

The importance of literacy

Literacy is integral to success in modern society. It pervades almost every area of social interaction including education, work, leisure, communications, and business and is a key component of the information revolution. Its importance is underlined in the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy:

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The contents of this report and the processes leading to its production are grounded in two guiding propositions. First, skilled and knowledgeable young people are Australia's most valuable resource for the future. Second, teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools. Equipping young people to engage productively in the knowledge economy and in society more broadly is fundamental to both individual and national prosperity, and depends primarily on: the ability to speak, read and write effectively; and the provision of quality teaching. (Dept Education, Science and Training 2005: Preface)

Competence in literacy is essential if an individual is to participate fully in society—able to take part in the workforce, engage in democratic processes, and contribute to society. Literacy is also an essential component of social justice. It enables individuals to gain access to social resources and helps them to participate in social institutions. It can be a source of enjoyment and can contribute to individuals' widening knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world.

Literacy is an essential component of social justice

Literacy is crucial to young people's success at school. Students with effective literacy skills excel not only in English but also in other areas of the curriculum. Students' overall school performance and their successful transition from one stage of schooling to the next depends on a well-developed foundation of literacy skills and on the positive attitudes to learning that accompany these skills. Students need to have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and understandings to engage with the literacy demands of the curriculum and to participate effectively in society.

Denise Lievesley and Albert Motivans state: 'Literacy plays an essential role in improving the lives of individuals by enabling economic security and good health, and enriches societies by building human capital, fostering cultural identity and tolerance, and promoting civic participation' (2002: 8).

Most governments throughout the world give a high priority to the development of literacy skills in their populations. As part of basic education, literacy is seen as a key factor in a country's social and economic development. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as part of its education strategy, sees literacy as 'a fundamental human right'. The Director-General of UNESCO, as part of his message on International Literacy Day 2001, said:

Literacy is a fundamental human right

We must never forget that literacy is indeed a cause for celebration: for individuals and their families and for society at large. Humankind has achieved spectacular progress in regard to literacy: there are now close to four billion literate people in the world. Moreover, many of today's rapid technological advances are focused on information and communication, which are central to the practice of literacy.