
SPECIAL REPORT

TD Economics



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Executive Summary

LITERACY MATTERS: UNLOCKING THE LITERACY POTENTIAL OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA

TD Economics continues to carry out Aboriginal-related research to heighten the awareness of the many issues confronting Aboriginal peoples, businesses and communities. In this fourth series of Aboriginal-related articles, we explore the literacy outcomes of Aboriginal peoples. This paper is also our fourth installment under the ‘Literacy Matters’ masthead; these chapters reflect TD’s broader commitment to improve literacy outcomes in Canada.

Literacy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults in Canada

Literacy is an essential component of social and human development – increased literacy produces better health outcomes, higher income, and improved communications with other people. Simply put, greater literacy means more exposure to ideas, and the exchange of knowledge spurs debate, making communities dynamic and continuously-improving.

A key source of data on adult literacy performance is the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). While relatively high literacy scores make Canada outperform other countries overall, those scores are not shared by large segments of the Canadian population – particularly Aboriginal people.

The IALSS data surveyed urban Aboriginal peoples in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as some communities in the three territories. While some data is better than no data, there are limitations with analyzing this data source. First, literacy proficiency is measured in English or French versus other language competencies. Second, there is a large written element attached to high proficiency. Third, IALSS covers approximately 30% of all Aboriginal peoples and excludes virtually all First Nations living on-reserve.

Slightly more than 60% of Aboriginal Canadians do not have the literacy skills necessary to participate fully in the current knowledge-based economy. The threshold, Level 3, is equivalent to high school completion. In other words, 60% of the Aboriginal population are unable to understand and use the information around them to create a better life for themselves and their families. Discouragingly, this share is ten percentage points higher than registered by Canadian adults.

The percentage of Aboriginal peoples reporting a less-than-desirable literacy proficiency is greater or at-par with other countries including Australia (33%) and New Zealand (roughly 60%). These countries are reasonable comparators due to their large size of Aboriginal populations.

Most jobs in Canada demand literacy of Level 3 or higher. The literacy level of many Aboriginal adults, however, makes them more challenged for occupations/jobs which demand higher literacy pro-

iciency. This skill disadvantage often translates into lower employment and wages for Aboriginal people in comparison with their non-Aboriginal peers.

If we examine literacy skill by age cohort, we see that the lowest levels are posted by Aboriginal peoples who are aged 46 and older. These low scores can in part be attributed to the lasting impacts of residential schooling and other assimilation policies of the past. They may also reflect the fact that literacy skills atrophy with age. Furthermore, older Canadians – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – generally speaking, have less education relative to their younger counterparts.

Youth represent the generation of tomorrow. Four out of ten Aboriginal children score poorly in early development instruments in the areas of language and communication skills. A greater proportion of Aboriginal children are also born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder which impacts individual learning ability. In addition, less than half of First Nations children in Canada read a book every day. Discouragingly, these statistics suggest that many Aboriginal children are held back straight out of the gate when it comes to overcoming literacy barriers. If greater attention and efforts are not placed on the young Aboriginal population, a multi-generational cycle can perpetuate.

The high price of low literacy

Literacy has a significant impact on social and economic outcomes, both at an individual level and across the country. Literacy is a key determinant of high school completion and participation in post-secondary education. As a result, the relatively weak literacy skills of many Aboriginal peoples will likely translate into poorer educational attainment. Literacy skills are also an important factor in understanding health prevention, the proper use of medications, and overall nutrition. Taken together, the relative lack of literacy and its impact on education and health contribute to a gap in Aboriginal employment between the highly literate and the poorly literate of almost thirty percentage points.

The Aboriginal population is young and rapidly growing. As businesses and policymakers look to the Aboriginal population to help offset labour shortages, especially as the Canadian population greys and baby boomers retire, it is imperative that Aboriginal peoples be in a position to fully participate and contribute to the economy. As the Canadian economy becomes more knowledge-intensive, Aboriginal peoples having low literacy will find it increasingly difficult

to compete in the labour market and benefit from new economic opportunities. Both outcomes will result in Aboriginal peoples being pushed further to the margins of society.

