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Failing a generation: What literacy is and why it matters

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Five years ago, I wrote [an article \(https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1240207\)](https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1240207) on literacy as a human right. I argued, essentially, that literacy is not only a skill to acquire but also a tool we use throughout our lives. That article earned me a telling off from a friend of mine, who consistently claims there's no such thing as human rights. We won't delve into the merits (or otherwise) of the human rights doctrine in this blog post. However, if nothing else, the proclamation that literacy is a human right does bestow upon literacy a certain status, and in doing so, brings to the fore the *crucial role literacy plays in transforming lives both at the individual and the community level*.

What is literacy and who does it belong to?

A range of views on what literacy is – and who it belongs to – exist. Many of us would understand literacy to be reading and writing. However, some argue that this is a [Western view of literacy \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126374\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126374) that needs to be deconstructed. Suggestions regarding literacy include that it is a form of colonisation or [“becoming White” \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126372\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126372). Some argue that literacy is a skill that is not [part of the history and culture \(https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol9/iss2021/6/\)](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol9/iss2021/6/) of Māori children, and that ‘Western’ literacy practices have [damaged indigenous peoples \(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10259197/\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10259197/). Others contend that we ought

to take a culturally relative view (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10259197/>) of literacy and expand our understanding of what constitutes literacy to include, for example, carvings (<https://thisisgraeme.me/2015/01/13/maori-literacy-definition-te-kawai-ora/>), dance (<https://lled.educ.ubc.ca/about/indigenous-language-literacy-education/>), and reading the environment (<https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Literacy-and-Maths-strategy-development-in-2021/Shifting-the-dial-Full-document.pdf>). Given the undisputed role literacy plays in enhancing outcomes in virtually all aspects of our lives across our entire lifespan, *these suggestions regarding what literacy is and who it's for are reckless, with potentially dire consequences for generations of children.* These views stand to harm Māori children in particular, as well as those who are reliant on a good education to improve their lot in life. For many children, any disadvantages they face will be further entrenched if they are denied the right to acquire such a crucial life skill due to the whimsical claims made by those who are invariably (and ironically) highly literate themselves.

What do I mean by 'literacy'? Let me be very clear: I mean reading and writing. But wait, I hear you say. The New Zealand Curriculum (<https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum/English/Achievement-objectives>) says that as well as reading and writing, literacy also includes (for the moment, at least) talking and listening, and viewing and presenting (a conservative list when compared to what some argue literacy is). Talking and listening are indeed crucial practices to grow strong literacy skills. The more frequently a child is engaged in quality conversations, the more a child listens to and tells stories, or hears and uses a wide range of vocabulary, or sings songs, the better developed their foundational skills (<https://nzareblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/29/early-literacy/>), are, which are crucial to learning to read and write well (<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/early-literacy-development/articles/why-phonological-awareness-important-reading-and>). As for viewing and presenting, I argue they are functions of literacy – but not literacy on their own, and they certainly are not sufficient on their own to bring about the sorts of outcomes highly developed reading and writing skills (i.e. literacy) can. Being able to view or present information requires, well, literacy.

So what happens when we insist on expanding what constitutes literacy in seemingly limitless ways? Could we end up harming the very children so many of us are ostensibly wanting to help? Yes.

The transformative power of literacy

The corpus of research on the power of literacy (i.e. reading and writing) is compelling and copious. The impact of literacy on health and wellbeing, community engagement, economic outcomes, career progression, civic participation, and lifelong learning is undisputed (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1747938X18305116>). Literacy is a central component of education, crucial to accessing (<https://www.lifescied.org/doi/10.1187/cbe.18-12-0238>) all other parts of a curriculum. We need reading and writing skills to vote, to read bank statements, to communicate well with colleagues, to curate history, to articulate thoughts and ideas, to apply for a job or a promotion, to become leaders in business, to read medicine labels or nutritional information on food packaging, to create new knowledge, to read recipes, to help our children with their homework – the list is long.

Moreover, people with highly developed reading skills – and who consequently are able to read for pleasure – enjoy an abundance of enhanced personal outcomes. Examples include (<https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf>) better developed emotional intelligence, greater degrees of relaxation and escapism, increased knowledge of self-identity, reduced depressive symptoms, greater motivation to learn, increased social and cultural capital, higher levels of self-esteem, longer life expectancy, better developed communication skills, reduced likelihood of developing dementia, better academic outcomes, higher standards of living, greater degrees of parent-child communication, more developed levels of empathy, relatedness and knowledge of other cultural groups – I could go on. Again, the list is long. Being a frequent reader – and becoming one requires strong levels of literacy – is more of an advantage (https://ukla.org/wp-content/uploads/November_11_Resource_TC_Reading_for_Pleasure.pdf) in terms of enjoying positive outcomes in life than having well educated parents. Therefore, finding ways to engage students in reading, and encouraging and expecting high levels of literacy, may be *one of the most effective ways to leverage social change* and to improve standards of living, particularly for those at the bottom of the heap.

If you care about social justice, you must care about literacy

With all of the above in mind, we must be firm and unwavering about what literacy is – and what it is not. The danger in taking a broad, culturally relativist view of what literacy is most likely to be faced by children who arrive at school with rich cultural knowledge but *that does not mean they are literate in the way a skilled reader is*. Of course, a teacher who has been told to accept cultural skills and knowledge as literacy can easily pass that child as being literate, and there we have it – generations of children potentially slipping through the cracks, equipped with high levels of cultural knowledge (which is valuable in its own right and is something we want children to have – and which is not mutually exclusive with strong literacy skills) but unable to read and write to a level that will open doors and expand their world. The ever-increasing list of what some argue literacy is is a concern at best and criminal at worst. ***To deny a generation of children access to the sorts of things I list above is something we should all be condemning.*** Silence on this matter is inexcusable. That's why I'm speaking out – not for my child, who is growing up in a home full of books, where he is engaged in conversations, and where reading and writing are valued. But for the children who desperately need us to teach them literacy as we all know it to be – not the warped version that appeases those intent on expanding our understanding of literacy but that denies children access to human rights and the opportunity to flourish in life.

Dr. Melissa Derby (Ngāti Ranginui) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and is co-director of the Early Years Research Centre at the University of Waikato. Melissa's primary area of research is in early literacy, where she explores the role of whānau and pūrākau in fostering foundational literacy skills. She also has an interest in Māori education and success. Her scholarship has been recognised through a range of awards, including a Fulbright-Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Graduate Award, a SAGE Young Writer's Award, and Te Kōpūnui Māori Research Award from the Royal Society of New Zealand.



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2 comments

1. **Irana** says:

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Indeed literacy gives the life and soul to who we are and provides opportunities to engage holistically in the socio-cultural and other environments. It is the basic literacy skills to read and write that are important.

Lata Rana

REPLY

2. **Alison** says:

NOVEMBER 16, 2023 AT 1:56 PM

Thank you Melissa for continuing to argue that literacy is a human right. Without it one's ability to participate in 21st Century society is so limited. Think literacy AND application in context – applying one's ability to read and write in health literacy, in financial literacy, in digital literacy for citizenship. Literacy is so important for shifting the dial on inequality. Keep up the good work

Alison Sutton, adult literacy advocate and founder of Talking Matters, a national campaign to get people talking more to babies to enhance their life success and literacy.

REPLY