

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA AND MRS FRANCES UNDERWOOD
TO OPEN THE 35TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
COUNCIL FOR ADULT LITERACY, HOBART, THURSDAY,
20TH SEPTEMBER 2012**

HE It is a great pleasure for me and for my wife to welcome you all to Tasmania to the 35th National Conference of the Council for Adult Literacy. May I say at the outset that I am in total agreement with the statement on your conference website that describes Tasmania as “one of the world’s most stunning environments.”¹ That’s absolutely right and my wife and I hope that those of you who have not been to our island State before can find time to look around after the conference because it is particularly beautiful in early Spring. I am sorry that we were not able to meet you at the reception at Government House but we did not return from an overseas holiday until last evening after the reception was over.

My wife and I were specifically asked to open this conference jointly and we are pleased to do just that as we do much of the Governor’s non-constitutional work together. My background is the law and my wife’s background is education. I thought that probably the organisers had asked me to play a part in opening this conference in the hope that I would treat you to my 3-hour dissertation on the

¹ <http://www.tcal.org.au/12conf/index.htm> accessed 17th July 2012

history of the Law of Trusts and the development of the principles of equitable remedies and I was most surprised when my wife told me that she thought that was most unlikely and that it would be unwise of me to embark on such a course. I have to say that I was quite disappointed that that was her view of my interesting dissertation and I was put in mind of a dinner for a newly formed group of law students that I addressed when I was Chief Justice. Actually I thought it was a really good address. The students nodded gravely when I made a serious point and laughed quite loudly at my jokes and in the end the applause can only be described as sustained. On the way out the Society's President thanked me for my address and asked me what fee was. I drew myself up to my pompous best and sternly said that judges don't charge fees for giving a public address especially one to law students and the President said "oh, that's so good because we are a new society and don't have much money and we are saving up to get some really good next year.

I have to tell you that my wife and I find this the most depressing conference that we have ever attended. Although I was generally aware of a high illiteracy rate in our country and in Tasmania in particular, I was shocked to learn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics data that 49 % of the population of this State aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate. The ABS tells us that "approximately 174,000 people do not have the basic skills needed to understand and use information from newspapers,

magazines, books and brochures and that overall, Tasmania ha[s] the lowest level of adult literacy skills in the nation.² Worse, the same data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 1996.

We found these numbers so hard to believe that we had a chat just the other day to the Executive Officer of Group Training Australia in this State, Mr Geoff Fader. He told us that anecdotal evidence from Group Training right across the country confirms the ABS data and worse, he said that one on one help offered by Group Training in this State to improve functional literacy is often refused. Mr Fader said that no less than 2 out every 3 applicants for an apprenticeship are unemployable because they lack basic numeracy and numeracy skills. In the light of this it is not surprising to read in a paper produced by the Australian Government that “by 2015 it is estimated there will be a shortfall of 500,000 skilled workers despite the fact that 1.6 million Australians will have completed a vocational education and training by that time.”³

It seems to us that Australia is facing one of the biggest socio-economic crises in its history and the fact that there is no evidence of

² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Adult Literacy and Life Skills Programme, Summary Results 2006. Cat No. 4228.0

³ “National Workforce Development Fund Skilling Your Business:” Department of Industry Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2012 ISBN 978-1-922-125-00-2.

an improvement in the literacy rate over the last 14 years makes one think that a solution still evades us.

Given that in accordance with the law of the land it is compulsory for every child to attend school for at least 10 years how can it be that at the end of that time nearly half of all those children are functionally illiterate?

Perhaps I should ask my wife that question for she is a musician with an A Mus A, and a BA, and a Dip Ed She is a registered teacher and was the Head of the Friends' Junior School, a section of a large private Pre K - 12 school here in Hobart, for 15 years.

MU Good Morning Everyone. Before trying to answer my husband's question, I would just like to congratulate your organization and each of you on your sterling efforts to make a positive difference for good in our community and in the lives of individuals, by helping them to overcome the disadvantage of being functionally illiterate and the disastrous impact that must have on their lives. I know that you all feel passionately about finding a solution to the situation we find ourselves in. You only have to talk with Mr Fader for half an hour to be convinced of that. We all know that there is not one silver bullet nor a one size fits all solution, but passion and purpose are great motivators for raising awareness,

finding creative solutions, overcoming difficulties, and for igniting a desire to learn. And we need to become a nation of learners. If you know you have a capacity to learn anything is possible. You don't have to wait passively for someone else to "fix" things. Or as Peter Ellyard puts it, the tendency in our culture "to wait for the cavalry to arrive rather than help [yourself]"⁴

I am sure you would agree that education and training is not just about building skills for the globalised economies of the future. It is also about building the lives of individuals; growing successful, independent, self-motivated adults who feel socially connected and who can participate fully in life. And that is the job description that parents, teachers and the community have in common. We are all involved in making the future. We are the trustees for those who come after us and your organization clearly takes those responsibilities seriously.

