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SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILD CARE

Cultural Competence in Early Childhood Education and Care Services, SNAICC Consultation Overview

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Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

A strong voice for our children and families

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

The views in the paper do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government.

1. Introduction

Significant research identifies cultural proficiency as one of the key areas for increasing service engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.[1] Cultural proficiency within the Early Childhood Education and Care (**'ECEC'**) sector refers to a state of knowing and being (as an individual staff member or as a service) that supports an understanding of culture and the development of a child's cultural identity.[2] Increased engagement in ECEC services is critical in light of well documented evidence that:
  - ➢ Early childhood educational and developmental outcomes are lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children;[3]
  - ➢ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a significantly lower participation rates in ECEC services than other children in Australia;[4] and
  - ➢ Children's participation in quality, culturally inclusive and relevant early childhood education and care services leads to better longer term outcomes in a range of developmental areas.[5]

This paper provides an overview of SNAICC consultations conducted with nine diverse ECEC services on cultural competence, one aspect of the journey towards cultural proficiency. The services interviewed span urban, inner regional and remote areas; Child Care Benefit (**'CCB'**) approved and Budget Based Funded (**'BBF'**) services; and both Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community controlled and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services. The interviews explored services' understanding of cultural competence, their incorporation of aspects of culturally competent policies, systems and practices within their service and any barriers they experienced in achieving cultural competence in their service.

Based on these consultations, the paper proposes a series of recommendations for policy development to both enable and ensure cultural competence in ECEC service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with services on a journey towards cultural proficiency. In particular, SNAICC highlights the significant opportunities presented through the introduction of the National Quality Standards to strengthen culturally competent practice in early childhood education and care services.

2. Cultural proficiency and its importance for outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Cultural proficiency is the highest level in the broader cultural competence framework or continuum. [6] Most literature refers to cultural competence and cultural proficiency interchangeably, however a discerning difference is that cultural proficiency is a state of deep knowing and understanding of a culture where one continuously aspires to cultural proficiency and culturally proficient practice. According to Cross et al (1988) cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together within a system, agency or profession, and enables that system, agency or professional to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Cultural proficiency requires more than becoming culturally aware or practicing tolerance. It is the ability to identify and challenge one's own cultural assumptions, values and beliefs, and to make a commitment to communicating at the cultural interface. Cultural proficiency promotes self-determination.[7] SNAICC characterises it as "Holding culture in high esteem;

seeking to add to the knowledge base of culturally competent practice by conducting research, influencing approaches to care, and improving relations between cultures".[8]

A culturally proficient or safe service responds to the majority of the barriers that prevent families from accessing childcare services. These include: a lack of transport; prohibitive fees; burdensome or inappropriate administrative requirements; inflexibility in service provision; perceived cultural inappropriateness of the service; fear of Aboriginal culture being undermined; being judged negatively; a sense of shame; fear of racism towards families or their children; lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff or other service users; and negative associations with institutions and government services, including that their children might be removed from them.[9]

A wealth of anecdotal evidence demonstrates that a culturally safe service[10] that supports and nurtures cultural identity and language can potentially increase access to and engagement with services, leading to improved education, health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.[11] Strong cultural identity helps foster confidence, resilience and positive self-identity in children, which continue to contribute to improved wellbeing in later life.[12] Many authors also acknowledge however a need to strengthen the evidence base to determine the causal relationship between culturally proficient service delivery, and attendance and educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.[13]

There are a series of other reasons that reinforce the importance of cultural proficiency within the service context. In particular they help to protect a range of rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, such as education that respects their cultural identity, language and values. It also supports children to:
  ➢ Identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander without fear of judgment or questioning;
  ➢ Maintain their connection to country, kinship ties and social obligations;
  ➢ Receive education from Elders; and
  ➢ Receive information in a culturally sensitive, relevant and accessible manner.[14]
A strong positive identity in children is now known to be a major factor in positive developmental outcomes, as is reflected by the focus on identity in the national Early Years Learning Framework.

3. Areas of cultural competence
Three strong areas of culturally competent service practice emerged from discussions with mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services. The following cultural competence areas encapsulate these themes.
  1. Respect for the cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including language and traditions, in ECEC service delivery.
  2. Understanding that culture is embedded in all that a service does and doesn't do, and acknowledging the privilege granted to the dominant culture.
  3. Valuing positive, mutually supportive and equal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations.

