



SNAICC
Secretariat of National
Aboriginal and Islander
Child Care

**Improved Outcomes for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Children and Families
in Early Childhood Education
and Care Services:
Learning from Good Practice**

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A strong voice for our children and families

SNAICC is the national non-government peak body that advocates on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

A. Introduction

Strong evidence indicates that the early years from 0-8 are critical in a child's development, and that "investment in early education, particularly for disadvantaged children, is more effective than intervention at later ages."¹ This is reflected in the current Government policy agenda, including the Council of Australian Governments ('COAG') National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development, 2008; Investing in the Early Years A National Early Childhood Development Strategy, 2009 ('*Early Years Strategy*'), and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Early childhood is also one of the seven interrelated 'Building Blocks' developed to support the COAG agreed reforms to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage in 2008.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly disadvantaged in development and educational outcomes by the end of the early years. The Australian Early Development Index 2009 checklist highlighted that 52 per cent of Indigenous five year old children were classified as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' in the domain of languages and cognitive skills in 2009, compared to 21.4 per cent of non-Indigenous five year olds."² Evidence suggests that without early learning opportunities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children "are likely to be behind from their first year of formal schooling",³ and that across all states Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children show lower schooling achievements (particularly in literacy and numeracy) than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with the gap being even wider in remote Australia.⁴

Participation in a high quality early childhood development program "may significantly enhance a child's general developmental outcomes...and promote the development of their cognitive, language, social and pre-academic skills."⁵ Early childhood education and care ('ECEC') services are therefore a central, evidence-based strategy for supporting strong outcomes for early childhood and later life.⁶ As

¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2011). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*. Productivity Commission, 4.28; see also Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school'.

Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 4

² Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2011. *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*. Productivity Commission, 5.45

³ Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). (2009). *Closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage: the challenge for Australia*. Canberra, 13

⁴ Leigh, A. & Gong, X. (2008). 'Estimating Cognitive Gaps Between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians'. Centre for Economic Policy Research. Australian National University. Discussion Paper No. 578, 1; Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). (2009). *Closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage: the challenge for Australia*. Canberra, 13

⁵ Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. (2011). 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 16; see also Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra, 347.

⁶ Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. Canberra, 8 & 15; See also Biddle, N. (2011). 'An Exploratory Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children'. Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Research Policy, Australian National University. Working Paper No. 77, 22; Dockett et al. (2010). *School readiness:*

concluded in the Productivity Commission's report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage,

Early Childhood Education and Care services provide development opportunities for children, as well as supporting the needs of families, and can be considered to be a significant influence in a child's early education...Early childhood education programs are associated with increased levels of school completion and enhanced literacy, numeracy and social skills.⁷

Biddle highlights that the effects of quality preschool continue beyond the early school years, children who attend such services "have been found to be better off in terms of self-esteem and later social and emotional maturity, as well as being less likely to engage in criminal and antisocial behaviour, teen pregnancy or drug abuse."⁸ In the same study the author also suggests that "Access to good quality early childhood education is likely to be one of the most effective ways to reduce social inequity."⁹ ECEC services are also beneficial for the entire community, as "engagement provides respite, information, social networks and models of positive adult-child interaction"¹⁰ for family and community members.

However it is important to remember that the quality of the service and education is a key factor in promoting results. As Biddle cautions, "Not all preschool education has the same effect on a child's development. A quality preschool education is likely to be beneficial for a child, but poor quality preschool may in fact have a negative effect on outcomes."¹¹

what does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities? Issues Paper No 2. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 12; Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school'. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7

⁷ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2011). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*. Productivity Commission, 4.28

⁸ Hull, R. & Edsall, S. (2001). 'No Small Matter: Quality Preschools Benefit Children and Society'. Australian Education Union, Melbourne cited by Biddle, N. (2011). 'An Exploratory Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children'. Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Research Policy, Australian National University. Working Paper No. 77, 22

⁹ Biddle, N. (2011). 'An Exploratory Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children'. Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Research Policy, Australian National University. Working Paper No. 77, 25

¹⁰ Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. (2011). 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 16

¹¹ Magnuson, M. et al. (2005). 'Does Prekindergarten Improve School Preparation and Performance?'. NBER Working Paper 10452. Viewed 19 March 2007, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w10452>, cited by Biddle, N. (2011). 'An Exploratory Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children'. Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Research Policy, Australian National University. Working Paper No. 77, 22

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also remain significantly underrepresented in ECEC services.¹² Furthermore, whilst preschool 3-5 year old *enrolment* rates were similar between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, actual *absence* (ie non-attendance) rates differed greatly – with 33.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being absent, compared with 15.8 % non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹³ It must also be noted however that this statistic excludes preschool programs provided through child care services such as long day care, and thus is not representative of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in ECEC services.

It is widely acknowledged that the barrier is not simply the low availability of services in a given area. As Flaxman and Muir note, “Increasing the number, scope and capacity of services did not necessarily mean Indigenous families accessed and engaged with these services.”¹⁴ Rather, there is a multiplicity of complex and interrelated factors that research identifies as contributing to this gap, including:¹⁵

- Venues that are too small, inadequately resourced or inappropriately set up for young children;¹⁶
- Difficulty in accessing services due to isolated location, and/or a lack of transport.¹⁷ This is also an issue for those families living in outer suburbs.¹⁸ A lack of transport also hinders the involvement of Elders or other community members in the service;¹⁹

¹² Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra, 351; Windisch, Jenvey & Drysdale. (2003). ‘Indigenous parents’ ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Volume 28, No 3, September, 51

¹³ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2011). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*, Productivity Commission, 4.30 and 4.33

¹⁴ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. Occasional Paper No 23. National Evaluation Consortium, 9

¹⁵ For a more detailed look at these barriers see: Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Melbourne

¹⁶ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. Occasional Paper No 23. National Evaluation Consortium, 33

¹⁷ See: Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 355; Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 8; and SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy Paper. Melbourne, 8

¹⁸ See: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. (2007). *Social Justice Report 2006*, 35; Cortis, N. et al. (2009). ‘Engaging hard-to-reach families and children’. Occasional Paper No 26. National Evaluation Consortium, 29; Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. Occasional Paper No 23. National Evaluation Consortium, 33; and SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy Paper, 8