Barriers to overcoming low literacy levels held by Aboriginal peoples

There are many barriers to Aboriginal people improving their literacy:

- **Geographic barriers:** Close to half (46%) of all Aboriginal peoples live outside urban areas. In their rural and remote locations, formal training and higher education are typically non-existent. This lack of access is worsened by unreliable broadband internet and poor telephone connectivity.
- **Social and economic barriers:** Many Aboriginal people experience poverty and unsafe living conditions – both of which can be barriers to full and effective participation in school.
- **Cultural barriers:** Some learning environments are less welcoming to Aboriginal students. Where there is racism and discrimination toward Aboriginal students, it affects their self-esteem and self-confidence.
- **A more holistic view of literacy:** Print-based literacy is a fairly new concept to many Aboriginal communities. Standardized tests of print-based literacy do not capture forms of literacy which are valued by many Aboriginal communities. The broader perspective may prevent individuals from focusing on the literacy skills which are most desired by the labour market and economy.
- **Education outcome gaps, education system complexities and under-funding:** At the current pace, it will take 28 years for Aboriginal peoples to possess the same educational attainment as non-Aboriginal Canadians. In essence, poor educational outcomes are costing the country hundreds of billions of dollars in lost opportunity. There is also a patchwork of policies supporting on-reserve education. This, in turn, provides a shaky foundation and often uneven service delivery. In terms of funding, on-reserve schools are short-changed by \$2,000-3,000 per student relative to other remote and rural schools. A needs-based approach to measure the education gap also underscores the notion of under-funding in the education system.
- **Linguistic differences:** Aboriginal languages in Canada are structured differently than English and French,

making a lot of the terms, concepts and expressions in the official languages difficult to translate and understand. However, most literacy evaluations are carried out in English or French, but these are second languages to many Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal students often cite language problems as a barrier to seeking additional help in school.

- ***Too few teachers and other role models:*** Role models can instil a ‘will to learn’ while providing individuals with positive examples. Many Elders and parents continue to feel the lasting impacts of residential schools. As a consequence, they mistrust the education system. Teachers can sometimes fill the gap; but unfortunately, many reserves cite shortages of highly-qualified educators.
- ***Other individual barriers:*** Lack of resources, a prior history of trauma, learning disabilities and inadequate academic preparation can impede literacy progress. Some of these barriers are multi-generational; accordingly, the plight of Aboriginal people often leads to a cycle of despair.

Turning the corner on Aboriginal literacy

Some literacy improvement among Aboriginal peoples is expected to have occurred over the last decade. More Aboriginal peoples are living in urban centres versus ten years ago, giving them greater access to support. The literacy assessment test developed in Saskatchewan argues that Aboriginal literacy proficiency is not as bad as the earlier statistics suggested when the data are viewed in an appropriate cultural context. Many new Aboriginal-targeted literacy programs have also been rolled out.

The extent of improvement in Aboriginal literacy performances is likely limited. International human development indices do not point to a big amelioration in education and social trends in Canada, relative to other countries. Current Aboriginal labour market performances are better than was the case in 2003 which could be pinned in part to improved education attainment levels. Yet, the rise in Aboriginal labour market participation could have been at the expense of education (individuals migrated to the workforce due to the decade-long commodity rally rather than first complete

Selected Best Practices to Promote Stronger Literacy Skills Among Aboriginal People

- 1) Engage parents to dispel the stigma associated with education and improve literacy.
- 2) Make Aboriginal students feel valued and welcomed to improve educational outcomes.
- 3) Incorporate Aboriginal approaches to learning into curriculum and teaching methods to increase literacy levels.
- 4) Increasing access and targeted funding for literacy programs and supports for those Aboriginal peoples in rural and remote areas.
- 5) Deliver teacher support and training to ensure that literacy programs are both sustainable and of high quality.

their studies). The challenge is that commodity prices go up and down over time. The only way to boost Aboriginal income potential on a sustained basis is through improved education and literacy.

Barriers are opportunities in disguise. Many determinants for success in delivering literacy-related programs and services have been identified – the accompanying text box presents five of these best practices. This list was compiled based on success stories and program evaluations for literacy support in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

If the best practices identified here are systematically put into action, the future will look brighter for Aboriginal peoples. And the time to act is now: there are countless examples of such initiatives being delivered across the country today to young and adult Aboriginal peoples alike. These concerted efforts, exerted over a period of time, should help reduce the size of the literacy gap. Aboriginal peoples are increasingly leaving their economic footprint on the national stage; and the Aboriginal market is expected to reach \$32 billion by 2016 – more than the economies of Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island combined. All Canadians – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – will undoubtedly benefit from improved Aboriginal literacy and greater Aboriginal participation in the Canadian economy.

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