This Consultation Overview discusses services responses grouped in these three areas. Most services consulted partially meet these areas of cultural competence and show a clear

commitment to improving and embedding cultural competence in a practical way. Many services expressed a need for greater support to achieve this.

Area 1: Respect for the cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including language and traditions, in ECEC service delivery.

This area of cultural competence requires more than becoming culturally aware. It involves reflective practice that translates into service delivery in various ways. It means that workers have the understanding, values, knowledge, skills, behaviours and professional practice needed to work effectively with people from cultures other than their own. It also translates into the development of programs, resources and support structures that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, traditions and language, and that support the cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and workers. At the organisational level, respect for cultural identities becomes embedded in organisational policies, protocols, services, programs and practices, with services providing guidance and support to staff to strengthen children's cultural identities through their work.[15]

Key findings
- All services consulted conduct some activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity through the use of language and traditional images, posters and celebrations. Most services believe that this is an important aspect of their programming.
- Services interviewed found that the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language creates positive relations with families and celebrating cultural events provides a sense of safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Most services experience some barriers in accessing resources and knowledges including not knowing protocols; being afraid of doing the wrong thing and causing offence; locating people to teach language, tradition and culture appropriately; funds to access resources; lack of local resources; and lack of knowledge of where to access resources.
- Many services also place an emphasis on the Early Years Learning Framework (**'EYLF'**) as a guiding document that will bring a sense of safety and belonging to all children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Services also experience limitations in developing programs to support cultural identity, which where they existed, lacked coordination and were not derived from a particular source.

Area 2: Understanding that culture is embedded in all that a service does and doesn't do, and acknowledging the privilege granted to the dominant culture.

This element recognises that self-reflexivity is an essential component to developing cultural competence and is necessary for engaging with people from another cultural background.[16] Creating a culturally safe and respectful service involves practitioners engaging in high-level critical self-reflection to analyse how their behaviours and methods of interaction in the service reflect their own cultural assumptions and values, and how this communicates to people from different cultures. Moral and value-laden assumptions will have negative consequences for access and continuity of care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.[17]

Key findings

- Most services apply some form of self-reflective practice and recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have different needs. However, some services exhibit a lack of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. For example, no service referred to kinship and social obligations within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in comparison to western family structures.
- No service has conducted cultural proficiency training and only one service has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence policy (although most do have anti-bias and anti-discrimination policies).

Area 3: Valuing positive, respectful, mutually supportive and equal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities

This element recognises that positive, mutually supportive and equal partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations lead to better programs, higher attendance,[18] and overall improved service delivery. To effectively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, programs and services must be "relationships focused and relationship driven."[19] Respect is a key factor in relationship development. As VACCA have noted,

> Respect is key to engaging – both you [as a mainstream organisation] showing and gaining respect. Respect is based on relationships, rather than position.[20] Equal, respectful partnerships recognise the power discrepancies that still dominate interactions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and mainstream services. For a service to build an effective relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, it must acknowledge "The role of history – acknowledging the past and learning together (which includes understanding) the impact of dispossession, family separation, and institutionalisation…[21]

Key findings

- All services view relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as a key aspect of effective service delivery. Many services provided examples of long-term relationships with families. For example, some services have served two generations of children within a family.
- The community controlled services reiterated the importance of involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, families and Elders from the community for cultural guidance.
- Some services expressed barriers in connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and Elders, and in incorporating more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge within their service delivery, as well as a desire to overcome these barriers.
- No service uses a cultural competence framework to develop their cultural proficiency: most draw information and knowledge from the EYLF, professional training (Certificate 3 and 4, Diploma) or their own experiences.
- All services stated a desire to expand their cultural proficiency from a central source such as the EYLF.

Matrix 1 below identifies the main practices shared by the services consulted that support their cultural competence in these areas.

