Why Are Our 15 year olds Falling Behind in Literacy?

By Misty Adoniou

The recent results for NAPLAN, Australia's national standardised tests of literacy and numeracy, confirm a disturbing trend. Our teenagers are actually going backwards in writing, and making no progress in the other areas of testing. The question is – why?

A close examination of the 2016 NAPLAN statistics provides some clues. In the Writing paper less than 2% of Year 3 students in Australia are below the minimum benchmark standard. It would seem to be very achievable, then, to address the needs of this 2%. Instead, by Year 5, 5% of students have dropped below minimum benchmark standards. The drop off continues in Year 7, and by Year 9, more than 15% of students are below the standard. We do not collect standardised test data beyond Year 9, but if the trend continues – and we have no evidence to suggest otherwise – that would mean around a third of students graduate school below minimum benchmark standards in writing.

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These statistics suggest that schooling is either not bothering to intervene for these failing students, or is not being effective in its interventions. The government response to this continual decline has not only been inadequate, it has been nonsensical. The only response the Federal government has made in the area of literacy development since NAPLAN test results have begun to map this decline has been the overhaul of the Australian Curriculum to increase the emphasis on phonics in the first three years of schooling.

Phonics is a necessary component of any literacy program, but in and of itself is insufficient to produce competent readers and writers. And our declining results will not be fixed by focussing even more on phonics. The fact that the national results for Year 3 students are good tell us that our children have mastered the phonics component of literacy.

Our Year 9 students are not failing because they don't know their sounds. They fail because they cannot comprehend inferential meaning in complex texts, and they cannot work with English grammar in sophisticated ways to craft their own messages.

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Our students reach the middle years of school with poor vocabularies and unable to work with language in sophisticated ways. In short, they write like they speak. They do this because we teach them simple decoding in the first years of school, using books that mimic spoken language, and somehow think we have inoculated them against literacy failure for the rest of their lives. It turns out that early reading success with simplified levelled reading schemes is not an iron clad predictor of later reading success.

At around about Year 4, students must make the shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Not only does the grammar of the texts they read become more complex, but so does the vocabulary. Those easy and predictable texts they have been exposed to up until now, with their controlled grammar and vocabulary, essentially starve our children of the skills they need to do the authentic reading that is now expected of them. By the time they reach high school they are linguistically malnourished, unable to deal with the more complex language they encounter. This affects their writing too, because reading is the key to good writing. If we want students to write a considered and convincing argument, then they must be reading exemplary arguments. If we want them to write an evocative and engaging narrative then they must be reading great narratives.

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Fang (2012) describes the development of language over these stages of schooling as shifting from basic to abstract, and then to metaphoric. These three language functions build up and interweave as school progresses. Too many of our students stumble at the shift from basic to abstract language, as slipping scores in Year 5

indicate. Even fewer will make the shift to metaphoric use of language, as the Year 9 results clearly show. Success in school can thus be predicted by a student's capacity to work with all three language functions.

To add further complexity to these descriptions of language functions, specialised language skills differ across the disciplines. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) characterise this as a shift from basic literacy through to intermediate literacy, and then to disciplinary literacy. If we are to stop the decline in literacy standards then we must focus on the development of our students' skills in working with abstract and metaphoric language, across all the disciplines.

Disciplinary literacy is marked by its use of specialist genres. 'Genre' in this context is broader than the notion of literary genes, e.g. fantasy, crime, romance genres of literary fiction. School genres are the socially mediated predictable text structures that change according to the social purpose of the writing, e.g. narratives, recounts, reports, explanations, expositions, procedures. Some genres are more prevalent in some discipline areas than others. For example, explanations are more likely to be required in the scientific disciplines, while narratives were more prevalent in the humanities. Lack of explicit instruction in how these socially constructed genres work in the school years has been linked to low literacy achievement levels (Christie and Derewianka, 2008).

The language structures in each genre differ; the grammar and the use of vocabulary is very specific to the genre. As a consequence, the basic generalised literacy skills gained in the lower primary years will not be sufficient for later years (Cummins, 2015). Moreover, that specialist language differs for each discipline. So a student may be proficient in the disciplinary literacy of English but not in Biology or Mathematics. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008, p. 43) observe of students in the U.S.:

> *Early learning gains, instead of catapulting students toward continued literacy advancement, disappear by the time these students reach eighth grade.*

They categorise approaches to literacy instruction where the emphasis is heavily resourced towards early years instruction on general skills as a 'vaccination' conception of teaching literacy (p. 43) which does not appear to be working. Their observations of the situation in the US seem just as applicable to the Australian context.

Literacy instruction must continue into the high school years . . .

Literacy instruction must continue into the high school years, and it must occur within the disciplines. The English teacher cannot be expected to teach the literacy of Science, because the English teacher will have little knowledge of how texts in Mathematics are organised, and vice versa. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) found scientists, mathematicians, and historians think, read, and write differently from one another. They approach reading and writing tasks in quantifiably different ways. These fundamental language and literacy differences occur because each discipline has developed from specific ways of thinking about the world, and the consequent communication of those thoughts and understandings also differs (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). That is, *literacy within disciplines is a function of the development of that body of disciplinary knowledge* – an integral part of the discipline.

As a consequence, becoming literate in the discipline areas involves an initiation into the disciplinary community and its ways of thinking, behaving, and communicating. For example, in History, you may expect the writer to have a bias and you watch for language that indicates the writer's position. Identifying bias helps you understand where the text sits within your own research. In Mathematical reading you don't expect bias. An important part of preparation for reading in History, then, is understanding the allegiances of the author, whilst in English you might simply enjoy the allegiances of the author and in Maths you simply wouldn't consider the author at all.

In English, elaborate prose may help build empathy with the characters or put the reader in the time and setting, whilst in Maths you do not expect to encounter redundant vocabulary. In Maths you need to understand the meaning of every word or you are likely to miss crucial information. In English, the abundance of words allows the reader to make good guesses at words they don't understand. In Maths, words are chosen not for the mood they evoke, but for their role in describing or solving the problem. Therefore, you need to understand the precise meaning of words in the mathematical contexts, rather than their general or everyday

meaning. For example, the meaning of 'half' in English describing a 'half-hearted attempt' is very different from the Maths instruction to find 'half of' something.

Literacy across and within disciplines, therefore, cannot be tackled simply through the application of literacy strategies learned back in primary school, nor through the application of literacy strategies being learned in the high school English classroom.

Literacy must be at the forefront of high school curriculum planning . . .

Literacy must be at the forefront of high school curriculum planning and not an emergency ripcord pulled when unfavourable NAPLAN results come in. There are no quick fixes, and nor is it a matter of temporarily filling the gaps in high school until primary school 'gets their act together'. Literacy rates will continue to decline in high school until high school also understands its permanent role in ensuring our students continue to develop their capacity to work with language in increasingly abstract and metaphoric ways, across each of the discipline areas.

In summary, the decline in literacy scores of our high school students will not be halted until we:

1. Stop defining literacy in increasingly narrow terms, with too much emphasis being placed on decoding skills and not enough on comprehension skills
2. Stop assuming that reading and writing is 'done and dusted' in the early years of school
3. Start putting exemplary literature back into the hands of our students, from their very first days of school – less reading schemes, and more borrowing from the library
4. Start providing professional development to support discipline teachers understand the language and literacy demands of their specific disciplines, and how to teach this to their students

References

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