

**IMPROVING LITERACY AND EDUCATION STANDARDS IN TASMANIA
ROYAL SOCIETY LECTURE DELIVERED BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA, TUESDAY 16 MARCH 2021**

Good evening.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

When asked if I would deliver a Royal Society lecture on a topic of my choice I chose the topic of improving literacy and education standards in Tasmania as a way of summarising all I have learnt about the current situation and what we in Tasmania are doing to improve it. Like many others, I was shocked by the oft quoted 48% functionally illiterate statistic and the well below Australian average Year 12 completion rates.

Since becoming Governor, I have been made a Patron of Education Ambassadors, Chair of the Advisory Committee of the Peter Underwood Centre, Patron of Connect42 and have been associated with 26Ten and as a result have attended many seminars and lectures on education. And as Governor I have visited many schools and Child and Family Centres around the State. But at the same time, I must stress that I am not speaking as an expert.

After a brief overview of some indicators of literacy and educational attainment in Tasmania, I will talk about some of the ways we are addressing these deficits: the Basics project, the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, Connect42, 26Ten and Child and Family Centres.

Education is a driver of economic prosperity for individuals and for the economy. Tasmania is the poorest state economically despite the fact that we are experiencing strong economic growth. The average weekly income is \$1488, the lowest in Australia, and more than one third of Tasmanian households receive the majority of their income from government payments.¹

Some of the reasons for the relative poverty of Tasmania we cannot do much about, such as the higher proportion of the population that is over 65, and the fact that high level labour productivity industries such as mining and finance are under-represented in Tasmania.

But there is something we can do to increase levels of employment, hours worked and productivity, because there are unambiguous linkages between these factors and education level.

So, what is the education situation in Tasmania?

- The percentage of Tasmanian adults who are functionally illiterate at 48% is 4 percentage points higher than the national average.
- A smaller proportion of Tasmania's population has a bachelor's degree or higher than any other State or Territory.
- Year 10-12 direct retention rates at around 74% (for 2020)² are improving but remain at 8% below the national average.
- Successful Year 12 completion rates are improving but remain at 15% below the national average.³
- NAPLAN results are poorer, for example in 2019 the mean scale scores for Year 9 were below the national mean scores in spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy.⁴

Let me elaborate a little on 'functional illiteracy'. This does not mean that almost half of adult Tasmanians are literally illiterate – that they don't have basic reading, and writing skills but it does mean that according to international literacy surveys, 48%-49% of adult Tasmanians attained less than 'Level 3' literacy, at which level they cannot, among other things, identify, interpret or evaluate one or more pieces of information and make appropriate inferences.⁵ This is four percentage points higher than the national average and there is this same gap in relation to numeracy. This means that 48% of Tasmanians will be unable to complete a job application; understand workplace health and safety instructions; understand many medicine labels or the nutritional information on a packet of food; or help children with their homework.

Year 12 completion rates are a concerning statistic with only 50% of males successfully completing Year 12 and still low retention from Years 10 to 12. And the picture in the most disadvantaged schools is disturbing. Education Ambassador founder, Professor Michael Rowan revealed in a 2020 article that only 16% of Cosgrove High School's 2016 Year 10 students obtained their TCE by 2018, whereas students from similarly disadvantaged Queensland schools did much better.⁶

As the Chair of the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, I have embraced Peter Underwood's vision that: 'Education is the passport to a better life.' We need higher levels of educational participation and attainment and its flow on effects to our economy and a great improvement in literacy and numeracy rates. It can unlock the potential that is dormant in our State.

It all starts with babies and toddlers and The Basics is an innovative program that I first heard about from Natalie Brown, Director of the Peter Underwood Centre. About 80% of brain development occurs in the first three years of life and so these early years are vital. Research has shown that reading to babies as young as six months leads to larger vocabularies and better early literacy skills four years later, just as a child is getting ready for school. 'Even though children may not be talking yet, that doesn't mean they are not learning.'⁷ How often (quantity) and how vividly (quality) toddlers and adults engage in books together is related to early reading and writing skills.