Matrix 1: Examples of cultural competence in services

Area 1: Respect for the cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including language and traditions, in ECEC service delivery.	**Area 2:** Understanding that culture is embedded in all that a service does and doesn't do, and acknowledging the privilege granted to the dominant culture.	**Area 3:** Valuing positive, respectful, mutually supportive and equal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities
Use of traditional language in pictures, posters, books and displays (more than one service)	Understanding of different childrearing practices (one service)	Long term relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who have provided input and advice to services over the years (more than one service)
Aboriginal puzzles and books (more than one service)	Understanding that cultures are different (one service)	Invite Elders to tell stories and play music (more than one service)
Elders' stories, music and dance (more than one service)	Treat all children the same and use an umbrella principle of equality but don't reflect on how 'equality' may mean different things to different families, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (almost all services)	Seek advice and draw upon the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and staff of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent (more than one service)
Celebrate NAIDOC week (more than one service) and NAICD (all community controlled services)	Acknowledge that relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have taught them a lot about culture, language and traditions (more than one service)	No formal program to bring in Elders and families to teach knowledge, tradition, culture and language (all services)
No formal program in place to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges (all services)		

4. Embedding cultural competence in different layers of ECEC services

Services consulted had made efforts to incorporate cultural competence on different levels within their service. This overview describes service practice against three important interrelated domains of service delivery:

- ➢ Systemic: the regulatory, legislative, policy and funding frameworks within which the service operates;[22]
- ➢ Service: the values, organisational culture, policies, governance, practices, programs of the service; and
- ➢ Individual: beliefs, assumptions, expectations, knowledge, culture and practices of staff.

Systemic domain

The systemic service delivery domain explores how cultural proficiency at the sector policy level influences and interacts with the practices, policies and culture of early childhood services.

The consultations identified a need for stronger measures to embed cultural competence within the systemic domain. In particular, it emerged from discussions with services that:

- No service was required to report their cultural proficiency practices, policies or programs at a state or national policy level. At the time of the consultations state based childcare service accreditation processes did not substantively consider cultural proficiency.[24]
- No Director made the connection between cultural proficiency and better education, care and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Whilst individual staff working in a service may have a different perspective, the weight of a Director's influence on structural developments in a service gives this result particular importance.
- No service interviewed has developed a continuous improvement process for cultural proficiency or have evaluated their cultural proficiency.
- No service has conducted cultural proficiency training and only one service has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence policy (although most do have anti-bias and anti-discrimination policies).

Most services did nevertheless demonstrate commitment to strengthen their cultural proficiency and advocated for a cultural competence framework (accompanied by support to use it) within the EYLF. These services recommended that the framework be a stand-alone document to avoid *"just another box to tick."*

It is hard to define our own culture, and therefore understand what assumptions we make, as we exist within it.[25] Therefore it is not difficult to see how, despite awareness of other cultures and respect for cultural diversity, mainstream childcare policies, practices, programs and training are likely to be predominantly influenced by the Anglo-Australian (western) culture.[26] Some efforts to make cultural assumptions and practices more explicit and to address this challenge are underway, as illustrated by the Victorian Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework.[27] This framework is designed to guide mainstream child and family services through eight standards that aim to increase a service's ability to be culturally competent. The Early Years Learning Framework[28] also contains many references to cultural competence and to valuing the unique cultural contexts of families and children.

SNAICC suggests that these could be valuable mechanisms to enable services to ensure that cultural competence is supported from a systemic level.

The National Quality Framework (**NQF**), which has been rolled out in a staggered approach since January 2012, introduces new National Quality Standards (**'NQS'**) and a new ratings system with which ECEC services need to comply.[29] The NQF, jointly developed by the Australian Government, states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments (**COAG**), aims to 'build a high quality, integrated quality system including accreditation, for early learning and care that takes account of setting, diversity of service delivery, and the age and stage of development of children.'[30] The NQS will not however apply to most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, although there is to be consideration of this in the future. In relation to cultural competence, the introduction of the NQS provides a major opportunity to embed in national regulation the cultural competence of ECEC services. This has considerable potential to strengthen the cultural competent practice of ECEC services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

This potential is limited in the current formulation of the NQS. The term cultural competency is not clearly defined, but rather is linked to certain NQS quality area requirements, with loose terms such as 'cultural diversity' and 'difference'. Quality Area elements with cultural competence implications are:
a) Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to (amongst other things) their identity, connection with community and wellbeing; and programs are founded on (amongst other elements) a child's culture (Quality Area 1);
b) Services are to: develop and maintain respectful and supportive relationships with families; support families in their parenting role and respect their values and beliefs about childrearing; facilitate access to inclusion and support assistance; and build relationships and engage with the local community (Quality Area 6).

