

THE CONVERSATION

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Closing the gap on Indigenous literacy requires more than increased attendance

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Tony Abbott is looking for simple solutions to complex problems in Indigenous education. AAP/Alan Porritt

The sixth annual update on Closing the Gap provides an unsurprising picture of slow progress on addressing issues of Indigenous disadvantage.

The update presents a mixed bag of small improvements in life expectancy, child mortality rates and access to early childhood education, while there has been little improvement in employment, reading, writing and numeracy.

Nearly 70% of remote Indigenous students in Year 9 are not meeting national minimum standards for reading. This is compared to 80% of Year 9 Indigenous students in metropolitan areas performing at or above this level.

The more remote, the bigger the gap becomes.

Measuring Indigenous literacy learning

The measure used for the goal of closing the gap on Indigenous reading, writing and numeracy are results from the annual National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. Yet relying on NAPLAN results as the key measurement of Indigenous literacy rates is problematic.

The difference in literacy levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests equate to roughly two and a half years of schooling.

For many Indigenous students, English may be their second, third or even fourth language. The teaching and testing of Standard Australian English through NAPLAN and other testing programs such as the Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH) suite marketed by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) do not reflect the largely oral-language lives of young Aboriginal children living in remote communities.

Simple solutions; complex problems

If we are going to successfully address the significant issues of disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, then it will take much more than the simple solution of making students attend school.

Prime minister Tony Abbott has announced that a new target of 90% school attendance, with the assumption that it will lead to increased success in education. He asserts:

It's hard to be literate and numerate without attending school, it's hard to find work without a basic education, and it's hard to live well without a job.

Abbott went on to say that “one of the worst forms of neglect is failing to give children the education they need for a decent life”, linking it to truancy and the need for more anti-truancy measures and welfare quarantining.

School attendance is certainly part of the picture, but through focusing on it, Abbott promotes a dangerous approach of applying simple solutions to complex problems. 90% attendance will not, in and of itself, close the gap.

There are also ethical concerns surrounding the School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) where welfare payments are tied to school attendance records.

There are much more complex socioeconomic, cultural and geographic barriers that need to be taken into account. Simple punitive measures that place the blame solely on parents ignores issues of equity, access and inclusiveness in education.

Focusing on attendance also takes attention away from resourcing and access issues, which are symptomatic of the large inequities in Australian schooling. Improving school quality through facilities, committed and highly trained teaching staff, parent and community participation, more Indigenous teachers, addressing endemic health issues such as middle ear infection, nutrition, housing, access, culturally responsive curriculum and teaching all need to be part of the picture.

Closing the gap on Indigenous literacy

There is a lot of work being done around the country on improving Indigenous literacy rates. For example, the Indigenous Literacy Foundation run a range of community literacy projects and supply thousands of books to kids in remote communities.

The National Accelerated Literacy Program, which ran until 2010, was a large-scale literacy program that had some success in lifting Indigenous literacy levels across the Northern Territory and Queensland.

The Northern Territory has the Families as First Teachers-Indigenous Parenting Support Services Program, which encourages active engagement of families and communities in early years learning.

Other programs taken up across the country include First Steps, Walking Talking Texts and Show Me the Way, an online mentoring program for Indigenous students in high schools.

One concern is that the continual implementation of new programs and initiatives leads to teacher fatigue and community disillusionment. At the same time, one-size-fits-all intervention strategies have been shown not to work, such as the spectacular failure of Howard's Northern Territory Intervention in 2007.

Instead, a balance is needed, where communities are engaged and empowered through active leadership in programs and initiatives. Success comes when schools, governments and families work together in a sustained and coordinated manner with collective vision, strong leadership, resources and support.

Room for improvement

Placing Indigenous disadvantage back in the spotlight with the Closing the Gap update presents an opportunity for governments, education departments, schools, teachers, parents and communities to find ways to work together in addressing educational inequity in Australia.

If we ignore the call, the future effects on Indigenous health, employment and well-being will be catastrophic. Given the report card issued this week, there is potential but much more room for improvement.