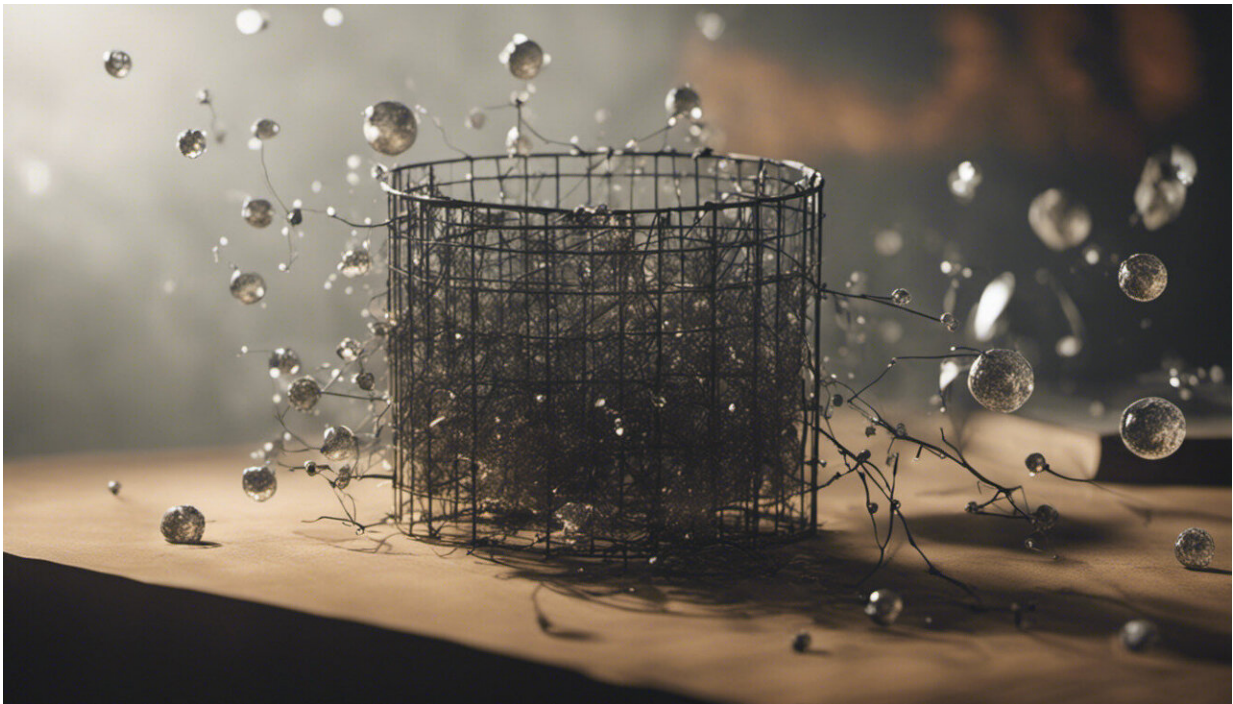


Online tutoring helps struggling students catch up

August 10 2021, by Sue Thomson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

One-on-one online tutoring for disadvantaged students has proved highly effective in helping them overcome their struggles with literacy and numeracy. The Smith Family, the national children's education charity, recently completed a small pilot of the program, Catch-Up Learning, for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Most made [above-](#)

[expected progress](#) in assessments of their literacy and numeracy by the end of the program.

About 100 children who participated in the program had one-on-one tutoring, with a qualified teacher, up to three times a week for 20 weeks. Being online, the tutoring could be done in the child's home at a time that suited the family.

The participants were students in years 4, 5, 7 or 8 who were struggling with [literacy](#) and [numeracy](#) skills. One in five were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Two in five had a health and disability issue.

The program was informed by strong evidence from analysis by the UK's [Education Endowment Foundation](#) that one-on-one tutoring with a trained teacher is very effective in helping learners catch up. It's particularly helpful for younger learners who are behind their peers in [primary school](#), and for reading and maths skills.

What did the program achieve?

Program attendance was high, including over the summer holidays—an extraordinary achievement given how prized those holidays are! Students were highly engaged and many increased their love of learning over the course of the program. This contributed to the strong improvements in literacy and numeracy they achieved.

Students were [assessed](#) before and after the program. Skills growth was measured, taking into account the length of time the program ran.

The results were highly promising: 86% of students made above-expected progress in literacy or numeracy. Two in five achieved above-expected progress in both subjects. By the end of the program, six in ten

students had achieved literacy levels equivalent to or stronger than their year-level peers.

Our latest research shows online catch-up tutoring delivered by specialist teachers in students' homes helps disadvantaged students to improve key literacy and numeracy skills and fosters an increased love of learning. Read more on the promising findings. <https://t.co/bmgCRW9Eyn>

— The Smith Family (@SmithFamily_org) [August 9, 2021](#)

Insights from the tutors confirm a range of positive changes for students. One tutor of a year 5 [student said](#):

"[He] is excited to tell me how well he did in a particular lesson [...] His attitude toward learning has improved so much as he learnt more during the sessions and became confident in school as a result."

Another [said](#) of their year 4 student: "I was astonished at how quickly they made gains in literacy [...] their reading galloped from struggling with basic texts to being able to read nine out of 10 words."

Catch-Up Learning confirms what parents and teachers across Australia know—with the right support at the right time, all children can develop a love of learning and in turn develop key literacy and numeracy skills. The Smith Family will use the evaluation to refine the program and move to a second stage pilot with more students.

It is also hoped these findings resonate with education departments and schools during times when students are unable to attend school.

The program is not, however, a panacea for all the educational challenges faced by many students experiencing financial disadvantage.

Participants were on average three years behind their peers in numeracy at the start of the program. Unsurprisingly, despite their significant progress over the 20 weeks, they didn't make up this large gap. There is more to be done.

Why does this skills gap matter?

In our technology-rich 21st century, strong literacy and [numeracy skills](#) are prerequisites for Australians to find a job, access services, participate in e-commerce and keep connected.

Unfortunately, [research](#) shows a clear and persistent relationship in Australia between socioeconomic background and students' educational outcomes. Foundations for success in literacy and numeracy are laid early on.

Childhood maths skills are predictive of later learning and achievement. Children who enjoy reading, read more. This, in turn, helps them to become strong readers. The converse is also true—poor readers lose motivation, tend to read less, and this leads them to falling further behind.

Data from international assessments show significant numbers of Australian children are not meeting important literacy and numeracy benchmarks. In the latest Trends in International Maths and Science Study ([TIMSS](#)), less than half (48%) of Australia's year 4 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds achieved or exceeded the national proficiency standard in numeracy, compared to 82% of those from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Similarly, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study ([PIRLS](#)) shows 57% of year 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students met the national proficiency standard, compared to 83% of non-Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander students.

These gaps have persisted despite the efforts of students, parents, teachers and schools over many years. They're also pre-COVID gaps, with [concerns](#) that remote learning [may have widened them](#). These children are in danger of not being able to participate economically and socially in our community.

Australia must invest in catching up

We can and must do better. These skills gaps aren't inevitable.

The Catch-Up Learning [program](#) confirms international evidence of the value of tutoring for helping children who are behind in literacy and numeracy. But through its innovations—using online technology so tutoring takes place in the student's home, with their carer's engagement a key component—it has gone further. These innovations contributed to the outcomes achieved.

So Catch-Up Learning is helping to build the evidence base of how young Australians can be supported to achieve educationally. Australia should seize the opportunity to build on this work.

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