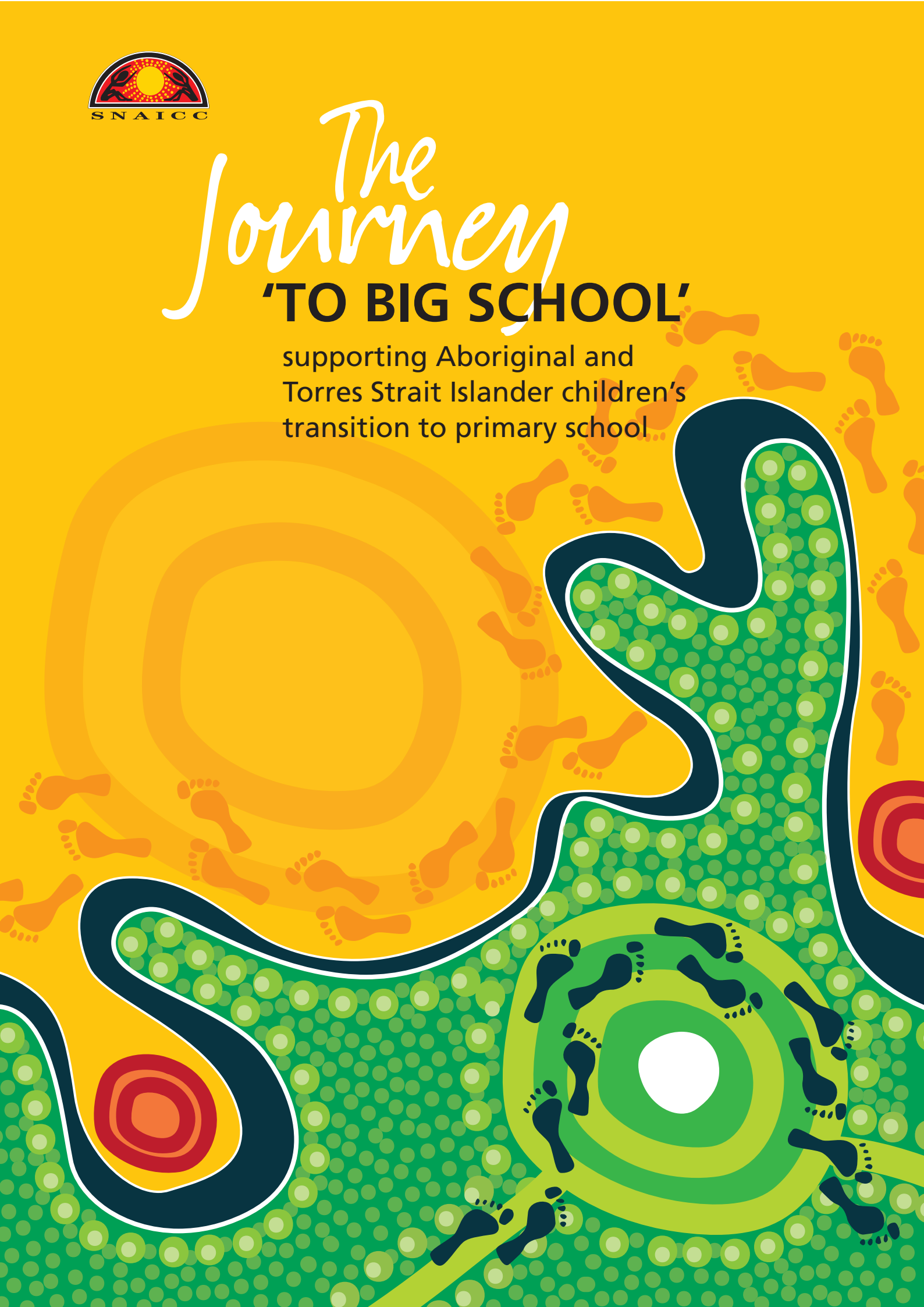


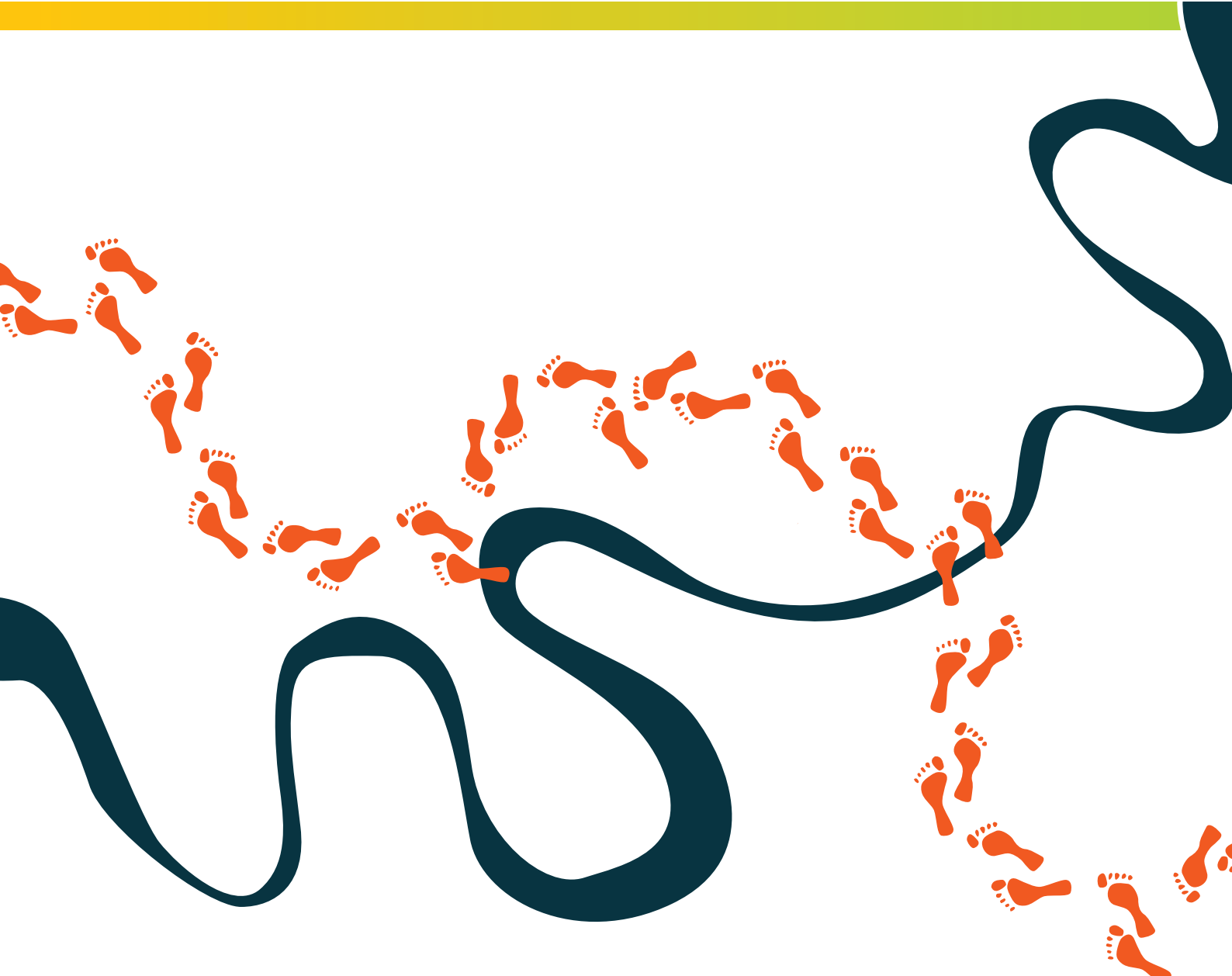


# The Journey

## 'TO BIG SCHOOL'

supporting Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander children's  
transition to primary school