This does provide a starting base for supporting and requiring services to exhibit culturally competent practice. However, as highlighted by the Productivity Commission, further efforts are required to develop a clear definition of cultural competency and measurement frameworks to ensure that "ECEC services must meet cultural competency standards to receive National Quality Standard endorsement". [31] Cultural competence is also not integrated across all quality areas, including areas where understanding 'cultural diversity' and 'difference' are directly relevant.

The Early Years Learning Framework is a new guide for early childhood educators that is another potential structural support for integrating cultural proficiency into service practice. The EYLF aims to ensure delivery of nationally consistent and quality early childhood education across sectors and jurisdictions and is included under the assessed Standards and Elements of the NQS Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice).[32] It is based on three inter-related elements of children's learning – Principles, Practice and Learning Outcomes and is driven by three fundamental principles key to the lives of children: Belonging, Being and Becoming.

The EYLF provides some support for the development of cultural competence. It acknowledges that family, community, culture and place are fundamental connections in the lives of children, and that families are the foremost influential aspect of children's learning and development. [33] One particular EYLF practice requires educators to be culturally competent and respect multiple ways of knowing, seeing and living.

The EYLF sets out the proposition that cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural difference. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. The guidance to cultural competence within the EYLF encompasses the following:

- "Being aware of one's own world view;
- Developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences;
- Gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views; and
- Developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures."[34]

This guidance can be seen as the beginning of developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific culturally proficient practice when working with and caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and peoples. The 'cultural competence' of the EYLF can be seen as providing general guidance but is not specifically focused on cultural proficiency to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

It remains unclear whether application of the EYLF is mandatory, as either the EYLF or another approved framework may make up part of services ratings under one of the quality areas within the National Quality Standards. Further research to develop a specific cultural competency framework to guide the cultural proficiency of the ECEC sector for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and people may then still be essential.

The SNAICC consultations reinforced the need for a national cultural competence framework, which services felt would most appropriately sit in the EYLF. However, services stressed that it should be a separate stand-alone document to ensure that it receives the necessary attention and is accessible. Many of the services interviewed had already started to implement the EYLF in service delivery and were positive about its potential to improve outcomes for children. The community controlled services stated that the Indigenous Professional Support Units **(IPSUs)** are assisting them to refine their programs to align with the EYLF, but expressed a need to have greater support in this task.

Based on these issues, SNAICC provides key recommendations to strengthen cultural competence within the systemic domain in the final section of this overview.

Service domain

The service domain looks at the culture of an early childhood service, its values, policies and programs. Cultural competency can be embedded within the service delivery domain through culturally competent service policies and procedures; fostering a culture of continuous improvement and reflection; staff engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families; and through the delivery of culturally sensitive programs for children.

Services had varied experiences applying the identified areas of cultural competence in the service domain. Implementation was stronger in practices than policies, but barriers still persisted.

Most of the services use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, images, posters and resources, with many developing their own resources. Use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and resources is however, not coordinated or drawn from a central source, such as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural centre or organisation. Services interviewed found that the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language creates positive relations with families, and that celebrating cultural events provides a sense of

safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.   Most services celebrate NAIDOC week and other cultural events such as Harmony Day. Only community controlled services celebrate National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day.

The community controlled services reiterated the importance of involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, families and Elders from the community for cultural guidance in programmes and activities. Many services also placed an emphasis on the EYLF as a guiding document that will bring a sense of safety and belonging to all children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Almost all services expressed some barriers in accessing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, including not knowing protocols; fear of doing the wrong thing; lack of local resources and lack of knowledge of where to access resources.

Some clear gaps remain in services' programming and practices. For example, only one service reflected within their programming the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connection to land, and no services mentioned the importance of maintaining strong kinship ties and social obligations, although one community controlled service stated that such education should come from the home. Only a minority of services invite in Elders and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to teach culture and language. All services do however utilise support services, including Inclusion Support Officers and IPSUs, for programming, information, support, advice and assistance on cultural issues. This demonstrates both a willingness and need for guidance towards adopting and implementing cultural proficiency principles within mainstream and non-mainstream ECEC services.

It was noteworthy that no service has received cultural competence training and only one service had an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence focused policy. It is noted however that most services did have anti-bias and anti-discrimination policies. Cultural competence training is an important commitment to developing cultural proficiency. This is particularly the case given the absence of compulsory cultural competence training in many early childhood related courses.[35]

Service directors often commented that staff were the drivers of programming, relying on upon their certificate level and diploma training to do this. SNAICC believes that this knowledge could be further supported and developed through accessible processes and resources to ensure both that staff display high levels of cultural proficiency, and that it is reflected in the development of programs.

