

THE garage in Michael Stuart's Perth home bears all the hallmarks of a skilled man and good provider - rows of well-maintained family bicycles, kayaks and two sleek motorbikes. Inside, tucked on a shelf above the kitchen table where younger son Luke is finishing his homework, is a motorised replica of a fishing vessel that Stuart made. "I'm good at working with my hands and I like fixing things," says Stuart (opposite), who works fly-in fly-out shifts as a minesite scaffolder.

Yet for over two decades he kept a secret from everyone but his wife and two sons. "It started in primary school when I fell behind in reading and spelling, then they pulled me out for special classes, and the other kids called me dumb. So I learnt to hide it from everyone - classmates, friends and teachers - and I found jobs where I didn't have to write and spell." Fear knotted his stomach every time he thought his secret was out. "Whenever the phone rang at work I'd look around and hope someone else would answer it. If I took a phone message down, the person on the phone would virtually have to spell every word to me. Then I'd be asked, 'What does it say? You wrote it.' And I'd say, 'I dunno'.

"I knew I had to do something but the fear of telling people kept me back. To me, not spelling or reading well means you're not bright. My wife said, 'I can't make the phone call, you've got to make it.' And I put it off for four years."

Eventually he made the call to Read Write Now! in Perth where, once a week for five years, he worked one-on-one with volunteer literacy tutors. "I'd come home from night shift and go straight to a lesson, so it was hard." But Stuart, now 44, says he tackled his literacy problems in the nick of time; minesite safety requires written tests on a regular basis. "You do a day's safety induction and there's a questionnaire afterwards. Before it was just answering by filling in box A, B or C, but now you have to write the answers." The gnawing fear has gone. "I'm confident now when they put a form in front of me. I'm not thinking, 'How am I going to fill it out?'"

Gabrielle Worthington has viewed Australia's adult literacy problem from a different vantage point. She runs a business selling commercial laundry equipment at her factory on a busy intersection near Perth airport. Dependable Laundry Solutions employs 15 people and needs more - Western Australia's resource boom means more mining camps and busy motels, and greater demand for well-equipped laundries. But when Worthington sought to hire workers for her warehouse last year, she was appalled. "It was a big, big eye-opener," she says, shaking her head.

"I discovered that finding a young person who can read and legibly write was hard." Applicant after applicant failed simple tasks. "I assumed everyone could read a consignment note or an instruction manual. But they can't read a road map, or spell the street name."

Poor literacy isn't merely academic, she says; it hurts the bottom line. "If we send them out on the road with a bunch of orders, they might deliver the wrong machine to the wrong

address. If they select the wrong part number in the warehouse and it's installed, there's an hour or two of my technicians' time to replace it."

Worthington is a mother of five, grandmother of six, for whom reading to kids at the kitchen table and checking their spelling came naturally. Only her employer role has brought her face-to-face with a problem that government, businesses and educators have been grappling with for years. The Lucky Country has produced significant numbers of people - many of whom, like Stuart, are not migrants - who struggle to read newspapers, follow a recipe, make sense of timetables or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.

Clear evidence began to emerge in 2006, when the Australian Bureau of Statistics undertook an Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey as part of an OECD comparative study. It estimated that more than four million adult Australians - or around 46 per cent of its workers - had literacy and numeracy skills that fell below a level required to function well in everyday life and work.

In case you're tempted to believe this is simply a reflection of high levels of immigration to Australia, and migrants with a poor command of English as a second language, think again. The survey screened out people with such low levels of English, leaving a representative sample of 9000 people aged between 15 and 74 who were given a booklet and asked to complete tasks containing "real-life" scenarios using texts such as newspaper articles, advertisements, diagrams and maps. When their skill levels were rated in five categories, from highly literate down, a large number fell below level three, the cut-off point for sub-standard skills. Forty-six per cent had less than minimum prose literacy skills; 47 per cent had poor document-reading skills; and 53 per cent failed to meet the required numeracy skills. Prominent at the bottom level, predictably, were those individuals from the ranks of Australia's 300,000 unemployed.

Four years later, in 2010, industry sounded the alarm. The Australian Industry Group asked 550 of its members if low literacy and numeracy were significant workplace problems. According to 75 per cent of respondents, the answer was yes - and it affected "all occupational categories", from apprentices and clerical workers to managers and engineers. AIG's executive director Heather Ridout took to the airwaves to warn that "hundreds of millions of dollars" was needed to address poor literacy and numeracy skills of four million Australian workers. "This doesn't mean that four million people can't read, write or undertake very basic mathematical calculations," she said. "But it does mean that almost half of the workforce can't confidently use or understand typical workplace documents such as standard operating procedures, job applications, payroll forms, transport schedules, maps tables and charts."

In that same year - ironically the 10th anniversary of Australia's national language and literacy policy - Skills Australia released Australian Workforce Futures, a report that warned the Federal Government that many workers couldn't understand the meaning of everyday words and phrases such as "mandatory", "hearing protection", "procedure" and "authorised".