¹⁹ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 32

- Prohibitive fees, even though services may still be heavily subsidised;²⁰
- Unmet cultural or support needs of families.²¹
- Complex cultural relationships within community, including community or family conflict.²²
- Fear of racism towards families or their children, of being judged negatively, or that “engagement with early childhood settings will undermine Aboriginal culture.”²³
- Negative associations with institutions and government services, including that children might be removed from families;²⁴
- Inflexible entry points, such as access only through a referral from another service,²⁵ and
- Staffing issues including challenges in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; few staff fluent in the local language; and a lack of systematic approaches to cultural competency training for staff.²⁶

In light of the clear benefits of ECEC services for early childhood development, SNAICC considers it imperative to overcome these barriers, and better understand how early childhood education and care services can be made increasingly accessible for, and engage more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

A major initiative previously undertaken to address the barriers discussed above was the implementation of Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (‘MACS’).²⁷ MACS have proven to be very effective in providing quality and accessible ECEC services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. As concluded by Trudgett and Grace “the establishment of these centres is potentially the most important contributor to the decrease in the discrepancy between the rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous enrolment in early childhood services.” Further praise in the literature for the MACS model highlights that “MACS incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and is widely recognised in Indigenous communities as

²⁰ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 266

²¹ Ibid

²² SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy paper, 8

²³ Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. (2011). ‘Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children’. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*, Vol. 1, 17

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy paper, 7

²⁶ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 359; SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy paper, 7; and Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 8

²⁷ Trudgett, M and Grace, R. (2011). ‘Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children’. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*, Vol. 1, 17

a preferred model for early learning centres.”²⁸

There is therefore a strong history, and evidence of and methodological basis for high quality, culturally appropriate, accessible ECEC service provision to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that lead to outcomes for children. Evidence has shown that the most effective models for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families follow certain key principles,²⁹ namely they:

- (a) Apply innovative governance strategies;
- (b) Foster an empowering culture;
- (c) Support identity and culture; and
- (d) Are holistic and responsive.

However, whilst there is strong anecdotal evidence for why these principles lead to positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, there has been little real substantive examination to unpack why and how such outcomes are achieved. As Sims et al indicate, “Knowledge of the ranges of successful Indigenous children's services programs is limited and much of the information is available only through word of mouth.”³⁰

B. Paper aims

Given the scarcity of evidence for what actually works in early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, this paper aims to explore principles of good practice in delivering ECEC services to these families. The paper investigates ECEC principles and practices that support those most in need to engage with services.

The paper begins by outlining the two guiding national frameworks for early childhood education and care in Australia, *Investing in the Early Years - A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009), and the COAG *Early Years Learning Framework ('EYLF')*. These frameworks inform the principles, practices and outcomes set for ECEC services.

²⁸ Kitson, R., & Bowes, J. (2010). 'Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 4; see also Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). (2002). *Improving Access to Childcare for Indigenous Families*. Briefing paper for Commonwealth Child Care Reference Group; SNAICC. (2004). *Seven priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families*, Melbourne; and SNAICC. (2007). *Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for the next term of government*. Briefing Paper, Melbourne

²⁹ For more on these principles see Sims et al. (2008). "Indigenous child carers leading the way". *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 3-4; SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project*, 16; SNAICC. (2010). 'Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services', 10-11; Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. (2011). 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*, Vol. 1, 22; and SNAICC. (2011). 'Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services'

³⁰ Sims et al. (2008). 'Indigenous child carers leading the way'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol 33 (1), 3

The paper then examines each of the four good practice principles outlined in Section A, exploring their meaning and operation in practice. A brief analysis of how each principle contributes to the overarching agenda set out within the two guiding government frameworks is also included. Finally, the paper will conclude by espousing the value of further consideration of these principles to inform practice and policy to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

C. The framework for analysis

For the purposes of this paper, SNAICC adopts the two frameworks that currently guide the ECEC service response in Australia as the framework through which to analyse the particular features and qualities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services.

The *Investing in the Early Years Strategy*,

“...focuses on how Australia’s early childhood development system aims to engage with and respond to the needs of young children and their families so that Australia’s young children have the best possible start in life.”³¹

The Strategy identifies the importance of families and communities, and outlines seven critical outcomes for children and families. The first five outcomes relate to children’s development:

1. Children are born and remain healthy
2. Children’s environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe
3. Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning
4. Children benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage, especially Indigenous children
5. Children are engaged in and benefitting from educational opportunities

The last two outcomes “recognise the primary importance of the family”.³² These last two outcomes underpin and enable the first five:

6. Families are confident and have the capabilities to support their children’s development
7. Quality early childhood development services that support the workforce participation choices of families.

While the *Investing in the Early Years Strategy* sets out the broad overarching framework and outcomes for the early childhood education and care sector, the *Early Years Learning Framework* focuses on the specific principles, practices, and outcomes that can be implemented in early childhood settings on a day-to-day basis, creating a comprehensive yet non-prescriptive pedagogical framework. The EYLF is a

³¹ Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Investing in the Early Years - A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*, Canberra

³² Ibid, 14

key component of the National Quality Framework ('NQF'), a broad strategy to guide early childhood development in Australia. As one of the approved learning frameworks under the NQF, the EYLF can be used as a broad 'curriculum' for early childhood services. The purpose of the EYLF is to guide early childhood educators "to provide young children with opportunities to maximize their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning."³³ The following are the key principles, practice and outcomes focused on in the EYLF.

Principles

1. Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
2. Partnerships
3. High expectations and equity
4. Respect for diversity
5. Ongoing learning and reflective practice

Practice

1. Holistic approaches
2. Responsiveness to children
3. Learning through play
4. Intentional teaching
5. Learning environments
6. Cultural competence
7. Continuity of learning and transitions
8. Assessment for learning

Outcomes

1. Children have a strong sense of identity
2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world
3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
4. Children are confident and involved learners
5. Children are effective communicators

With a focus on key principles, practices and outcomes to support children's development, the EYLF "forms the foundation for ensuring that children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning."³⁴ It provides a strong guiding pedagogical basis upon which services can develop and expand their own specific curriculum relevant to their local community³⁵ and as of January 2012 it establishes the benchmark against which ECEC services are measured.