And children's verbal skills when they start school correlate to later reading success. These findings fit in with what we know about early language development. Reading aloud is a form of conversation and conversing with children is important. A seminal study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley found that in the first three years of life, some children heard 30 million more words than others, an advantage that translated by third grade into bigger vocabularies, better reading scores and higher test scores.⁸

In 2018, a group of Tasmanian teachers attended Dr Karen Mapp's Family Engagement Course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Boston. As part of this week-long course, they attended a session with Dr Ron Ferguson on the Boston Basics. The Boston Basics are five evidence-based, care-giving principles that encompass much of what experts find is important for children from birth to age three. The tenet is that every child from every background can benefit from the five principles. They embody simple messages that can be

adopted by the whole community and publicised through posters in prominent places, on buses, with videos and so on.

The messages of care-giving behaviour are:

- Maximise love, manage stress.
- Talk, sing and point.
- Count, group and compare.
- Explore through movement and play.
- Read and discuss stories.

Two of the teachers in the group were from Margate Primary School, Kate Slater (the Principal) and Maree Thompson (Early Years Literacy Leader). They were aware that data for the Channel area showed an increasing proportion of children were starting school with developmental delays and developmental vulnerability, and that, according to PIPS (Performance Indicators in Primary Schools) data, there were increases in the proportion of children achieving below the expected grade level in reading. [I note that it is also of concern that the gap between Tasmania and Australia in terms of the percentage of at-risk and vulnerable children on the language and cognitive skills domain is widening.⁹]

The session on the Boston Basics inspired the Tasmanian participants in the course, Kate and Maree from Margate Primary and Bill Jarvis (Claremont College Principal) and Ben Richardson (Rokeby Primary School Principal) to consider and develop a strategy for how this birth to three program could be applied in the Tasmanian context.

The pilot in the Channel area was launched in 2019, attracted AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) funding and had a steering committee which continues to lead the project and it has partnerships with the Underwood Centre, the B4 Coalition and the Department of Education. It is described as a 'collective impact project' designed to ensure that the community (the local community in the Channel and the wider community) understand the critical importance of the basics for a child's development in the first three years of life.

To quote from their website:

The Basics community is a diverse network of organisations and individuals committed to a single goal: improving children's opportunities by making sure that all families have access to science-based strategies for making the most of the time they spend with their children from 0-3. Whether you are a parent or caregiver or connect with families in a clinic, a childcare centre, or anywhere that children frequent, you have an important role to play.

The Basics Community Toolkit is an online collection of videos, activities, handouts and other materials designed to support communities improve children's opportunities. For example, for each of the basic messages of parenting/care-giving behaviours there are tips or examples for babies (0-12 months) and for toddlers (12-36 months).¹⁰

The first tip for 'Talk, Sing and Point' advises:

- With your Infant (0-12 months): *Talk a lot*. Talk to your baby from the time they are born, during activities like changing, feeding, bathing and errands. Describe what you are doing.
- With your Toddler: (12-36 months): *Describe life*. Talk about the everyday things you see and do together. Most things are new and interesting to a toddler!

The resources will expand as The Basics community grows and learns together. This seems to be such a promising program with a strong evidence base; it aligns nicely with the Government's B4 Early Years Coalition agenda, Launch into Learning and the programs at our wonderful Child and Family Centres.

The Peter Underwood Centre

The Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania – the Governor chairs the Advisory Committee. Its vision is that all young Tasmanians flourish through the transformative power of learning. Its focus is on partnerships and initiatives that contribute to positive and sustained change in educational outcomes for children and young people and, being a University based organisation, research and evaluation is an important component of its work.

I will give some examples of its work.

The *Children's University* is an 'iconic project' of the Underwood Centre. It recognises the importance of learning outside the formal classroom setting and the importance of encouraging engagement in learning. Schools in lower SES areas in Tasmania have joined the program which provides outside-school educational opportunities for 7-14-year-olds at a range of some 150 learning destinations including museums, sporting clubs and other organisations – even involving Children's University students in productions such as *Rosehaven*. Activities include bush walking with a Bush Walking Trail Activity Sheet to complete and holiday programs such as visits to Parliament and Government House with talks and discussions.

Learning passports are stamped with hours of participation and students with a minimum of 30 hours are eligible to graduate. Graduation ceremonies are held in conjunction with University December graduations, with children wearing gowns and participating in the Town and Gown Parades in Hobart, Launceston, Burnie and Devonport. As well as celebrating the children's achievements, this creates an awareness of pathways to higher education.

