

# THE CONVERSATION



## Children in care are falling behind in literacy and numeracy – but the problem is far bigger than that

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Young children enter care as a result of neglect or abuse, which has a big impact on their ability to engage in school. [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

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A report out today has found that children in care are less likely to achieve the national minimum standards in literacy and numeracy, with the gap growing substantially over time.

The report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) compared child protection data and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results.

It found that while 81.4% of year 3 students in care met the writing benchmark, this reduces to 43.9% for year 9 students. In year 7, just 70.9% of students in care met the reading benchmark, compared to 94.2% of students nationally.

This is similar for year 5 numeracy, where 71.3% met the benchmark compared to 93.4% nationally.

With approximately 59,000 children living in care in Australia, this is a significant issue.

### Educational challenges facing children in care

Young children often enter care as a result of neglect or abuse, which has substantial impacts on their well-being, language development and social inclusion.

AIHW spokesperson Justine Boland explains that children in care have:

*complex personal histories and multiple forms of disadvantage, including poverty, maltreatment, family dysfunction and instability in care and schooling.*

Students who are placed in care often start off with lower learning outcomes. They tend to have fewer opportunities to engage in learning outside school, such as reading with an adult, for example.

They continue to experience lower levels of academic engagement as they get older and are increasingly disadvantaged.

The effects are cumulative, particularly when combined with existing factors of equity and access, social disadvantage, disability, Indigeneity and geo-location. Moving to different homes on a regular basis and irregular school attendance are also factors.

Research shows the whole process of going into care, from before they have entered a care home to life during care, has a significant impact on a child's ability to attend and perform well in school.

These have a compounding effect, leading to high rates of disengagement and school dropout in later years.

## **Will increasing literacy and numeracy scores help?**

There is no doubt that improving literacy is central to not just increased educational attainment, but also better life opportunities and social inclusion.

However, we also need a much more sophisticated understanding of educational disadvantage.

I have written [previously](#) about the importance of school funding that addresses unequal access to educational opportunities. We know that there are clear links between factors of disadvantage and educational equity.

Reports such as this one from AIHW provide an important starting point for a conversation about equity and access in education.

## **Target funding at the disadvantaged**

It also fits with the general arguments around why we need the Gonski funding package as it was originally intended. The goal was to target disadvantage to ensure that:

differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions;

all students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances.

We need to be having difficult conversations about how we are going to provide a more equitable education for Australia's most disadvantaged children, including those in care.

As well as improving educational attainment, we need to address a whole range of factors. These include improving school participation and engagement, reducing levels of suspension and expulsion, increasing retention and year 12 completion rates, and providing alternative pathways from school to work and further study. We also need to address a range of social, cultural, economic and emotional factors outside the school grounds.

## **We need support from all sides**

It is **important** that children have a sense of security, stability, continuity and social support both at home and at school.

Providing young people with strategies for developing resilience is also key.

Consistency and **stability** in school attendance and participation as well as in care arrangements are critically important for increasing the capacity for young children in care to engage fully in education.

Unfortunately, these are not issues with an easy policy fix or a simple curriculum intervention waiting at hand. It takes a long time and co-ordinated effort –involving governments, non-government organisations, schools and education systems, courts and child protection authorities, foster and community care providers, families and communities more broadly – to make the difference that is needed.

When you consider that nearly nine in every 1,000 children (0-17 years) are living in state-ordered care, it is a very real problem for many young Australians.

The **National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children** demonstrates a commitment from Australian governments to ensure that children live in safe and supportive families and communities. However, much more needs to be done.

Providing a meaningful education for children in care has benefits not only for future employment prospects, but also for health, participation in society and belonging to communities. Increasing NAPLAN scores is not enough.



Schools  
Literacy  
Child abuse  
Numeracy  
NAPLAN