

*Alice Springs Education (Mparntwe) Declaration:*

Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. They need to deal with information abundance, and navigate questions of trust and authenticity. They need flexibility, resilience, creativity, and the ability and drive to keep on learning throughout their lives. (Education Council, 2019, p.3)

The *Foundation for Learning and Literacy* supports the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. We are particularly concerned with the role literacy plays in ensuring our children become compassionate, confident, competent and creative citizens in an increasingly complex world. Literacy is about making and communicating meaning. It is a powerful, wide-ranging life skill that includes the traditional notions of speaking, reading and writing as well as new kinds of communication that continue to arrive with new technologies.

The Foundation provides information about relevant research and classroom practices that establishes an evidence base for effective literacy teaching and learning. Our aim is to support teachers and parents who work everyday with children to give them the power, the joy and the skills of reading and writing. The Foundation's resources will also be of interest to anyone concerned with educational policy making, including politicians, business and the media.

The following touchstones for effective literacy teaching and learning are supported by research, and classroom success. To read more about the research evidence base, or see examples of classroom practice which exemplify each touchstone, have a look around this site.

## TOUCHSTONES

**1. A fair and equitable society depends upon every citizen being able to read and write. Being able to read and write gives people equal access to information, employment, enjoyment and further educational opportunities.**

Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity, its obligations to its First Nations peoples, and its ongoing migrant and refugee intakes place great demands on Australian schools to develop the language and literacy resources of its diverse young people.

Unfortunately, Australians living in poverty are more likely to be poor readers and writers given that those who are poor or dis-advantaged may lack the opportunities we know support learning to read and write. Often they have missed out on factors that are important when learning to be literate including:

- parents who can read and write
- homes full of books filled with rich stories
- meaningful parent-child talk
- real opportunities to share in reading and writing for different purposes
- quality pre-school experiences.

One in six Australian children currently live in poverty and the gap between the very rich and the very poor is widening. While we wait for politicians to work on systemic changes that reduce this gap, educators must step in. Quality literature and rich language, along with exemplary teaching must be the mainstay of all early childhood classrooms – including classrooms in disadvantaged areas.

Successful literacy and learning in Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse schools also requires recognition of students who are learning English as their additional language or dialect. It requires commitment to providing targeted, language-based teaching so students can achieve their literacy and learning potential in English.

**2. Oral language is the foundation for all meaningful reading and writing.**

The importance of parents, caregivers and teachers spending time playing with children engaging with sounds and words in rhymes and songs; sharing stories; actively listening and responding to questions meaningfully; wondering together; and talking about shared experiences cannot be overstated.

**3. Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and to imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.**

Teachers and parents can support children and young people to read and write and talk in response to what is happening in their known community and their wider world. Engagement and motivation increase when learning is authentic, as this brings relevance and rigour to learning. It also allows children and young people to connect ideas and transfer knowledge across content areas. Every child has the right to be engaged and motivated in their learning – indeed, it is a condition for all learning. Reflect on the last thing you learned to do – undoubtedly you were motivated to learn because you either wanted to learn it (those French macarons?) or you needed to learn it (that new accounting software?).

**4. Creativity and imagination matter in ongoing literacy learning.**

Children and young people are innately curious, imaginative and playful. They ask questions about why things are as they are. Parents and teachers need to foster this inquiry, exploration, sense of wonder and deep questioning. Hearing and telling stories, sharing quality literature and imaginative story writing are critical for children's ongoing creative language and literacy development. Drawing helps to symbolically represent or

visualise thinking, as does drama and role play. Arts rich language activities across all stages of schooling foster creative and critical thinking, compassion, self confidence and a respect for diverse opinions and perspectives. These activities are part of the meaning-making process – part of learning to be literate.

**5. *'Making sense' is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.***

The purpose of reading and writing is to create meaning and communicate. We read to make sense of and respond to what someone has written, and we write in ways that we aim to make sense for other readers. Young children understand this from the moment they put symbols on paper and ask adults to 'read' them. Reading and writing instruction must keep this fundamental purpose of reading and writing at the forefront at all times throughout the early years of schooling and during the later years.