In 2020 we had 340 graduating students from 47 schools across the state, including West Coast schools for the first year. However, for Covid reasons there were no Town and Gown parades in 2020, graduations were instead held at schools.

UCTV Alive for Kids is an interactive online broadcast developed by the Peter Underwood Centre to provide children and young people with fun, extra-curricular learning opportunities.

The show is delivered during class-time every second week and covers a range of child-friendly topics for Grades 5 and 6. Past episodes have focused on everything from the endangered red handfish, volcanoes and sea birds, to Christmas marketing, the history of coins and a tour of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition *This Too Shall Pass*. They are presented via a Zoom Webinar with a Q&A segment so that classes have the opportunity to submit questions to the presenter. Last week's episode was 'Bringing the Birdsong back to Tasmania'.

The Wonder Weekly is an online and print publication of educational activities for children initiated during the Covid lockdown last March and due to its popularity has been continued. Because of concerns that some disadvantaged families would not have adequate access to online materials for home schooling, Woolworths also agreed to print the Wonder Weekly and make it available in their supermarkets.

Research is a central activity of the Underwood Centre. Examples of completed research projects include evaluations of the Big Picture Schools and the Teaching Internship Placement Program and a three-year study on literacy teaching, training and practice which was completed in December 2019.¹¹ The Final Report is supplemented with 11 Fact sheets which summarise the report with separate sheets for teachers and parents/carers providing evidence-informed practical recommendations across all stages of schooling.¹²

In relation to the often-heated debates about the role of phonics in early literacy teaching (the reading wars), it recommends the use of a systematic phonics program in the early years of schooling 'in context and alongside other clearly known strategies'¹³ and states that there is not enough evidence to favour a 'synthetic' (with each phoneme being important) versus an 'analytic' phonics approach. The report found good literacy teaching practice was not yet universal across all schools in Tasmania and in particular there were challenges in meeting the needs of students with literacy learning difficulties and a need for additional support for children with backgrounds of trauma and neglect.¹⁴

A recent piece of research from the Centre looked at the effects on vulnerable young Australians of learning at home during Covid-19.¹⁵ And in this brief overview I have by no means done justice to all of the Underwood Centre's work.

Connect42

Connect 42 (formerly Chatter Matters) was founded by speech pathologist and criminologist and 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year, Rosalie Martin. It is a not-for-profit organisation that works with people to build their language, literacy and communications skills. I am its patron. Rosie believes that almost without exception, every child can learn to read. She is not alone in believing that this is the case. At the end of a symposium, we held at Government House on literacy, participants agreed to embrace the goal of not just closing the gap between Tasmania and the rest of Australia in literacy and numeracy but to aim for 100% literacy. This spawned the Tasmania #100% Literacy Alliance.

Just last Friday, the Minister for Education, Jeremy Rockliff, announced that he had met with the #100% Literacy Alliance to discuss their roadmap to a Literate Tasmania which he embraced.¹⁶

I have watched Rosie Martin at work in a Grade 3 classroom at Bridgewater. In the class I observed, the Principal told me that only 7 of the class of 28 had reached the minimum standard for reading in their NAPLAN test. The school is attempting to address this with Rosie's help.

I observed the way Rosie worked with the class teacher. After the whole class had worked together on an exercise, Rosie took aside groups of two or three who were struggling with the exercise and worked with them: writing a word in their book and then counting the phonemes in the word starting with their little finger in their non-writing hand. This was interspersed with card games as rewards to keep them engaged. I observed a little boy, who was said to have an IQ of 70, learn the pronunciation and phonemic signals which indicate whether a '-ck' or '-nk' spelling should be used at the end of a word.

I have learnt such a lot through my association with Connect42 and attending its day long seminars. At Connect 42's first *Colleagues at the Heart of Literacy* seminar, I heard about a literacy program, called 'Response to Intervention' that uses speech pathologists in collaborative learning teams.

It began at a Victorian Primary School, Mahogany Rise, in 2008 with Foundation Students (Prep). At this small low SES school, 95% of students starting school have a language delay or impairment; close to 50% had been exposed to violence or alcohol or drug abuse in the home. The program, which focuses on developing students' oral language skills, has three tiers of support: Tier 1 is a whole-class language strategy; Tier 2 is targeted small groups and Tier 3 is individual (one-on-one) intervention for children with severe language delay.