Conversely, the seven outcomes identified in the *Investing in the Early Years Strategy* present a comprehensive framework that reflects overall national early childhood

³³ Australian Government. (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, 5

³⁴ Department Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Australian Government, 5

³⁵ *Ibid*, 8

development priorities. They detail the seven critical areas essential for children to grow, learn and develop, and how families can be supported to enable this. For the purposes of this paper they provide the overarching development framework within which ECEC services should work.

With their unique strengths and foci these two documents are appropriate frameworks in which to examine the four good practice principles that lead to improved service delivery, and therefore better outcomes, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. By exploring links between the principles, practices and outcomes articulated in these two frameworks, and the four principles identified in Section A, the paper aims to demonstrate how the implementation of the four good practice principles are compatible with, and can and do lead to improved outcomes in line with the two national Frameworks.

D. Principles of effective ECEC services

a) Services that employ innovative governance strategies

Definition

There is a wealth of evidence in the literature that governance strategies that foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and ownership of services, in effect community control, lead to better outcomes for service delivery,³⁶ and therefore directly benefit children and families. A comprehensive definition of community controlled services comes from the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO),

“An Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service is:

- An incorporated Aboriginal organisation
- Initiated by a local Aboriginal community
- Based in a local Aboriginal community
- Governed by an Aboriginal body which is elected by the local Aboriginal community
- Delivering a holistic and culturally appropriate health service to the Community which controls it.”³⁷

This definition applies beyond health to ECEC services as it contains the fundamental elements of community control in any service.³⁸

³⁶ See Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. Occasional Paper No 23. National Evaluation Consortium, 34; SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*, 44; SNAICC. (2011). ‘Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services’. Policy Paper, 1 & 3; and Sims et al. (2008). “Indigenous child carers leading the way”. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 4

³⁷ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), viewed 21 November 2011, <http://www.naccho.org.au/definitions/communitycont.html>

³⁸ For support for this definition see: Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). (2010). *A Better Way: Success Stories in Aboriginal community control in the Northern Territory*. Sydney; Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory (AMSANT), viewed 21 November 2011, http://www.amsant.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=56

It is also useful to examine the learnings from the US-based Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, which suggests that there are four key principles that inform sustainable social development for Indigenous Americans. These are:

- That when Indigenous communities “make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform external decision makers on matters as diverse as governmental form, natural resource management, economic development, health care, and social service provision.”³⁹
- Sovereignty and control must be supported by institutions that oversee the running of the organisation or enterprise, and can “separate politics from day-to-day business and program management.”
- Services must fit within the unique culture of the particular community.
- Strong Indigenous leadership is critical – effective leaders “introduce new knowledge and experiences, challenge assumptions, and propose change.”

Given the strong emphasis on adaptation to culture, it is clear why community ownership and control – in the design, delivery and management of services – are difficult to achieve from mainstream models.⁴⁰ Community control will look different in each setting – for example what particular type of governance model is used, how decisions are made, who is involved in designing services, or whether formal written documentation or informal agreements govern the service management. It is therefore also important to understand the distinctive elements of community control that are most important in each community context.

Correlation with National Frameworks

Investing in the Early Years	Early Years Learning Framework	
Children’s environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe	Principle	Partnerships
Children are engaged in and benefitting from educational opportunities	Practices	Responsiveness to children
		Cultural competence
		Learning environment
Families are confident and have the capabilities to support their children’s development	Outcomes	Continuity of learning and transitions
		Children have a strong sense of identity
		Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
		Children are confident and

³⁹ Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, viewed 21 November 2011, <http://hpaied.org/about-hpaied/overview>

⁴⁰ Turner, K. (2001). *Pipirri Wiimaku ‘for the little kids’ Innovative Child Care Report*. Waltja Tjutangku Palyapiyi Aboriginal Corporation, 2 cited by SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 44

		involved learners
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Despite the links drawn above, the principle of community control cannot be seen as a stand-alone factor. In rendering a service more effective at engaging with the community, community control contributes to all of the outcomes under the EYLF. It must therefore be viewed as a principle that underpins and affects every aspect of a service.

What does it mean in practice?

Participation and sustainability

Ownership of services is a determining factor in participation and engagement with services. As Hutchins et al note,

“Indigenous communities all around Australia have very high expectations regarding their involvement and ownership of services and programs provided to improve and support their wellbeing. This relates to all levels of decision-making, policy development, processes and practices. Without this involvement there is no guarantee of participation.”⁴¹

Sunrise Health Service is a community health service catering for Katherine and surrounds. Aboriginal community control underpins everything they do,

“The premise is that if Aboriginal people can own and control the services provided to Aboriginal people, then self-determination can occur and empowerment result. When populations are empowered they have a voice and political standing.”⁴²

When a service is controlled by the community, the likelihood of a community feeling ownership over and responsibility for the service increases, and therefore the service is much more likely to benefit from increased community participation and long-term engagement. In one study of community controlled ECEC services, an Aboriginal father commented that “The main thing was it was a Koorie controlled, Koorie owned centre and there was a heavy focus on community building and cultural affirmation.”⁴³ Management and community control of services address deeper issues of sovereignty and self-determination,⁴⁴ which contributes to positive engagement with that service. Banks notes, “Community engagement is a common

⁴¹ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 25

⁴² Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). (2010). *A Better Way: Success Stories in Aboriginal community control in the Northern Territory*. Sydney, 11

⁴³ Llewellyn, personal interview, quoted in Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 96. Note that the term Koorie applies to the Aboriginal people of Victoria and the southern part of New South Wales

⁴⁴ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 22

feature of successful Indigenous programs and initiatives, and is the basis for achieving long-term and sustainable outcomes.”⁴⁵

Quality and responsiveness of services

As well as increasing participation rates and sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families also believe that community ownership improves the quality and responsiveness of services.⁴⁶ Communities themselves are the experts on their own unique situations, and have particular insights into the community strengths and areas for improvement that outsiders cannot have. Therefore community ownership leads to truly community designed, uniquely tailored effective and appropriate responses to arising issues.

Overcoming negative associations

Previous SNAICC studies have revealed that many of the barriers to service access are overcome through the particular characteristics and features of community controlled organisations.⁴⁷ One significant barrier to access is the negative associations some community and family members may have with mainstream services, such as with child protection services and related associations with child removal.⁴⁸ Community governance has been shown to mitigate against this as services are seen by the community to be part of the community, and therefore safe and non-threatening places.

Recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

Furthermore, the fact that an organisation is community controlled is thought to strongly correlate with its ability to recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers,⁴⁹ a feature which is known to be key in engaging with and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.⁵⁰ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment and retention for ECEC services is challenging,⁵¹ particularly in rural and remote areas, and so strategies to increase this are essential.

⁴⁵ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 367

⁴⁶ Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). 'Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 85

⁴⁷ SNAICC. (2011). 'Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services'. FaHCSIA policy paper 3. Melbourne, 2

⁴⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. (2007). *Social Justice Report 2006*, 35, cited by SNAICC. (2010). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*. Policy paper. Melbourne, 7; and Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 17

⁴⁹ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 367

⁵⁰ Ibid, 359; Rigney, L. I. (2010). 'Indigenous education: the challenge of change'. *Every Child*. 16(4). 10–11, cited by Sims. (2011). *Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 9; and Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. PhD Thesis. Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The University of Melbourne, 85

⁵¹ See Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 359-360

b) Services that have an empowering culture

Definition

Effective ECEC services focus on fostering an empowering culture. This involves many aspects, but first and foremost that the service is based on a strengths based model. Strengths based models can “use experience parents and carers have had with parenting issues and discuss what is the most appropriate action to take.”⁵² By comparison, a deficit model of service delivery “does not build on strengths already existing within Indigenous families and communities, and also sets up situations where self-esteem, which is already low, is further eroded.”⁵³ This model means that the interaction parents have with the service empowers them in making choices over their child’s upbringing, builds on their expertise, increases their confidence and supports them to learn new parenting skills. An empowering culture within a service will also develop capacity, confidence, and pride within the community by utilising community expertise and providing positive outcomes for children, families and the community as a whole - it actively requires community participation – “encouraging and facilitating communities ‘doing it for themselves’ rather than ‘being done to’.”⁵⁴ Critical to an empowering, strengths based approach is recognising the unique qualities of each family and community, as Sims describes, “It is essential to remember that each family/community/culture has different strengths, not all of which are recognised as strengths in a white, middle-class world.”⁵⁵

Correlation with National Frameworks

Investing in the Early Years	Early Years Learning Framework	
Families are confident and have the capabilities to support their children’s development	Principle	Partnerships between educators, families and support professionals
		High expectations and equity
		Respect for diversity
		Ongoing learning
		Reflective practice
	Practices	Holistic approach
		Responsiveness to children
Cultural competence		

⁵² SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 39; see also Sims. (2011). ‘Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 4

⁵³ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 39

⁵⁴ Turner, K. (2001). *Pipirri Wiimaku 'for the little kids' innovative child care report*, Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation, Alice Springs cited by Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 22

⁵⁵ Sims. (2011). ‘Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 6 & see also 8

Children’s environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe		Cultural competence
		Continuity of learning and transitions
		Assessment for learning
Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning	Outcomes	Children have a strong sense of identity
		Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
		Children are confident and involved learners

What does it mean in practice?

Empowering families through respect for the family and traditional child-rearing practices

Empowering programs seek to enable and increase parent participation in services. Atkinson describes that “When mainstream centres are constructed around a single institutionalised voice, that of a western middle class philosophy and practice of early childhood education and care, Indigenous parents may be silenced.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may experience a lack of self-esteem in their abilities as parents, and this can cause them not to speak up to express their children’s needs to services.⁵⁷ Empowering programs seek to overcome this by being culturally sensitive, and this involves recognising the trauma and destruction of parenting knowledge that is a direct effect of the Stolen Generations. Atkinson notes “that the intergenerational consequences of the stolen generations...continue to adversely impact on parenting skills are best understood within Indigenous spaces.”⁵⁸ With their focus on the individual child, mainstream services tend to exclude “the influence of history, society and politics on early childhood spaces.”⁵⁹ Empowering services therefore need to understand the historical factors that impact on many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents today, and both celebrate their strengths and support them to further develop as parents within the context of their culture.

Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families also need to empower the family as a whole, and this incorporates an appreciation of the valuable child-rearing skills and knowledge that parents and the extended family possess,⁶⁰ and also an understanding and acceptance that in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families responsibility for child-rearing is shared amongst a wider group of family and community members. Hutchins et al highlight that “Culturally strong programs

⁵⁶ Cannella, G. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution*. New York, Peter Lang, cited by Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 85

⁵⁷ Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 151

⁵⁸ Ibid, 86

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 24

embrace the positive features of shared care and support and promote the development of children's attachments to a range of family and community members."⁶¹

A lack of respect for Aboriginal knowledge and ways of learning has been identified as a key barrier in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families accessing ECEC services. As Trudgett, drawing on many authors, emphasises, "It is important to embrace a notion of 'multi-literacies' in which knowledge is passed down through songs, poems, stories, dance and music."⁶²

SNAICC research⁶³ has identified significant differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream Australian child-rearing practices. Culturally strong early childhood programs "map onto forms of early childhood care and education held to be important in the local community."⁶⁴ Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing strategies is therefore crucial in ensuring consistency for children between home and early childhood services. Inconsistency between these two environments can impact negatively upon children's development.⁶⁵ This connection to culture is crucial for children's wellbeing, as the Family Law Council indicates "There is a large body of evidence indicating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in particular need to connect with their culture, and are at risk of psychological harm if this is not facilitated."⁶⁶ The most effective way to develop continuity between a child's experiences at home and at child care is to understand the child-rearing practices and values that guide the child's development in their home.⁶⁷ Some authors have suggested that this can be achieved "through the formal recognition of traditional Indigenous child rearing and parenting practices, and the translation of these cultural values into services provided to Indigenous children."⁶⁸

⁶¹ Turner, K. (2001). *Pipirri Wiimaku 'for the little kids' innovative child care report*. Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation, Alice Springs cited by Hutchins et al. (2007). 'Indigenous Early Learning and Care'. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 36; see also Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 87

⁶² Trudgett, M & Grace, R. (2011). 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 17

⁶³ SNAICC. (2011). *Growing Up Our Way: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices matrix*. Melbourne.

