

# Adult literacy: a social determinant of Aboriginal health and wellbeing

In Australia and the countries of the 'global north' – in Europe, Japan and North America, for example – no-or-low adult literacy has virtually been eradicated. Not so in most of the nations of the 'global south', especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This global division and disparity in adult literacy goes-hand-in-hand with now universally recognised health disparities between the global north and south (UNESCO 2019). This disparity, however, does not prevail only *between* countries. It also operates *within* many of them, especially post-colonial nations like Australia. Here the pattern of no-or-low adult literacy in remote Aboriginal communities is more similar to those in Sub-Saharan Africa than to those of non-Aboriginal Australians. Around forty percent of all Aboriginal adults in remote communities are estimated to have no-or-low literacy.

The strong population-based association between literacy and health suggests that literacy is a key *factor* in social inequality and health disparity – a *social determinant of health*. This presentation addresses *how adult literacy operates as a social determinant of Aboriginal health and wellbeing*. It focuses on the relationship between the Cuban *Yes, I Can!* adult literacy campaign and Aboriginal communities in western NSW between 2012 and 2018. Based on the findings of recent Australian Research Council funded research and university-based evaluation it shows how adult literacy can transform the lives of individuals towards health improvement in Aboriginal communities. The capacity of adult literacy to progress the health of Aboriginal nations across the country, I argue, rests on the crucial role it can play in the making of Aboriginal peoplehood and engagement in the project of *self-determination*. Central to our understanding of this project is *power and empowerment*.

## About Associate Professor Toni Schofield

A/Prof Toni Schofield is an Honorary Scholar and former member of staff at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney. She researches and teaches in sociology and public policy, with a special focus on health and health care, particularly in relation to social equity. She has worked with a wide range of community-based, State, national and international policy agencies, including Women's Health NSW, the WHO, The Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Swedish Office for Gender Equality. She has published more than a dozen authored books, monographs, and edited collections, and over 50 peer reviewed journal articles and book chapters. She has recently completed work as a chief investigator on her fourth ARC-funded research project since 2000: an investigation of the social and health impacts of the Adult Indigenous Literacy Campaign in Western NSW with the Lowitja Institute and the National Foundation for Literacy.

Light refreshment is provided

Venue: Room 305, Level 3, Samuels Building, UNSW Upper Campus, Randwick

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Parking: Available on L5 of the parking station; enter via Gate 11 Botany St, Randwick

Map: [www.facilities.unsw.edu.au/getting-uni/campus-maps](http://www.facilities.unsw.edu.au/getting-uni/campus-maps)

The School of Public Health  
and Community Medicine

# Seminar Invitation

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> September  
12:00 - 1:00 pm  
Room 305 Samuels Building



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