Comparison with a control school demonstrated significant improvement in the Mahogany Rise children. It became a whole-of-school program in 2013.

All children improved significantly. The 2016 NAPLAN results showed Grade 5 students were above the Australian average in reading, writing and spelling and well above similar SES schools in the other domains (grammar and numeracy).

They were then tested when they moved on to High School (Monterey Secondary College) in three areas of language: spelling, grammar and reading and it was found that their growth had plateaued. As a result, work on vocabulary (explicit vocabulary teaching) and comprehension was introduced at Monterey.

In this context it is worth mentioning the State Government's plan to roll out a Year 1 phonics screening check this year, with the aim of providing critical insights to teachers on their students' sounding-out aptitude. The information will be used to identify those who may need additional support. School-based Quality Teaching Coaches and Professional Support Staff will collaborate with classroom teachers to inform the next steps in instruction. The check was trialled last year in 20 schools and a similar check been used in South Australia since 2018 with successful outcomes.

This is welcomed by Rosie Martin, who argues that a decades-long shift away from explicit teaching of sound/symbol correlation in favour of a whole language approach has failed many students. According to the Underwood Centre's report on literacy teaching, phonics and phonological awareness is currently taught – perhaps it is a matter of emphasis and degree and I am not in a position to resolve this.

The first Chatter Matters seminar in 2018, *Communicating: The Heart of Literacy*, was preceded by the publication of an inspiring collection of pieces on literacy demonstrating some of the things that can be done to tackle our literacy problem. Deb Hutton, an educator, told the story of Jennifer, a Grade 1 student of hers at a small rural primary school where there were a number of children experiencing difficulties learning to read. Jennifer was selected for a special 15-week intervention program and as a result, learnt to read to the expected level for her age. Moreover she became more confident and happier at school and with the engagement of her family in her learning, continued to improve and became a fluent and capable reader. On leaving school she became the first member of her family to go to University.¹⁷

Steve Bentley, who works with disengaged children who have suffered trauma, told how he successfully connected with Ben, helping him to read despite Ben telling him:¹⁸ 'I don't know why you bother with me Steve. No one in our family can read; it's like a magic trick we don't know. I just can't do it; I can't make my brain see words.'

Connect42 also works with prisoners at Risdon and last year received Tasmanian Community Fund support for a new program, *Just Moving On* which is a program to bring language, literacy, transformation and connection to people leaving prison and is a companion program to *Just Time*, a parenting program for inmates, for which I have handed out completion certificates at the end of a number of courses. I will be going to Risdon to do this tomorrow morning.

26Ten

In Tasmania we have a wonderful adult literacy program, 26Ten. This program has now been running for about ten years and I have had the opportunity to see their literacy tutors at work with adult learners and to visit a workplace and speak to employees who have benefited from the programme by improving their numeracy skills, literacy and communication.

At Houston's Farm (a salad producer in the Coal River Valley), one young woman employee explained to me that she had been educated mainly at special schools and that she struggled with numeracy and could not do percentages, an essential task in her work at Houstons. Anne Salt, a literacy support officer had helped her and she was now confident in doing the calculations she needed to do as part of her job. She told me, with tears in her eyes, that this had changed her life.

We also met Jade, a young man who explained that with the support of the literacy support officer, he had improved his oral skills so that he became confident enough to address team meetings as a team leader of processing.

26Ten has a large group of organisations and individual supporters and some 1,333 people have volunteered and undertaken training to be a literacy tutor.¹⁹

When we travel around the state visiting workplaces and industries, one of the questions we now ask is, 'Do you have a literacy or numeracy problem with your employees?' And we explain how 26Ten can help.

Two years ago, I was involved in the launch of the 26Ten Chat resource which encourages and empowers people to refer adults to literacy and numeracy support. This resource is necessary because of the sensitivity of the issue and difficulty of raising it with a person suspected of struggling with literacy or numeracy. It suggests ways of starting the conversation and following up with the person using five steps.

My husband Dick is a member of the 26Ten Coalition which is a group of people formed to encourage people and organisations to understand the challenges of low literacy and numeracy and to take action. Dick has the responsibility of working with the agricultural sector to come up with an action plan for that sector.