⁶⁴ Guilfoyle, A. et al. (2010). 'Culturally strong childcare programs for Indigenous children, families and communities'. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. No. 35 (3), 68–76 cited by Sims. (2011). *Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 9

⁶⁵ Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2000). 'Child Care in Cultural Context – Issues for new research'. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Research paper No. 22, 11

⁶⁶ Family Law Council. (2004). *Recognition of Traditional Aboriginal child rearing practices: Response to recommendations from the pathways report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 35

⁶⁷ Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2000). 'Child Care in Cultural Context – Issues for new research'. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Research paper No. 22, 11-12

⁶⁸ Priest, K. (2005). *Preparing the Ground for Partnership - exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care: A literature review and background paper*. Department of Family and Community Services. Commonwealth of Australia, 20

Build on what's already there

An empowering culture also builds on relationships and services that already exist in a community, rather than creating new services and processes which will have to begin the long process of community engagement and trust-building.⁶⁹ This leads to improved service efficiency, and increases the sustainability of a service by ensuring that it is fully embedded in the community. Burchill et al note that, "The most critical mechanism for ensuring sustainability [of community development] is whole-of-community involvement, utilisation of local knowledge, local resources and local personnel..."⁷⁰ In terms of management structures, services with an empowering culture also need to be representative of all of the community and clan groups, ensuring that the service draws on the diverse strengths of community members, and is seen as belonging and relevant to all.

Empower children to be strong in their culture

An empowering culture also means that the service equips children to be strong in their identity and culture, a key aspect that also ties in with the third principle discussed below. As Atkinson notes, a key wish that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have for their children is that "the sense of Indigenous pride engendered in the home and in the Indigenous early childhood centre will empower Indigenous children to deal with racism..."⁷¹ MACS demonstrate how empowering practice builds confidence and self-esteem for families as well as children. They are one example of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC service that has child, community and family empowerment at the heart of their mandate, "MACS provide environments that aim to develop positive self-esteem, independence and responsibility by communicating to the children their Aboriginal identity and instilling pride in their Aboriginal heritage."⁷²

c) Services that support identity and culture

Definition

Numerous studies have highlighted the "importance of models which acknowledge and affirm Indigenous culture and build positive cultural identity."⁷³ Services which

⁶⁹ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*, 14

⁷⁰ Burchill et al. (2006). 'Workin' Together – Indigenous Perspectives on Community Development'. *Family Matters*. No. 75. Australian Institute of Family Studies, 59

⁷¹ Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 69

⁷² Windisch, L. & Drysdale, V. (2003). 'Indigenous parents' ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Volume 28 (3, September), 2

⁷³ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*, 42; see also Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. (2011). 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 17; Priest, K. (2005). *Preparing the Ground for Partnership - exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care: A literature review and background paper*. Department of Family and Community Services. Commonwealth of Australia, 9-10; and Kitson R. & Bowes J. (2010).

support identity and culture are said to be culturally safe. This characteristic is key to implementing a successful ECEC service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. As recognised in the literature,

Whatever the culture specific to an Indigenous family, the ability of a child care service to recognise and incorporate cultural practice into the way the child and family is dealt with was identified as the most important aspect of child care for Indigenous children.⁷⁴

In simple terms, a culturally safe service assists “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build their capacity and sustain their strengths to support healthy relationships, families and communities, and to raise their children to be strong in their culture.”⁷⁵ For early childhood services, this should ensure that “every child feels culturally safe, with a sense of belonging and connection, and a feeling of being at ‘home’.”⁷⁶ How the community and families perceive a service – culturally safe or not – is critical in encouraging participation. Kitson and Bowes summarise the literature on this, emphasising that “Early childhood services where families are confronted with a contemporary western world view of childhood...are seen as ‘white fella’ places and regarded as unsafe by many Indigenous families.”⁷⁷

SNAICC considers from analysis of relevant frameworks⁷⁸ that there are three interrelated domains of service delivery in which cultural competency must be embedded in order to deliver effective and appropriate ECEC services. These are:

1. Systemic: the regulatory, legislative, policy and funding frameworks within which the service operates;
2. Service: the values, organisational culture, policies, practice and programs of the service; and
3. Individual: the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, knowledge, culture and practices of staff.

Whilst all services must be culturally competent, the particular focus on and strength of cultural competence is generally a key difference between Aboriginal and Torres

‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4).

⁷⁴ Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). (2006). *Towards an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan*. Viewed 28 October 2011, http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/indigenous/programs-towards_child_care_svs_plan.htm, 8

⁷⁵ SNAICC. (2010). *Working and Walking Together*. Melbourne, 84

⁷⁶ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 9

⁷⁷ Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). ‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 82

⁷⁸ Price-Robertson R. & McDonald, M. (2011) *Working with Indigenous children, families and communities: Lessons from practice*. Communities and Families Clearing House Australia; Thomson, N. (2005). ‘Cultural respect and related concepts: a brief summary of the literature’. *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin*. Vol. 5 (4); and Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2000). ‘Child care in cultural context’. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne cited by SNAICC, publication forthcoming

Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, and one which greatly effects the success or otherwise of an ECEC service. As Priest summarises,

The special feature that sets Indigenous child care services apart from the mainstream is their endeavor to nurture an Indigenous child’s cultural identity. Indigenous child rearing principles and practices in early childhood environments can strengthen and nurture an Indigenous child’s cultural identity.⁷⁹

In particular, it is the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to impart culture incidentally and everyday, rather than as a specific, time-limited and featured component of a service. Culture then becomes part of “everything that happens” at the service,⁸⁰ and this greatly strengthens children’s identity and connection to their community. Enabling a child to be confident in their identity and to feel pride in their heritage places them in a position of strength during their early years, the transition to school and beyond. As Bond summarises, participation in a culturally competent ECEC program supports children to “have a strong and positive feeling for their Aboriginality, which gives them the confidence to progress, with less inhibition, toward the achievement of their full potential.”⁸¹

Correlation with National Frameworks

Cultural competency is a critical factor in achieving most of the outcomes under the *Investing in the Early Years Strategy*, and the EYLF. The principles, practices and outcomes with a strongest connection are listed below.