In answer to my husband's question I could say that the reasons for the high rate of functional illiteracy are as many and varied as the 174,000 individuals who suffer from this disability. But, to cut to the chase and speak as a former principal, being taught properly in the first place is critical to success but not being taught properly is often due to multiple causes ranging from poor teaching, poverty, absenteeism, learning difficulties, to disengagement, lack of

⁴ Ellyard, Peter *Designing 2050* TPM TXT Victoria 2008

motivation and cultural attitudes. Whatever the cause, the outcome is the same; functional illiteracy. The very sad thing is it doesn't have to be like this and in many countries it isn't like this. There are some things we can't change but there are many that we can.

And those are the quality of teaching and learning; home and early life experiences of children; and community attitudes and societal values about education, learning and living; to name but three. It is hard to ignore the findings of research conducted by John Hattie⁵ for the Australian Council of Educational Research that attempted to identify the sources of variance in student achievement. He found that 50% of that variance arose out of the personal characteristics of the students, their prior experience, the major effects of the home and what they bring to the table. Other home effects such as expectations and encouragement accounted for a further 5-10%. That's a total of 60% of the causes of variance in student achievement were due to out of school factors. The attributes of schools and peers account for another 5-10 % But, teachers, what they know, do and care about account for a 30% variance in student achievement. Teachers therefore are powerful people and have the capacity to change lives. If you get it right as a teacher you give someone confidence in their ability to fly to unimagined destinations. If you get it wrong it can have a limiting and long lasting effect on someone's life.

⁵ Hattie, John Teachers Make a Difference What is the Research Evidence? ACER October 2003

Why is it that some teachers (expert teachers) have a powerful positive affect on achievement and others have only an ordinary and sometimes even a negative effect? Expert teachers have the aptitude, knowledge and skills to inspire and motivate students to want to learn, find what they are good at and enable them to become independent learners. Most importantly expert teachers know how to consistently and rigorously measure the effectiveness of their teaching. Anecdotally, we all - students, parents, other teachers and Principals - know who the expert teachers at a school are and they are not necessarily those whose classes get the highest marks in NAPLAN testing. The good news is that now we have something more to rely on than the Chinese whispers in the school yard and testing to predetermined outcomes; that is evidence from extensive research in the classroom that shows that all teachers are not equal. From 500,000 studies John Hattie⁶ has identified, out of all the positive influences on effective learning, those that have the greatest effect. The top 6 most effective influences are: effective feedback [and assessment] (teacher student/both ways), students' cognitive ability and prior life experiences, instructional quality, direct instruction, remediation/feedback and students' disposition to learn.

The attributes that expert teachers bring to their work result in higher quality learning than the teaching of less proficient or

⁶ Hattie, John *Visible Learning for Teachers Maximizing Impact on Learning* Pub. Routledge 2012

unqualified teachers. By quality of learning I mean depth of understanding, the ability to transfer learning and apply underlying concepts and principles to other situations. Hattie says, (I quote) “To assume that all teachers are equal brings all teachers down to the latest press scandal about a teacher. [The] profession deserves better than this.”⁷ To improve the quality of literacy and numeracy we have to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Both China and Singapore have put in place measures to achieve this to great effect⁸ in many cases using Australian research, that we have yet to apply in this country.

The next challenge is the characteristics, cognitive ability, prior experiences and home environment of the learner. This is a more difficult problem for the home culture is influenced by the values and culture of society generally. How can we ensure that education is valued and supported at home and generally in our society and that our very young, at risk children are given that positive start in life by their parents - their first teachers - that is essential for successful learning throughout life.

Personally, I believe Early Childhood has been one of the black holes of education. It has taken a long time for Australian society to recognize the truth in the observation” give me the child until he is 7

⁷ Hattie, John *Distinguishing Expert Teachers from Novice and Experienced Teachers* ACER 2003

⁸ See Australian “*Success in Asian schools driven by policies that target learning and teaching.*” 18/2/ 2012

and I will give you the man.” Perhaps we could also say show me the adult and I’ll show you the child. In my view the youngest children should have the most highly skilled, well trained, well-educated teachers who have a love of language and are qualified in the arts.