**6. *All children are different. Their experiences are different, their environments are different, their ways of thinking are different. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy learning does not work.***

Classroom teachers need to work skilfully to identify where individual children and young people are in their literacy and language learning. They teach learners the skills and strategies they need in order to understand, construct, reconstruct, create and communicate meanings through oral language, reading and writing. They support them to extend their repertoire of strategies so that they apply these to texts of increasing complexity. The creative arts (dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts) are different ways of making meaning - different kinds of literacies - and need to be embedded within the literacy program. Literacy development does not happen in a lock-step, linear sequence that assumes all children are the same and therefore follow the same developmental pathway.

**7. *Students learn to read through multiple opportunities to engage in reading; the more time students spend on independent reading, the more their reading improves.***

Students need time to read every day, with easy access to a wide variety of quality literature from which to choose. This independent, self-selected reading leads to growth and improvement in vocabulary knowledge, spelling, comprehension and children's ability to monitor their own reading. English grammar skills, writing styles and even gains on standardised reading achievement tests will improve when children have more time to read and talk about what they are reading. Similarly, children and young people become better at writing by writing every day for real audiences and real purposes. Daily reading and writing need to happen at every stage of schooling ensuring children are part of a community of learners reading and writing across all learning areas.

**8. *The main purpose for literacy assessment is to provide the child, their teachers, parents and school systems with information that informs all stakeholders of the child's learning and growth.***

Effective assessment that impacts positively on a child's learning is an ongoing process, occurring before, during and after learning and teaching every day. It involves many different strategies to enable children to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. The most effective assessment strategies are negotiated with

learners to ensure expectations are clear, are linked to instruction and provide insights for the child and the teacher about what learning is next. It is important that snapshot national assessments and annual standardised tests are not overemphasised. Instead our main efforts should concentrate on in class assessments which can provide clear insights for every child. Thoughtful and clear feedback should be given to children so they are confident about their next learning.

**9. *Effective literacy teaching and learning need to continue beyond the early years as texts increase in complexity.***

Once learners are moving beyond early literacy, we need to sustain their early progress and excitement so that they engage with and respond to complex texts across all content areas. Ways of dealing with the complexities of these texts require continued modelling, discussion, explicit feedback and teacher-led inquiry, to enable students to infer complex meanings and build rich vocabularies in different discipline areas. Teachers need to help children use complex and challenging language so they can understand, question the taken for granted and negotiate the world in which they live. All students need to master the specialised academic language of different Key Learning Areas.

**10. *Teachers teach children. Programs don't.***

Teachers make the difference in children's learning at school, just as parents make the difference at home. Even a good program relies on a good teacher for it to have an impact on learning for individual learners. Like all professions, teachers must stay in touch with advancements in the field. They must draw on contemporary, valid, rigorously-conducted and school-tested research to inform their judgements to target their teaching to support all children in their care. As education researcher Michael Fullan notes: The solution is not a program: it is a small set of common principles and practices relentlessly pursued. Focused practitioners, not programs, drive success. Professionals working together with focus is what counts. (Fullan 2010, *All Systems Go: The Change imperative for whole system reform*). At all levels of the system (school, network, region, state and national) teachers need ongoing, embedded professional learning that continues to build their expertise and capability, particularly in literacy.

**11. *When parents and carers read to and with their children, everyone benefits.***

Language and literacy skills established during early childhood are critical for later school success. Parents and caregivers are an important part of their child's learning in those early years. The best foundation for children who start school speaking a language other than English is to develop literacy in that language and build on the special learning resources they bring to school, including their storytelling, home literacy practices and other cultural knowledge and experiences. Parents need to maintain their interest in their children's reading and writing all through their school years. Learning to read and write is an ongoing process that doesn't end when home reading books stop coming home. Parents need to continue talking to their children and young adults about what they are reading and writing at school. It is a wonderful way to see what is on their minds when they may not be as communicative as they were when younger. And schools need to keep the doors open for parents, and ensure communication channels are clear.