



Indigenous Literacy – A Three Way Approach

The Fred Hollows Foundation believes that Australia's Indigenous people should enjoy the same education, employment and societal opportunities as other citizens. However, a lack of literacy skills among Indigenous communities is a common and critical barrier to participating in activities that many of us take for granted.

To help alleviate this literacy disadvantage, The Foundation is working in close partnership with remote Indigenous communities in central Northern Territory and in western New South Wales.

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The Foundation uses a **three-way approach** to building literacy and each of our projects aims to promote:

Cultural Literacy: connecting people, particularly young people, to their culture and traditional language,

Practical literacy: developing the skills needed for daily activities,

English literacy: promoting skills in English reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Our work is diverse and our projects address many of the underlying factors that impact on the health and well-being of Indigenous people living in remote and isolated communities. Better health means more opportunity to learn.



Photo | Tyronna Manyita (left), Earlene Plummer (centre) and The Foundation's Karina Amess ordering books for Wugularr Women's Centre. Photo courtesy of The Fred Hollows Foundation.

Some current literacy projects undertaken by The Fred Hollows Foundation

- Literacy Resources - providing reading and other educational resources to remote schools.
- Writing and Publishing Projects - working with local children and teachers to capture their stories and publish them in to books. The books are then given to schools and children in the local area.
- A Traditional Song Project - recording and translating the songs of elders so that young people can learn more of their culture and language.
- After-School-Hours Music Program - to engage young people in learning and encourage them to attend school or another form of education.

- Community Learning Centre - an interagency project to build a library and computer equipment for the residents of Wugularr.

Other projects aim to improve the health and well-being of the community and thereby ensure that children are able to regularly attend school and fully engage in learning. These projects include:

- Aural health - aimed at reducing hearing problems that restrict children's speech and literacy development.
- Eye health - complementing existing remote eye health services in the top end of the Northern Territory and offering an alternative Low Cost Spectacle Scheme to clients.
- Nutrition programs – including a community garden project and community grocery stores to improve the range and availability of fresh, nutritious foods. As well as providing five scholarships under the Outback Chef program.
- Child and maternal health programs.



Photo | Shellie Morris teaches children in Barunga traditional songs. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

Indigenous Literacy – A Snapshot

- The development of English literacy skills is important for the life opportunities of Indigenous children and youth. Literacy “provides them with the necessary skills to interact within mainstream society and avail themselves of the broadest range of civic, social, educational and employment possibilities”. (F)
- There is an enormous gap in the English literacy rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. The gap is even wider for Indigenous people living in remote and isolated communities.
- The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students emerges early. Non-Indigenous students far out-perform Indigenous students in benchmark tests for reading, writing and numeracy in Year 3 and Year 5. By Year 7, the gap has widened, particularly for numeracy. (I)
- Indigenous children living in isolated areas have even lower literacy rates. In the Northern Territory, only one in five children living in very remote Indigenous communities can read at the accepted minimum standard. By Year 7, just 15% achieved this benchmark, 47 percentage points behind their urban Indigenous peers and 74 percent less than non-Indigenous students. (I)
- More than half of Indigenous families living in very remote communities speak an Indigenous language in the home (A). Their children need extra assistance at school and from the community to learn English as a second language.
- Indigenous homes, particularly those in remote communities, have fewer books, computers and other educational resources than non-Indigenous homes. All of these factors are linked to children's achievements at school

and in the development of English literacy skills. (C)

- Absenteeism from school negatively affects students' academic performance. Indigenous students miss around 26 days of school per year compared with 8 days for all students. Indigenous students living in remote and very remote locations are likely to miss an even greater number of school days. (H)
- Nutrition and health are closely connected to educational achievement, school attendance and literacy skills (B) (D). The health status of Australia's Indigenous population is poor by world standards. More than twice as many Indigenous babies suffer low to extremely low birth-weight compared to non-Indigenous babies and Indigenous children are twice as likely to be hospitalized for infectious diseases. (G)
- Upwards of 70% of Indigenous children in remote communities suffer from chronic Otitis Media, a serious middle ear disease that can cause permanent hearing loss and inhibit language and literacy development. (E)



Photo | A health worker checks a child's ear at Barunga Clinic. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

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