Investing in the Early Years	Early Years Learning Framework	
Children’s environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe	Principles	Partnerships
		Respect for diversity
Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning Children benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage	Practices	Holistic approaches
		Responsiveness to children
		Learning environments
		Cultural competence
Families are confident and have the capabilities to support their children’s	Outcomes	Continuity of learning and transitions
		Children have a strong sense of identity

⁷⁹ Priest, K. (2005). *Preparing the Ground for Partnership - exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care: A literature review and background paper*. Department of Family and Community Services. Commonwealth of Australia, 8; and see also Vockins, C. & Armstrong, C. (2006). ‘Tjitji-Tjutatjara Kunpu Kulintjaku (Listening Up Strong For Little Kids) Innovative Evaluation in Remote Indigenous Communities’. Australasian Evaluation Society International Conference, 3

⁸⁰ Personal interview, 2004, quoted in Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 113

⁸¹ Bond, D. (2000). *Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services National Report*. SNAICC, 14.

development		
Quality early childhood development services that support the workforce participation choices of families		Children are connected to and contribute to their world
		Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

What does it mean in practice?

Providing a link between home and school, and aiding the transition to school
 Experience within a program that fosters children’s culture and identity produces better outcomes for them. The literature strongly supports this proposition, Kitson and Bowes note that, “children are more successful when they have a strong sense of identity and come from a place of pride...Education programs for Aboriginal children will be most effective when programs reflect the reality of children’s lives and provide continuity of experience between home and the early childhood.”⁸² This leads to a further important point – that the transition to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children presents its own particular challenges, and is a factor that needs to be addressed in ECEC services. Shepherd and Walker observe that “It can be incredibly difficult for Indigenous children and parents to make the connections between homes and school given the conflict between the demands and expectations of mainstream education with their language, cultural and social skills and experiences.”⁸³ One of the tenets therefore, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care services is providing that crucial link between home and school, preparing them for mainstream school and ensuring they develop a strong, confident identity, and thus supporting children to achieve better outcomes in their further education and development.⁸⁴

Utilising their position to link home and school, services that foster cultural identity are unique places to support children to transition to mainstream schools. Sims et al note that, “Indigenous children need services that support a strong cultural identity to enable them to move into the schooling system and experience success.”⁸⁵ MACS are particularly well adept at providing this link between home, early education services, and school. As recognised in one article, “the MACS centres, in particular, have been aiming to incorporate Indigenous-specific culture into the educational content of the centres, as well as provide a bridge for children between home life

⁸² Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). ‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 35 (4), 84

⁸³ Shepherd, C. & Walker, R. (2008). “Engaging Indigenous Families in Preparing Children for School”, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 20

⁸⁴ Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 110

⁸⁵ Sims et al. (2008). “Indigenous child carers leading the way”. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 3

and formal schooling.”⁸⁶ Bond’s report in 2000 still provides relevant lessons for today, as she states that with their focus on providing culturally relevant services,

The MACS centres...provide a bridge from where the children have come from, to where they have to go at the age of five or six: that is, to the local public school. After several years in a MACS program, the children ‘know the ropes’ and also have a strong and positive feeling for their Aboriginality which gives them confidence to progress, with less inhibition, toward the achievement of their full potential. This would not necessarily be the case if those children had come straight to school from the home environment or had been cared for in a mainstream centre.⁸⁷

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

Many authors have noted that whilst all early childhood services should be inclusive of all children, the most effective and appropriate service providers to deliver “culturally safe and strong care and learning environments”⁸⁸ are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.⁸⁹ SNAICC believes that key to this is the fact that such services are directly accountable to and administered by their community. Drawing on the research by Hutchins et al, Sims summarises the argument that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific early childhood services are best placed to deliver culturally appropriate care through their capacity to recognise:

- “The primacy of culture
- The primacy of self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty and the related principles of self-management and community control
- The need to develop capacity building for a marginalised/colonised community in a dominant/colonial context
- The primacy of addressing children’s development needs.”⁹⁰

Community controlled services also overcome many of the barriers to access discussed in Section A of this paper.⁹¹ SNAICC believes that with their intrinsic focus

⁸⁶ Windisch, Jenvey & Drysdale. (2003). ‘Indigenous parents’ ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Volume 28 (3), 6

⁸⁷ Bond, D. (2000). “Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services National Report”. SNAICC, 14

⁸⁸ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 1 & 5

⁸⁹ Bond, D. (2000). “Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services National Report”. SNAICC, 13-14;

Trigwell, J. (2000). *Childcare models and options in rural and remote Indigenous communities*. Western Australian Council of Social Service, Perth; and Fasoli, L. & James. R. (2007). Researching Remote Aboriginal Children’s Services: it’s all about rules. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8 (4)

⁹⁰ Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 10. For other authors who support this proposition see Bond, D. (2000). *Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services National Report*. SNAICC; Trigwell, J. (2000). *Childcare models and options in rural and remote Indigenous communities*. Western Australian Council of Social Service, Perth; and Fasoli, L. & James. R. (2007). Researching Remote Aboriginal Children’s Services: it’s all about rules. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8 (4); and Thomson, N. (2005). ‘Cultural respect and related concepts: a brief summary of the literature’. *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin*. Vol. 5 (4)

on culture – in particular the culture of the specific local community - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations are best placed to incorporate the local culture, history, languages and traditions of the community into service delivery. Furthermore, being grounded within and managed by the local community allows services to accurately reflect and teach both the traditional culture of their specific area, but also to transmit the *contemporary* identity of the community. This particular feature is challenging for mainstream organisations to achieve. Attempts at incorporating cultural identity into the service often focus on traditional notions of Aboriginality and ignore complex current community identities. As one Aboriginal early childhood professional comments, “People (non-Indigenous) expect to see more traditional culture [in services]. It’s the subtle parts of contemporary culture that are the features of the MACS.”⁹²

Furthermore community controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services avoid the power disparities that can be apparent in mainstream services. Kitson and Bowes note that, “It might appear easier to achieve a pedagogical perspective that incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing in Indigenous services where the power differentials of the majority culture are not an issue to overcome.”⁹³

Non-discriminatory

Whilst this paper does not claim that all mainstream services are discriminatory, how a service is perceived is critical in encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation. Not having access to a service that encourages cultural identity has been identified as a major barrier in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents accessing mainstream services. One study found that in many mainstream ECEC services,

