Also of note are links to recent government consultations regarding homelessness, employment services and the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy.

The Australian Government’s recent ‘Which Way Home?’ Green Paper on homelessness rightly identifies that a key social inclusion challenge for government is how to implement ‘joined-up’ service delivery backed up by ‘joined-up’ policy: *“Program and funding program boundaries must allow governments and funded organisations to take a multidisciplinary approach to addressing people’s needs”* (page 63).

It is imperative that the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program takes up the challenge to be part of the movement for a ‘joined-up’ approach to assisting our most disadvantaged citizens. Young people’s literacy or numeracy issues need to be addressed in a way that acknowledges other issues and experiences such as homelessness or mental health difficulties.

Ensuring the ‘most disadvantaged’ are not overlooked for literacy and numeracy support

Within the employment and training sector, we believe there is insufficient commitment at the policy and program level to assist the ‘most disadvantaged’. There is a tendency to focus exclusively on the ‘most employable’ without due consideration to what can be achieved if appropriate support is also provided to the most disadvantaged.

The eligibility for Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program services includes that a person has ‘no potential barrier to successful participation in the Program’. We are concerned that this ‘no barriers’ clause may be used to exclude a disadvantaged young person who may be experiencing difficulties with mental health issues, homelessness, or other issues.

In our view, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program should strengthen the commitment to helping all people with language, literacy and numeracy issues, including the most disadvantaged. Where barriers to successful participation in existing programs are identified by an individual or a service provider, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program should have mechanisms to ensure that the individual receives appropriate follow-up support.

Summary of Key Points

In considering the services the Australian Government should be purchasing in future through the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program, Jesuit Social Services suggests that priorities for program enhancement should include the implementation of new approaches specifically designed to assist disadvantaged young people, based on:

- Increased support for the provision of literacy and numeracy assistance within ‘youth friendly’ flexible learning environments, and;
- The capacity for young people to develop their literacy and numeracy skills based on their strengths and preferred individual learning styles, and;
- Links established to between literacy and numeracy service providers and other ‘whole-of-life’ support as required for each individual.