

# Literacy in the Pacific: in danger of being sidelined?

by Wendy Jarvie

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The Pacific is a crowded policy space – inevitable given the wide range of challenges facing Pacific island countries. Most recently, with climate change being on everyone’s mind and the need for massively enhanced infrastructure in the Pacific to help deal with it, it’s difficult to get any oxygen and priority for discussions on education, including literacy.

But there are major education issues in the Pacific. While there are high enrolments of children in primary school, countries are struggling to achieve decent education outcomes. For example, the **recently released** 2018 Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) data shows that **only half of children in Year 4 are at the Pacific literacy benchmark** for their grade. (Compared to Australia where around 95% of Australian Year 3 students are at or above our literacy benchmarks.)

The literacy problem starts early in a child’s school life.

In Tonga, an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) done in 2014 found that literacy problems were apparent as early as Year 1 with, for example, 25% of students at the end of their first year of schooling recording “zero” for letter-sound recognition. These children did not know the sound for any letter. That means a basic building block of reading comprehension – understanding the sounds that are associated with letters – is missing for these children. Most Pacific island countries for which EGRA studies have been done show that reading comprehension is very poor for a large proportion of children in Years 1–3.

Part of the problem is that many children are not starting “school ready”. A World Bank **study** of three Pacific countries in 2013 found that parents did not value early childhood education, or see their role in providing cognitive stimulus. Preschool participation is patchy. While most children have good oral skills, and they have stories told to them and they sing songs, many live in households with virtually no exposure to books or printed words. A large proportion are not read to by their parents or other adults. They start school not being aware of the right way to hold a

book, or how pages turn, or that those squiggles on the pages mean words. And all the evidence is that children who start school behind, stay behind.

Pacific island country education ministers are well aware of the education challenges they face. They have developed a [Pacific Regional Education Framework 2018–30](#), and, with the help of development partners, have invested in measurement. PILNA – meant to be a one-off when first done in 2012 – is being done on a regular basis to help guide country education programs. Countries such as Vanuatu have undertaken major reforms in their curriculum and school systems. Fiji has been investing in early childhood education. Through the Pacific Early Age Readiness and Learning ([PEARL](#)) program, Tonga and Tuvalu trialled community play-based activities (playgroups) to lift school readiness. The playgroups in Tonga, evaluated through a randomised control trial, significantly increased pre-literacy of the most disadvantaged children. They were also inexpensive. Tonga, Kiribati and Tuvalu trialled new approaches to teaching reading and got impressive improvements in reading comprehension of children in Years 1 and 2.

There has been progress. The PILNA 2018 results were a significant improvement on 2015:

- 53% of students in Year 4 met or exceeded expected literacy standards – up from 43% in 2015, and
- 63% of Year 6 students met or exceeded literacy standards – up from under 50% in 2015.

But even if these impressive rates of improvement are maintained, it won't be until the 2030s that 90% of Year 4 children are at acceptable literacy levels. There will also be countries that will lag.

The [World Bank](#) has recognised the fundamental importance of literacy, as part of a human capital development agenda, pointing out that investments in areas such as infrastructure and trade facilitation will not yield expected returns without human capital investments. It is obvious to all that infrastructure investments, such as cables, are a far greater boost to economies with healthy and skilled populations who can read, write and innovate to make the most of this infrastructure. At the 2019 DFAT [Education Forum](#) the Bank made [a strong case](#) for literacy investment, arguing that countries should aim to have all their children reading with comprehension by the age of ten.

While Australian development assistance has been provided to education, it has very little profile, with priority in the development budget going to economic development, infrastructure, security and private sector development. Of the

education assistance allocated, much goes to older age children or school leavers – for example, to skills development through initiatives such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition, on labour mobility through the Pacific Labour Scheme, and most recently to a new [secondary scholarship program](#). There has also been support for improved data, such as PILNA. But these investments, while valuable, will not help with school readiness or early age reading, and indeed because of poor literacy, these programs run the risk of not achieving the outcomes Pacific islanders and their governments want and need.

Don't get me wrong, I believe there is an important role for Australia to play in helping the Pacific to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to meet the challenges of delivering health, transport, energy and other services to small highly dispersed populations. Like most people, I love infrastructure – power poles, roads that withstand cyclones, and cables that bring Facebook to the Pacific and enhance trade linkages. And I want Australia to support these. But to be a good neighbour means helping to set the basic building blocks for strong peoples, communities, and economies. Literacy is at the heart of this.

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions the author is affiliated with.*

*Read more about the 2018 PILNA results on the Blog [here](#).*

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