There was a near-absence of celebration of Indigenous heritage, lack of consideration of various Indigenous issues, and, more broadly, a perceived discrimination against Indigenous families by the education system at large.....these factors may well explain why Indigenous children are not accessing early childhood education.⁹⁴

In a South Australian study, the most significant reasons given by Aboriginal families for why they didn’t send their children to preschool were the lack of consideration given to Aboriginal culture, and perceived negative attitudes of staff towards

⁹¹ SNAICC. (2011). ‘Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services’. FaHCSIA policy paper 3. Melbourne, 2

⁹² Citing an Aboriginal early childhood professional, personal interview, Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 81

⁹³ Kitson, R., & Bowes, J. (2010). ‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 35 (4), 84

⁹⁴ Windisch, Jenvey and Drysdale. (2003). ‘Indigenous parents’ ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 28 (3), 2

Aboriginal families.⁹⁵ There is a strong argument therefore that “Indigenous parents are not motivated to involve their children in educational processes with which they feel no connection”,⁹⁶ and even less so in services which they perceive to be at best culturally insensitive, and at worst culturally hostile. Cultural safety in an ECEC context has also been described as being where a service is “non-judgemental and recognises and promotes Indigenous culture(s) in ways that make the child feel a sense of belonging and connection.”⁹⁷

Consulting with family, community and Elders

Flaxman et al note that “Broadly, culturally competent services consult with and involve family, extended kin, Elders and community members in service delivery.”⁹⁸ This includes consulting with community role models and mentors.⁹⁹ This is because a culturally competent service recognises that the parents are not the only important figures in a child’s development, and that child development issues are intertwined with community development issues. This understanding recognises that expertise can and should come from many different sources within the community, and respects the special role that Elders have within a community.

Embracing and celebrating culture, including utilising local history, language and art

Services can foster a culturally safe environment by producing and delivering service materials and programs that embody and use the history, language, art and other features of the local culture, and are tailored to local cultures and knowledge.¹⁰⁰ This includes incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices and approaches into their service delivery.¹⁰¹ Services must go beyond tokenistic cultural awareness to actively actually incorporate cultural safety in all that they do. In a study conducted by Flaxman et al it was found that, “To be completely culturally sensitive, some [study participants] suggested that merely understanding Indigenous

⁹⁵ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations (DEEWR). ‘Why Aboriginal people use early childhood services, and why they don’t’, What Works Program, Australian Government. Viewed 4 November 2011,

<http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=139>

⁹⁶ Windisch, Jenvey and Drysdale. (2003). ‘Indigenous parents’ ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 28 (3), 2

⁹⁷ Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), (2006). *Towards an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan*, viewed 28 October 2011, http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/indigenous/programs-towards_child_care_svs_plan.htm, 6

⁹⁸ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 33

⁹⁹ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 14; and Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 28

¹⁰⁰ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 23-25; and SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 14 & 33

¹⁰¹ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 30

community cultural norms and values was insufficient, but that these values needed to be internalised and integrated into service practice.”¹⁰²

Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

A further aspect, referred to previously in this paper, is ensuring the recruitment and retention of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are known and trusted by the community. As it has been argued,

Workers with skills specifically matched to the needs of the target population were considered more important in early childhood service delivery than were those with qualifications, in cases where both skills and qualifications were not available. Relevant skills for workers in Indigenous communities included cultural knowledge and knowledge of local kin, community and service networks.¹⁰³

Evidence shows that “Indigenous staff are more likely to be able to embed their service in local culture and language, ensuring that community members may feel comfortable in the service and trust the carers.”¹⁰⁴ In particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff from the local community are best placed to deliver this. As Kitson and Bowes suggest, “A centre is culturally relevant when staff members understand cultural expectations, relationships and the subtleties of communication, including non-verbal communication. It may be that this is only possible for teachers who are members of or accepted by the local communities.”¹⁰⁵

d) Services that are holistic and responsive

Definition

The most effective services are ones that are holistic and responsive, meaning that they provide a range of services;¹⁰⁶ they target their services to the needs and context of the particular local community; and critically they focus both on the needs of the individual children (including taking into account complex family circumstances such as family breakdown, client behaviour and low income), but also on meeting the needs of all children in the community.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 25

¹⁰³ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 42

¹⁰⁴ Sims et al. (2008). “Indigenous child carers leading the way”. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 4; Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). ‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 85

¹⁰⁵ Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). ‘Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 86

¹⁰⁶ See Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 24, and Sims et al. (2008). “Indigenous child carers leading the way”. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 4

¹⁰⁷ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 9

Holistic service provision also supports cultural identity. The child is contextualised within a broader community network and this “community approach to child care is consistent with a ‘traditional’ Indigenous approach.”¹⁰⁸

Correlation with National Frameworks

Investing in the Early Years	Early Years Learning Framework	
Children’s environments are nurturing, culturally appropriate and safe	Principles	Partnerships
		Respect for diversity
		Ongoing learning
		Reflective practice
Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning	Practices	Holistic approaches
		Responsiveness to children
		Cultural competence
Children benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage	Outcome	Continuity of learning and transitions
		Assessment for learning
		Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

What does it mean in practice?

Range of services

A Northern Territory study found that communities wanted “early childhood services that provide for the health, welfare and educational needs of their children.”¹⁰⁹

Other authors have also supported this proposition, for example Sims advocates that early childhood services cannot be seen as stand-alone – they “cannot be separated from child, family, community health and wellbeing.”¹¹⁰ To overcome disadvantage in early childhood, “requires a holistic approach that addresses children and families in the context of their communities and cultures (Hallam 2008; Watson & Tully 2008), taking into account children’s physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing and development.”¹¹¹

Holistic and responsive services do just this – they increase the ease with which families can find out about, and access, a range of services by providing a ‘one-stop’ model of service delivery, or integrated service delivery. A key principle of integrated service delivery is that it combines “a range of different early childhood services so

¹⁰⁸ Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 90

¹⁰⁹ Judy Trigwell. (2000). *Childcare Models and Options in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities*. Western Australian Council of Social Service for the Department of Family and Community Services, 43.