Individual domain
The individual domain of service delivery explores the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, culture and practices of staff and management within a service.

SNAICC consultations did not extend beyond interviews with Directors of ECEC services. Accordingly, information on staff practices and approaches is limited and thus a focus on the individual domain is restricted. Further research is needed to discern the beliefs, expectations, assumptions and conduct of all staff who deliver ECEC programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

SNAICC notes that Directors interviewed held a common belief that all children should be treated 'equally'. However, there was little self-critical reflection as to how 'equality' of

children is upheld in practice and how this principle may meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Support to assist and ensure staff attitudes and practices reflect cultural proficiency and to support a culturally proficient service culture was limited in services interviewed. Most services provided some in-house training, but this did not constitute cultural competence training.

Matrix 2 sets out the three domains of service delivery against the three overarching cultural competence areas discussed earlier in the paper.

Matrix 2: Cultural competence and domains of service delivery

Cultural competence areas / Service delivery level	**Area 1:** Respect for the cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including language and traditions, in ECEC service delivery.	**Area 2:** Understanding that culture is embedded in all that a service does and doesn't do, and acknowledging the privilege granted to the dominant culture.	**Area 3:** Valuing positive, respectful, mutually supportive and equal relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities
Systemic: funding contracts, standards and regulations and national frameworks and policies	Commenced implementation of EYLF and started to prepare the NQF Use Indigenous Professional Support Units **('IPSUs')** and Inclusion Support Officers	Cultural competency standards within Certificate 3 and 4 and Diploma training	Utilise support services: Inclusion Support Officers to develop access strategies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
Service: values, organisational culture, policies, practices, programs	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, images and celebrations such as NAIDOC week Community controlled services celebrate, and know of, National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day **('NAICD')**	Use some form of cultural competency policy: multicultural policy, anti bias policy or anti-discrimination policy No cultural competency training within service. Some services have accessed cultural competency training in the past	Form continuous long term relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families Invite Elders and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to celebrate NAIDOC and NAICD
Individual: beliefs, assumptions, expectations, culture and practices	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff use language and images to develop resources for the children Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff use their training and other support services to develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources	Uphold a sense of equality, and that all children are the same and should be treated the same Recognise different child rearing practices and other differences	Acknowledge what they have learnt from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and Elders

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The consultations highlighted that many early childhood education and care services have a clear commitment to culturally competent practice, but still experience a series of barriers in realising this outcome. The National Quality Framework and Early Years Learning Framework provide a perfect opportunity to further develop, support, recognise and enforce cultural proficient practice within both mainstream and non-mainstream services.

SNAICC considers that an overarching cultural competency framework for the ECEC sector would greatly assist services to strengthen cultural competence across all aspects of service development and delivery, as has been developed in Victoria for the childcare sector, and nationally for the health care sector.[37] These frameworks aim to incorporate and embed cultural competence holistically and consistently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges at the individual, organisational and regulatory/licensing domains. SNAICC asserts that a national cultural competence framework for the ECEC sector, followed by longitudinal research to measure the long-term effects of cultural competence, has the potential to enhance outcomes in education, health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

SNAICC proposes the following recommendations to the Australian Government. These draw on issues identified in the consultations conducted with ECEC services to strengthen cultural proficiency within the systems, service policy, programming, practice and individual domains of ECEC services.

(a) Consistent with the recommendation of the Productivity Commission, SNAICC urges the Government to update the National Quality Standards to include a specific, outcome-based definition and measurement framework for cultural competence, which is developed in consultation with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

(b) This endeavour must also be accompanied by targeted research to determine how cultural proficiency principles align with the National Quality Standards, identify and bridge any inconsistencies with these principles, and ensure the appropriateness of application of the NQS to services targeting or reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

(c) Drawing on the recommendations of the majority of services consulted, SNAICC recommends that the Government enlist the support of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation to develop a cultural competence framework to assist services to embed cultural competence within their service. This would operate as a stand-alone document alongside the Early Years Learning Framework. Accompanied with the cultural competence framework should be a support process and support documents to enable staff to apply the framework, including service level templates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused cultural proficiency policies and protocols for program delivery.

