

## Case Study

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### Tackling Indigenous literacy in the Pilbara - Rawa Community School

Speech Pathology Week 2011 '*Literacy for Life*' (21 – 27 August)

A school in remote Western Australia has teamed up with a speech pathologist to tackle head on the problem of the literacy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, with some amazing results.

Rawa Community School is part of the Punmu Community, located in the Great Sandy Desert area of the Pilbara and for the last two years, Perth-based speech pathologist Diana Rigg has been working with teachers at the school to re-think their approach to literacy.

“When I first began working with Rawa Community School, the majority of the school’s 70 students were assessed as ‘non-readers’. Now the whole school is reading and we’re looking at expanding the program to Rawa’s sister schools,” Ms Rigg said.

When the program was first introduced, 100 per cent of the junior primary students were assessed as being ‘non-readers’, while at the end of the first year of the program, this was reduced to 64 per cent. Also, only 25 per cent of Rawa’s primary students were reading within one year of their reading age before the program, in comparison to 86 per cent after the first year.

“These are intelligent children but factors like limited access to support services and resources, irregular school attendance, hearing difficulties from chronic ear infections, English as students’ second, third or even fourth language and the print/word focus of the way literacy was taught make it extremely difficult to learn and retain literacy skills.”

Focusing on oral language and the sounds that make up words, students were taught how to hear the different sounds in words and how these sounds are represented in written form. They also learned how to blend sounds together to create new sounds and break words down into their sounds and syllables.

“By concentrating on developing key speaking and listening skills like sound awareness and language comprehension, we noticed an enormous improvement in students’ reading, spelling and writing skills in only one term. Staff also found that students returning to school after long absences have retained all of their newly-learnt skills,” Ms Rigg said.

Another part of the program focuses on providing the teachers and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA) with the skills and knowledge to carry out the language-based literacy program in their classrooms without Diana’s assistance.

“Teachers may have little or no training in literacy or learning difficulties and can find it very challenging to work with groups containing students with varying literacy skills. With additional funding from the local Martu Trust, we are now working to induct all new teachers to Rawa into the program so they can hit the ground running as soon as they arrive at the school.”

Although there is still a long way to go, Diana and the principal and staff of Rawa Community School are all hopeful for the future of the literacy program and especially their students – showing that good literacy counts, wherever you are.

For more information about speech pathology and Speech Pathology Week, visit [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au).

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### **Indigenous Literacy - a snapshot**

From *The Indigenous Literacy Foundation* [www.indigenousliteracyfoundation.org.au](http://www.indigenousliteracyfoundation.org.au)

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 (DEET NT 2006).

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 per cent achieved this benchmark, 47 percentage points behind their urban Indigenous peers and 74 per cent less than non-Indigenous students (DEET NT 2006).

More than half of Indigenous families living in very remote communities speak an Indigenous language in the home (ABS, 2001). 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 (Bortoli and Cresswell, 2004).

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 (Zubrick, Silburn, De Maio et al., 2006).

Upwards of 70 per cent 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 (DET, WA 2006).

### **To arrange an interview with speech pathologist Diana Rigg, please contact:**

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### **About Speech Pathology Week 2011 'Literacy for Life':**

Speech Pathology Week 2011 (21 – 27 August) celebrates the speech pathology profession and the important role speech pathologists play in acquiring and maintaining literacy skills.

### **About Speech Pathology Australia**

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for more than 4,500 members.

The Association supports and regulates the ethical, clinical and professional standards of its members. The Association also lobbies and advocates for people with communication and swallowing difficulties.