Child and Family Centres

Another strength that we have in Tasmania is the existence of twelve Child and Family Centres, many of which I have visited since my appointment as Governor. These centres, amongst other things, offer a game changing strategy to launch pre-school children and their parents into learning by modelling playful learning.²⁰ At the Ptunnara Child and Family Centre in New Norfolk, there is a Feed and Read project, which aims to create the conditions for parents and children to experience words, texts and story in an atmosphere of safety which it is hoped will encourage parents to read to their children at home. As well as catering for small children, the Queenstown Child and Family Centre is co-located with the Library and offers a warm and cheerful place for school children to do their homework with computer access.

Concluding comments

I applaud the efforts that are being made in our State to improve educational attainment. As I said at the beginning of this lecture, improvement in this area is one way in which we can tackle the fact that Tasmania is the poorest state economically.

I believe that in general our teachers are doing an excellent job. But I do believe we need to value teaching as a profession more highly and to pay our early child carers more.

Eddie Woo, an inspirational Maths teacher at Cherrybrook High School, and Australian Local Hero 2018, who has continued his advocacy work in teaching and learning, was advised as a student, not to choose teaching, that he had the ability to do better. We need to change this perception and encourage our best and brightest to go into teaching at least for a part of their career.

There is no silver bullet to deal with improving literacy and educational attainment. We need a variety of approaches to tackle it which includes such things as helping parents with their literacy problems so they can help their children; improving children's early learning, from birth to three; improving how we help children to learn to read in schools; provide more assistance to those children who are struggling before they became disengaged with their learning. More speech pathologists in schools would help and more support for children with learning differences in our schools. Many children have no difficulty in learning to read and seem to pick it up so easily. For others it is a mystery of decoding which takes many hours of patient help.

And I have just mentioned one of the issues we face in educating our children. There are many others, such as keeping children engaged in their learning in high school (schools need to be inviting places to be); we need to protect children from being bullied and to respond appropriately when they are; to help children who are traumatised by family violence or abuse, support those who are neglected by their parents because of mental issues or drug addiction so they are in a position to engage with their learning. And we need to improve where we do particularly badly in Tasmania, and that is in giving all our young people an education in Years 11 and 12.

Education is a whole of community responsibility.

Thank you.

¹ Average Weekly Earnings, Australia, ABS November 2020
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-work-hours/average-weekly-earnings-australia/latest-release> accessed 12 March 2021.

² <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/apparent-retention#View1> accessed 12 March 2021.

³ <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/year-12-certification-rates#view1> accessed 12 March 2021.

⁴ *NAPLAN National Report for 2019*, <https://nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2019-naplan-national-report.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=2> accessed 12 March 2021

⁵ Adult literacy and numeracy – what's the story?
<https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/adult-literacy-and-numeracy-whats-the-story> accessed 12 March 2021.

⁶ Michael Rowan, 'Building a Hobart High for Years 7-12 promises to be a game changer', *The Mercury*, 4 August 2020.

⁷ Carolyn Cates, cited by Lydia Denworth, 'The Magic of Reading Aloud to Babies' *Psychology Today*, 5 May 2017.

⁸ Also quoted by Cates, n 8.

⁹ Peter Underwood Centre, 'Early Childhood Development' Fact Sheet 1(2019), https://www.utas.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1263572/Underwood-Centre-Fact-Sheet-One.pdf accessed 12 March 2021

¹⁰ <https://www.thebasicstasmania.com/parents> accessed 11 March 2021.

¹¹ Sarah Stewart, Kitty te Riele and Elaine Stratford, *Literacy Teaching in Tasmania: Teaching Practice and Teacher Learning*, December 2019.

¹² <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects> accessed 11 March 2021.

¹³ Stewart et al, n 12, 45.

¹⁴ Stewart et al, n 12, 2.

¹⁵ Natalie Brown et al, *Learning at home during covid-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians*, 2020.

¹⁶ Jeremy Rockliff, media release, 12 March 2021, 'Statement: New literacy target to improve education outcomes'.

¹⁷ Deb Hutton, 'Four Significant Enablers in a Rural Tasmanian Student's Learning Journey' in *Communicating: the Heart of Literacy*, Chatter Matters, 2018 61.

¹⁸ Steve Bentley, 'Worthy Bother', 291.

¹⁹ See their website at <https://26ten.tas.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx> accessed 11 March 2021..

²⁰ 'Feed and Read: A Small Group Event for Children Under Five and Their Carers', 43.