(d) SNAICC recommends targeted research into the incorporation of the cultural proficiency principles within the EYLF to interrogate the sufficiency of the EYLF and to support the cultural interface of mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, with a view to:

- Supporting an appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education institute to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge framework for early childhood services. This could be considered to update the EYLF or comprise another approved learning framework under Quality Area 1 of the NQS. This would serve to at least elevate the relevance and validity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultural identity to support a shift to a more balanced perspective in services; and
- Developing support resources to assist services in their program delivery in order to strengthen the implementation of the EYLF and ensure that the cultural needs, access, education and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are upheld. Establishing a supportive clearinghouse would also assist in this task.

(e) Targeted research to identify the inclusion and adequacy of cultural proficiency training in child care courses such as Certificate 3 and 4 and Diploma education is an important step that SNAICC advises to comprehensively ascertain the quality of training of child care professionals in ECEC services and to identify any gaps.

(f) The Council of Australian Governments has indicated that specific documents are being developed for guidance to educators to ensure 'cultural security' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with additional resources to support the application of the Early Years Learning Framework to follow.[38] SNAICC recommends that these proposed resources are developed and promoted to services with assistance to apply them in practice.

(g) Given the shift of attitudes required for real advancement in culturally competent practice, SNAICC suggests that the Federal government (supported by ACECQA) strengthen the Professional Support Units to enable sufficient training, tools and resources for services to engage in a continuous improvement process. This should include a resource for applying early years programs, and in particular the Early Years Learning Framework, in centres that serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and families.

(h) The Productivity Commission recommends increasing funding to expand the cultural competence training offered by IPSUs to ECEC services. Tailored cultural competence training for staff in non-mainstream services was also considered important "especially where complex kinship networks exist in the community."[39] Targeted research on training packages, and how these support staff and services to become culturally proficient, may assist the overall implementation of cultural proficiency for the ECEC sector.

(i) SNAICC recommends federal funding for longitudinal research into outcomes stemming from cultural proficiency in ECEC services. This would strengthen understanding and the evidence base of the sustainable outcomes achieved through culturally proficient service delivery.

(j) The Australian Government should support documentation of good practice to highlight and reward programs that uphold cultural proficiency principles and utilise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges.

(k) The Federal Government work with SNAICC to develop a plan to elevate National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day to be celebrated in all early childhood education and care services and preschools across Australia by 2013 and mainstream primary and high schools by 2015.

(l) It was clear from the consultations that language, resource and cultural support generated from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and language institutes and organisations would greatly assist in strengthening incorporate of cultural identity in service practice. SNAICC recommends that at this stage the Government support an appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation to map and source Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, resources, posters, books and puzzles, and publishing companies to create a clearinghouse based on the core cultural proficiency principles and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. This could be similar to HealthInfonet[40] to support staff in program development and delivery.

[1] Flaxman et al. (2009). *Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services: Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004-2009*. National Evaluation Consortium. Social Policy Research Centre. University of New South Wales and the Australian Institute of Families Studies, 10; Trigwell, J. (2000). *Child Care Models and Options in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities*. Western Australian Council of Social Service. Department of Family and Community Services, 7.

[2] 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, 13.

[3] Nguyen, N. (2010). *Early post-school outcomes of Indigenous youth: the role of literacy and numeracy*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Briefing Paper 22. Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; Russell & Wenham. (2010). *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: Progress towards this important goal*. Menzies Centre for Health Policy.

[4] Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 351; Windisch et al. (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), 51.

[5] Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development*. Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision; Productivity Commission. (2011). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*. Australian Government, 4.28.

[6] The cultural competence continuum (developed by Cross et al 1988) illustrates the stages of becoming culturally competent. It spans from cultural destructiveness; cultural incapacity; cultural blindness; cultural pre-competence; and finally to advanced cultural competence and cultural proficiency. It can be used by organisations to understand their own cultural competence capacity, and how they can progress towards advanced cultural proficiency.

[7] Cross et al. (1988). *Cultural Competence Continuum*. New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children INC, New York.

[8] SNAICC. (2010). *Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations.* Melbourne, 86.

[9] Flaxman et al. (2009). *Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services: Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004-2009.* National Evaluation Consortium. Social Policy Research Centre. University of New South Wales and the Australian Institute of Families Studies, 10; Trigwell, J. (2000). *Child Care Models and Options in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities.* Western Australian Council of Social Service. Department of Family and Community Services, 7; 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.