In my opinion the arts should be central to any early learning program. Why; because children are natural musicians, artists, actors and dancers and the arts are a natural foundation for literacy, language and the patterns of numeracy. The arts are accessible to everyone, and creatively, socially and emotionally nourishing. Learning through the arts enlivens the intellect and the emotions; fires up the imagination and has a positive influence on self-esteem, empathy, and creative development, and this carries over to all aspects of learning. Imagination, curiosity, initiative, original thinking, and a voracious appetite for, and love of learning are the natural endowments of young children. So often these attributes and attitudes are lost or killed in the formal education process. Keeping them intact by nurture through the arts is likely to result in a lifelong love of learning.⁹ I quote, “The arts [including music] are not mere diversions from the important business of education; they are essential resources.”¹⁰

⁹Primary Years Programme ,Music Scope and Sequence Pub. IBO 2004

¹⁰ Eisner, Elliot *The role of the Arts in Cognition and Curriculum* in Costa 2001, *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*. Pub. Assoc. for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

But, perhaps my husband is really asking “why has the school system failed so many?”

I would say that the question is inappropriate because it carries the implication that functional illiteracy is the sole responsibility of the school. Important though school is I would argue that it is everybody’s job. It seems to me that functional illiteracy is a cultural issue. Although the statistical fact that nearly half the population is functionally illiterate may shock, I doubt if it would shock or surprise many if it was said that half of the population of this country do not value education; do not value books; and do not value the creative arts. But if I said that more than half the population of Australia value sport, I expect that most of you would agree with me.

There is plenty of evidence that the children who come from a home where books are kept and read and where education is valued are likely to be literate, and there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. Blaming teachers is not productive, especially as so many children arrive at school the victims of poverty and/or poor parenting, already disadvantaged and despite the best efforts of schools and teachers, they never recover. Unlike Finland, China, Singapore and South Korea we live in a culture that does not value education. In fact it seems that Australia almost has an anti-intellectual culture. Why do we in the 21st Century, still define ourselves by our sporting prowess when we are good at so many other things? If there is no driving purpose or perceived need and no

experience of the joy and rewards of learning then it is difficult to teach anyone anything. In contrast, in South Korea, education is considered vital to a child's future; competition is fierce; children are hungry to learn and parents desperate for their child to succeed. Links between business and education are strong and by 2013 high speed broadband will deliver free digital text books.

Reading is important for school success but in many homes there are more pressing survival needs than reading to a child especially when television is an easier passive option. Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that in the most disadvantaged families 47% of children were never read to.¹¹ In all likelihood many of those parents would not have been able to read. The first teachers we have are our parents. In this context, one of the greatest advantages in life is to have engaged, informed and loving parents. One of the greatest injustices is not to have such parents. Early childhood learning is as much a social justice issue as an educational one. But I am not telling you anything you do not already know.

As TS Eliot said in 1932 "Questions of education are often discussed as if they bore no relation to the social system in which, and for which the education is carried on." He continued, "If

¹¹ "Turned on, Tuned in or Dropped Out?" Michael Bittman University of New England & Michael Siphthorp: Aust Institute of Family Studies p45 et seq.

education today seems to deteriorate, if it seems to become more and more chaotic and meaningless, it is primarily because we have both vague and diverse opinions about the kind of society we want. Education cannot be discussed in a void”¹²

The really difficult question is whereabouts in the cycle do you attempt to break in and how do you break in? Teaching literacy to individual adults is of course very valuable but what effect will that have on cultural attitudes? Teaching literacy in the prisons will improve rehabilitative prospects of individual prisoners but will that change cultural attitudes? It maybe that the vulnerable point is mothers and young children. If they can jointly be shown the importance of valuing education and the importance of books and reading that might gradually bring a change in cultural attitudes. But you are the experts, not me or my husband.

Our job is to welcome you and open your conference so I think that I should call upon my husband to do just that.

HE At the start of this opening I said that we I find this the most depressing conference that we have ever attended. That of course is not a reflection on you, but on the state of affairs that you are addressing. It is equally true to say that the work you are doing to address this state of affairs is of crucial importance to our country.

¹² Selected Prose. TS Eliot Edited John Hayward. Penguin Books, 1953 at p208.

A way to fix this huge problem must be found. For the sake of all Australians we both wish you every success in your endeavours at this important conference that we now jointly declare open.