



# 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.

We use 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** | Ordering books for Wugularr Women's Centre. Photo courtesy of The Fred Hollows Foundation.

## Indigenous literacy projects supported by The Fred Hollows Foundation

- Indigenous literacy project – allows remote communities to self-select reading and literacy materials that are then provided to their schools and community centres.
- See my world project – provides intensive writing workshops to promote youth literacy and community pride. The written works are published together in an anthology titled *See MY World*.
- Sponsorship of the NT Indigenous music awards – these awards promote songwriting in Indigenous communities as a form of literacy development that also promotes culture and community healing.

- Indigenous book project – works with various authors and illustrators throughout the Northern Territory to ensure publication of books with Indigenous images and culturally appropriate content.
- After-school-hours music program - to engage young people in learning and support literacy development through music and songwriting workshops.
- Youth leadership and training projects – supports young peoples’ learning, work skills and leadership confidence to promote Indigenous education and leadership into the future.



**Photo** Children learning Barunga traditional songs. Photo courtesy of Claude Ho.

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 horticulture and food supply projects to improve the range and availability of fresh, nutritious foods.
- Child and maternal health programs – including the “sprinkles” project aimed at providing very young children with a multivitamin supplement to prevent anaemia.

### 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”. (A)
- There is an enormous gap in the English literacy rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. The gap is 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. (B)



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

- 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.(C)
- More than half of Indigenous families living in very remote communities speak an Indigenous language in the home.(D) 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.(E)
- 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.(F)
- Nutrition and health are closely connected to educational achievement, school attendance and literacy skills.(G) (H) 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.(I)
- 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. (J)

## References

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- D. *4713.0 Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2006, page 35.

- E.** *Australia's Indigenous Students in PISA 2000: Results from an International Study*, Bortoli and Cresswell, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), August 2004, Research Monograph No. 59, page 14.
- F.** *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (Volume 3): Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, Zubrick SR, Silburn SR, De Maio JA, Shepherd C, Griffin JA, Dalby RB, et al. Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2006, page 4.
- G.** *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (cat. no. 4704.0) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008.
- H.** *Final Report of the National Evaluation of National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), Dec 2003.
- I.** *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators*, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), 2005
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