Worthington isn't surprised. "One of our older workers nailed a sign up upside down, and that's when we realised he couldn't possibly pass a forklift truck test." But what bothers her and her staff, mostly experienced employees in their late 50s and early 60s who will retire within a decade, is that so many younger people seem ill-equipped for work and life in general. "We've got a generation of kids who are rewarded for participation but can't read or write properly. I wonder if they're losing the joy of reading."

Worthington has made the literacy issue a personal one. She asked to visit a local high school to address prospective youngsters. "I refuse to believe there's a kid out there who can't learn. It's up to adults to find the key." At Kent Street Senior High School, she donated a washer and dryer to help provide clean uniforms to disadvantaged teenagers - some refugees, but mainly Australian-born students. It's one way of breaking the cycle of chronic under-attendance at school, the main cause of most students' literacy and numeracy deficits. "We get very frustrated that kids come to us and they can't add, or subtract, or read - and they hate handwriting," says Kent Street's special education teacher Misha Mamo. "We have to go back to the basics." She says teenagers simply don't believe her when she tells them they aren't employable without better skills; only after short stints in the workplace do they accept the need for help. "Two boys came back to me two weeks from the end of term, and said, 'Can you teach us to read better?'" Both boys have moved into construction work with a big company; one is now a trades assistant, the other is earmarked for training as a supervisor. Says Mamo: "They had huge deficits, but in 10 years' time I hope they won't be in the illiterate category."

If anyone doubts that the lucky country can still produce illiterate younger citizens, ask "Dan". Aged 23, he got up the courage to ring the Reading and Writing Hotline, which he'd seen advertised on TV, and last year walked into the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre in inner Melbourne. It took him two attempts, years apart, because his first approach ended when no tutor could be found for him. One of six kids, Dan's father died of a brain tumour when he was young. Removed from his mother's care, he remembers regularly absconding from school until police or children's home workers picked him up. "After that, I basically couldn't go to school even when they put me back with my mum - I kept thinking I was going to be removed again."

In his teens Dan developed a range of tricks to cover up his illiteracy. "Quite a few. When I went to the bank I pretended I'd cut my finger and put a plaster on it so that I didn't have to fill out the form and the lady did it for me." Once he walked into a cleaning company for a job interview, thinking that he'd simply be asked to demonstrate he could do the work. "I went in and the lady handed me a form to fill out, so I left it and walked out. Basically, all I could do was my name and address."

His sister used magazines to teach him to read a little, but not write. At the Carlton learning centre, literacy teacher Linno Rhodes quickly realised Dan's aversion to classrooms required solo sessions with an experienced literacy tutor. He's making slow, steady progress: "Dan wasn't able to fill in a form before, but now he can and he understands the content," she says.

She is not surprised by the 46 per cent figure of adult Australians with poor literacy skills. "When I tell people what I do I have lots saying, 'I should come to you.?' " Other experts, however, question the 46 per cent statistic, claiming a statistical snapshot of only 9000 respondents is unreliable. After all, according to a 2011 United Nations Development Program ranking, Australia is among the top 20 countries in the world for literacy with a 99 per cent scorecard. In fact, this is a purely assumed figure by the UN, which gives all highly developed countries with free education the same near-perfect literacy score. The ABS can provide no such figure, nor any single statistic for national literacy levels.

What's certain is that the illiterate make up a significant portion of the long-term unemployed. "John" is a mature-aged, low-skilled foundry worker who was retrenched after several years. Having left school at 15, he had to copy his own name from his Centrelink card. Passing certain tests within a set timeframe (required by the program) was too daunting for John, who feared yet more failure. "He got a traineeship and left the program before reaching the next literacy level - I suspect he'll stay in the cycle," says Rhodes, whose clients often come via Centrelink under the Federal Government's Language Literacy and Numeracy Program, which helps long-term unemployed people raise their basic skills.

Illiteracy and numeracy problems are holding back productivity in all modern economies, says Senator Chris Evans, Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research. "But Australia has a particular problem with high rates of migrants from non-English-speaking countries." OECD findings show that if average literacy levels of a population rise by one academic year level, it can boost GDP by 3-6 per cent. The contentious 46 per cent figure is deeply troubling to Evans, regardless of whether it's an overstatement or not. "While people might argue about the figures, there is a significant literacy problem in Australia," he says. "It's largely unseen and people don't like talking about it."

But Judith Rivalland, emeritus professor at Edith Cowan University's School of Education, believes it doesn't help to exaggerate the problem. "There are about five per cent of kids who have a severe learning difficulty and another 15 per cent who struggle to reach expected levels of literacy. They leave school struggling."

Greg Lilleyman, who runs Rio Tinto's Pilbara iron ore operations, is also dubious about the 46 per cent low literacy figure. "I wouldn't have thought it was anywhere near as high as those statistics, quite frankly." But he admits that it's hard to know - people can go online to lodge job applications or their CV "so anyone could be sitting there with them and filling it in".