[10] Cultural safety involves users of a service feeling safe "to be themselves", and to feel safe from covert or overt cultural abuse. This means that services must be welcoming and aware of the "power dynamics of cross-cultural interaction." VACCA. (2008). *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Department of Human Services. Melbourne, 27. By comparison, cultural proficiency is a broader concept and the highest level on the cultural competence continuum. It involves the following aspects for individuals and services "Holding culture in high esteem: seeking to add to the knowledge base of culturally competent practice by conducting research, influencing approaches to care, and improving relations between cultures Promotes self determination." Ibid, 24.

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

[12] See 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; Terrini, L. & McCallum, J. (2003). *Providing culturally competent care in early childhood services in New Zealand Part 1: Considering culture*. Ministry of Education. New Zealand Government; and Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). 'Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children'. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 84.

[13] Goode et al. (2006). 'The evidence base for cultural and linguistic competency in health care'. National Centre for Cultural Competence. Centre for Child and Human Development. Georgetown University; Grote, E. (2008). *Principles and Practices of Cultural Competency: A Review of the Literature*. Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), 46; Sims. (2011). 'Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school'. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7.

[14] VACCA. (2010). Building Respectful Partnerships: The Commitment to Aboriginal Cultural Competence in Child and Family Services. Melbourne, 17.

[15] Grote, E. (2008). *Principles and Practices of Cultural Competency: A Review of the Literature*. Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC); SNAICC. (2010). *Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations.* Melbourne, 97.

[16] See VACCA. (2008). *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Department of Human Services. Melbourne, 28 & 54; and SNAICC. (2010). *Working and Walking Together*. Melbourne, 56-58; Hutchins et al. (2007). *Indigenous Early Learning and Care.* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 28-29.

[17] Walker, R. & Sonn, C. (2010). 'Working as a Culturally Competent Mental Health Practitioner' in *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*. Edited by Purdie et al. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Canberra, 162.

[18] Hutchins et al. (2007). *Indigenous Early Learning and Care*. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 7.

[19] Hutchins et al. (2007). *Indigenous Early Learning and Care*. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 31.

[20] VACCA. (2010). *Building Respectful Partnerships*. Melbourne, 105.

[21] Hutchins et al. (2007). *Indigenous Early Learning and Care*. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 7.

[22] Drawn from an analysis of relevant frameworks: 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), 7; Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2000). *Child care in cultural context*. Australian Institute of Family Studies: Melbourne, 7.

[24] Note that this has changed somewhat with the introduction of the National Quality Standard, under which services will be required to demonstrate that their programs are informed by, amongst other things, a child's culture, and that they facilitate access to inclusion and support assistance: Australian Children's Education and Care Authority (ACECQA). (2012). *National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument*, 8 & 36.

[25] Department of Human Services (DHS). (2008). *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework.* Victorian Government. Melbourne, 11.

[26] Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2000). *Childcare in cultural context*. Australian Institute of Family Studies: Melbourne, 7.

[27] Available at: http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/plans,-programs-and-projects/plans-and-strategies/children,-youth-and-family-services/aboriginal-cultural-competence-framework-2008.

[28] Available at: www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/Final%20EYLF%20Framework%20Report%20-%20WEB.pdf.

[29] Early Childhood Development Sub group. (2008). *A national quality framework for early childhood education and care: a discussion paper*. Productivity Agenda Working Group – Education, Skills, Training and Early Childhood Development. Canberra.

[30] Early Development Steering Committee. (2009). *National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care.* Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

[31] Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 369.

[32] Quality Area 1 assesses if an ECEC service's curriculum and program for each child has been informed by the EYLF or other approved learning frameworks: Early Development Steering Committee, 2009.

[33] Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). 2009. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra.

[34] Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). 2009. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, 16.

[35] Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report.* Australian Government, 375.

[37] Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council's Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Working Party. (2004). *Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health* 2004-2009; Department of Human Services (DHS). (2008). *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Victorian Government, Melbourne; and National Health and Medical Research Council (MHMRC). (2005). *Cultural Competency in Health: A guide for policy, partnerships and participation*. Australian Government. Canberra.

[38] DEEWR. (2009). *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Council of Australian Governments, 3.

[39] DEEWR. (2009). *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Council of Australian Governments, 376.

[40] See http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/