¹¹⁰ Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7

¹¹¹ Hallam. (2008) and Watson & Tully. (2008) in Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7

that families experience ‘wrap-around’ (Brechman-Tousaint & Kogler 2010) delivery.”¹¹² As well as some form of early child development, programs provided can also include “health screening, parenting support, nutrition programs, child abuse prevention and awareness activities and cultural activities.”¹¹³

Access to services

A further characteristic of holistic and responsive services, mentioned briefly above, is that they make accessing a range of services easier. Access to services by families has been shown to improve when there are informal and flexible entries to services (for example through different avenues such as health centres or mobile play groups).¹¹⁴ As the Productivity Commission noted, “Indigenous-focused ECEC services delivered within an integrated ECD services setting reduces the difficulties families may have in identifying and accessing fragmented services.”¹¹⁵ Services that are holistic and responsive can also use bridging strategies such as home visits and longer opening hours to engage with hard-to-reach families.

Tailored to local community

Various studies have found that “Indigenous families did not necessarily engage with services unless they were accessible and tailored to their specific needs.”¹¹⁶ Responsive services therefore understand that they need to fit around the need of the local children, families and community, they utilise local knowledge, resources and personnel,¹¹⁷ all of which help to develop a community-specific - and therefore more effective - service. This necessarily then means that “services in different communities will look quite different; one size does not fit all.”¹¹⁸ There is often a danger of homogenising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs and communities,¹¹⁹ “Butterworth and Candy (1998) reiterate caution when considering

¹¹² Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7

¹¹³ Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), (2006). *Towards an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan*, viewed 28 October 2011, http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/indigenous/programs-towards_child_care_svs_plan.htm, 2; see also Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 6

¹¹⁴ See Cortis et al. (2009). ‘Engaging hard –to-reach families and children’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 26, 6–18; and SNAICC. (2010). ‘Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services’. Policy Paper, Melbourne, 11

¹¹⁵ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 350

¹¹⁶ Flaxman et al. (2009). ‘Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services’. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 51

¹¹⁷ Burchill et al. (2006). ‘Workin’ together’ Indigenous Perspectives on Community Development’. *Family Matters*. No. 75, 59

¹¹⁸ Sims et al. (2008). “Indigenous child carers leading the way”. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 3; see also Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 9

¹¹⁹ Department of Family and Community Services. (2005). *Preparing the ground for partnership: Exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal and Islander child care: A literature review and background paper*. Australian Government, 14

the needs of Indigenous families and discuss that although there are commonalities between the various groups throughout Australia, ‘There are wide variations in the needs of individual families and their links with Aboriginal cultures, values and languages spread along a continuum from traditional to urban styles of living...’¹²⁰ There is a call emphasised in much of the literature for “more individualised responses to individual and local situations when designing programs and services.”¹²¹ This need for services to be responsive to the community in which they are based can only truly come about when the community has ownership and genuine involvement in them.

Comprehensively consider all aspects of the child in the context of the family and community

Key to holistic service delivery is recognition “that families live in communities that shape learning opportunities available to children and the way in which parenting occurs.”¹²² Children develop within specific family and community contexts, and to ensure that early childhood services are relevant, appropriate, accessible and meaningful to children and families, services need to “integrate children and families in their communities and...not separate them from the world around them.”¹²³ They also need to understand and appreciate complex family and community dynamics.¹²⁴ According to Hutchins et al, services can implement holistic practice by; including the family and community – which may mean going to venues such as parks that are relevant for the community; addressing all unique aspects of each child’s development - “the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, health and wellbeing of Indigenous children as well as sustaining their cultural identities”; and by basing their service delivery on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definitions of “children, childhood, families teaching and learning.”¹²⁵

e) Conclusion

It is clear that early education and care services play a vital role in educating, developing and supporting children and families, as is reflected by the two overarching national frameworks – *Investing in the Early Years Strategy* and the *Early Years Learning Framework*. The reality is, however, that educational and developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly below those of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. As

¹²⁰ Butterworth, D. & Candy, J. (2008). ‘Quality early childhood practice for young Aboriginal Children. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. No. 23 (2), 20–25, cited by SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 45

¹²¹ SNAICC. (2004). *Indigenous Parenting Project: Main report*. Melbourne, 45

¹²² Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school’. *Closing the Gap Clearinghouse*, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7, 6

¹²³ Sims et al. (2008). ‘Indigenous child carers leading the way’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 5

¹²⁴ Lopez-Atkinson, S. (2008). *Indigenous Self-Determination and Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Melbourne, 85

¹²⁵ Hutchins et al. (2007). ‘Indigenous Early Learning and Care’. *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)*, 35

Sims et al. emphatically state, “We are not doing well.”¹²⁶ However evidence, albeit largely anecdotal, abounds on the positive services and strategies that are effectively engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families to provide better outcomes for children.

This paper reflects on available literature which suggests that four principles are critical to provide the basis for strong, effective and quality ECEC services which are accessible for and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. These are that services: employ innovative governance strategies; foster an empowering culture; support identity and culture; and are holistic and responsive. These principles align with the objectives and indicated outcomes of both the *Investing in the Early Years* strategy, and the *Early Years Learning Framework*. They stretch beyond however, to address the complex community development needs that are reflected in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services.

The four principles discussed in this paper can each be unpacked to reveal a set of underlying values and particular service characteristics which provide insight into why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services are unique in their ability to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. SNAICC believes that by understanding these characteristics – their unique strengths, and how and why they support children and families – we can best explore how to cultivate, support and maintain them for broader impact.

SNAICC believes that this practical understanding has valuable insights for policy and practice. Specifically, SNAICC believes that understanding these characteristics could inform policy around workforce development, service models and funding, as well as support the development of effective strategies, practice and procedures to support services to strengthen their ability to engage with and achieve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

This paper is by no means an exhaustive review of these principles, but rather it provides a basis from which to look forward and to begin a deeper examination of how ECEC services can and are ‘addressing the gap’ in service provision to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

SNAICC proposes to develop this examination, investigating these four principles through consultations with ECEC services to ascertain whether the principles do actually capture the essence of effective service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. SNAICC aims to further unpack practical learnings for other services on how to apply these principles on various levels to ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

¹²⁶ Sims et al. (2008). ‘Indigenous child carers leading the way’. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 1

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