What's clear is that mine sites in future will require higher levels of literacy, numeracy and complex thinking, says Lilleyman. For example, Rio Tinto operates a massive Perth control room, "much like you'd see in Cape Canaveral", where trucks 1000km away are operated remotely. "The large part of our workforce is unskilled - truck drivers, people hosing down dirt and camp cleaners. But as we move forward, the truck driver will become a person in Perth controlling 10 trucks via a computer screen, someone who needs to understand the implications of alarms and safety messages coming up on screen. Other companies are talking about going in the same direction."

Lilleyman chairs Rio's Future Fund, which delivers book packages into the hands of 90 per cent of the state's parents with children aged zero to three. Called "Better Beginnings", the program promotes a simple "read aloud and often" message. "It's based on a general understanding that literacy is below par across the community, including indigenous communities," says Lilleyman. "It targets young children, but it affects the adults of those kids. We found that 85 per cent of parents said they'd read to their child, as against 14 per cent prior to getting their books. Some may have only read once, but it's not a bad start. For people in need, cost of living pressures may rule out them buying a book against paying for food or rent."

Raising literacy levels is proving hard. Fanfare around 2012 as the National Year of Reading was muted by the announcement in January that four years of national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN) had failed to lift standards among primary school students, and that the gap between top and bottom students had increased. "This is not acceptable in a country as wealthy and well-resourced as Australia," admitted Federal School Education Minister Peter Garrett. His ministerial colleague Chris Evans defends NAPLAN as a tool to monitor the problem, and says boosting school performance will ultimately pay dividends in the workplace. "But there's a large existing workforce with deficits."

Principal Lee Musumeci hands a piece of paper across her desk at Challis Parenting and Early Learning Centre in Perth's struggling outer suburb of Armadale, and points out the upward line on a graph marked "Reading". "When I saw this for the first time, I seriously had tears in my eyes," says Musumeci, a usually poised, businesslike figure. "This is the result of us striving for five years to make a difference." Musumeci has staked her reputation on rescuing 370 disadvantaged Challis schoolchildren from dismal futures. For years, testing had shown that many children had entered primary school behind their peers in their grasp of phonics, reading and maths; worse, after a year's schooling, the gap had widened.

According to the Australian Early Development Index, 33 per cent of five-year-olds starting school in Western Australia are developmentally behind in their language or cognitive ability, the precursor to developing reading and writing skills. "By the time a child starts primary school, language is either there or not," Musumeci explains. "Eighty-five per cent of language is established by the age of five, and 75 per cent of brain development takes place before the age of three. What this means is while schools and teachers are important, what happens to a child before they reach school is equally significant."

Musumeci set about providing the richest, most education-focused setting for children from kindergarten to Year Two. She leads the way around the Early Learning Centre, next door to Challis Primary School; bright, cheerful classrooms are full of toddlers and smaller children in nappies who come for playgroups, three-year-old kindergarten or mothers' groups. Musumeci rejects the view that it's good enough to surround children with books and words, and that somehow they'll learn by osmosis. Under a highly structured regime, children are progressively exposed to intensive teaching in phonics; they are taught to blend sounds, then letter names and recognise flash cards. They read to a teacher every day.

Trained staff encourage parents to play with their toddlers on the floor, to talk often to even the smallest babies. "If we can get our children off to a good start with their oral language development there's no reason why they can't become highly literate people," says Musumeci, who won 2010 Principal of the Year when her pupils' reading, writing and maths performances started dramatically trending upward.

"As a mum, I had no idea that getting down and doing fine motor activities with your baby develops literacy," says family support worker Jenny Forrest, as she hands out boxes of children's clothes to a group of African refugee mothers. Forrest is a respected member of Challis' team of support workers, nurses and speech therapists. Her job is to help address problems within a family such as poverty, violence or illness to ensure nothing gets between a child and their ability to learn.

Yet Forrest herself struggled to read and write. "I don't send emails and I'm upfront about not being able to spell well," she says, with a grin. "I was a struggler at school and I just got through ... I did a lot of watching, and then I'd write in privacy and use a dictionary or ask close friends for help. I didn't read a lot of books to my children, because I didn't want them to know my difficulties. When I first started in the classroom, one of the teachers asked me to read a story to the children. I said, 'I can't do that.' Now I'll read to toddlers, but I'm very hesitant if their parents are there."

So where to from here? The big test will come next year, when, according to Minister Evans, the ABS is scheduled to repeat its 2006 OECD literacy and numeracy testing. Evans says "a road map" for the next 10 years of literacy and numeracy upskilling, called the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, will be released by mid-year. "There are no excuses to delay it," says Megan Lilly, spokesperson for The Australian Industry Group, who complains that the strategy was supposed to be up and running at the start of this year.

In Melbourne, a resolute "Dan" is determined to become fully literate. "My signature on my licence was horrible, but my tutor has taught me how to perfect it. When I write I have to look up every second word in the dictionary. I always wanted to be a police officer, and I think to myself now I can reach that goal one day. I wish I'd done it earlier."

As for Michael Stuart, the illiteracy cycle is broken in his family; 13-year-old Hayden reads avidly and is taking an advanced computer course in high school. "I'm glad the boys won't suffer what I went through," says Stuart proudly. "I read to the boys now, and my older boy helps me with spelling. I'm not perfect but I'm not scared of it."