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- Echuca East Primary School, Echuca (VIC)
- Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS), La Perouse (NSW)
- Noogaleek MACS, Wollongong (NSW)
- Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre, Horn Island (QLD)
- Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, Thursday Island and Hammond Island Campuses (QLD)
- Thursday Island Child Care Centre, Thursday Island (QLD)
- Wanslea Family Services, Albany (WA)
- Warmun Early Learning Centre, Warmun (WA)
- Yarrabah Child Care Centre and Yarrabah Primary School, Yarrabah (QLD)
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning school is a key transition phase within early childhood. Children and families' first experiences with school have significant implications for educational and broader developmental outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This is accentuated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who experience higher vulnerability and exclusion in early childhood, including particularly low enrolment and attendance rates in preschool and early childhood programs.<sup>2</sup> Current research indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children frequently begin school demonstrating poorer indicators of development in areas such as literacy and numeracy than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>3</sup> For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the transition to school will set the pattern for inclusion or exclusion, and thus engagement or non-participation, within mainstream education for that child's schooling life.<sup>4</sup>

See SNAICC (2013). *Supporting Transition to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children: What it means and what works?* Melbourne, 5

The transition process, understood within this report as the one to two years prior to a child beginning formal schooling, is a crucial period during which to establish a solid foundation for a child's future schooling life and educational outcomes.

Appreciating the critical nature of this transition, earlier SNAICC research sought to investigate the key enablers and barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experiencing a positive transition to primary school. An initial literature review, *Supporting Transition to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children: What it means and what works?*, explored what constitutes a 'successful transition', and the key program elements that evidence indicates lead to this. The review found that a successful transition is generally defined as one that:

- "enables children to feel comfortable, connected and engaged with their school environment and community;
- facilitates readiness to achieve early learning outcomes; and
- promotes, amongst parents and families, a feeling of engagement in the school experience and school community."<sup>5</sup>

The review also concluded that a number of elements support such an experience:

- "relationship building and engagement with a range of stakeholders;
- high quality programs and experiences;
- strengths-based approaches;
- flexibility;
- cultural competence; and
- involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, current evidence frames successful transitions around a series of five interconnected elements; ready schools, ready children, ready families, ready communities and ready early childhood services.

This report is based on a series of consultations conducted with 12 early childhood services, family support services and schools, and seeks to investigate the practical implications and applications of the findings from the literature review. The services selected for consultation and featured in this report each deliver<sup>1</sup> a high quality program that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children transition to primary school.

<sup>1</sup> Note that one service is no longer delivering their transition program. See the Annex for details.

They embody a variety of program types. Most are early childhood services or schools, others provide family support or health services.

Services were selected based on interest and an initial determination of program 'quality' according to the key features of successful transition programs identified within the literature review,

as discussed above. The programs consulted are diverse, but share key strengths that demonstrate good practice principles and practices for transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Together with the literature review, these provide a strong basis for exploring program models and concepts that are potentially adaptable for a variety of contexts.

**TABLE 1: SERVICES CONSULTED (SEE ANNEX 1 FOR FULL DETAILS)**

- Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and Natalie Gorey Preschool, Alice Springs (NT)
- Echuca East Primary School, Echuca (VIC)
- Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS), La Perouse (NSW)
- Noogaleek MACS, Wollongong (NSW)
- Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre, Horn Island (QLD)
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- Yarrabah Child Care Centre and Yarrabah Primary School, Yarrabah (QLD)
- Yipirinya Aboriginal School, Alice Springs (NT)

The report will firstly explore two key program enablers and elements identified across the consultations;

- A holistic approach that places the child at the centre of focus; and
- Competent, supported and committed program staff.

In addition, the report will explore three substantive programmatic elements that were determined integral to high quality transition programs:

- A broad focus on child development that prioritises capacity to learn over specific knowledge;
- A targeted approach to building children's familiarity and relationships with school; and
- Family engagement and involvement throughout the transition process.

Although not expressed in exactly the same terms, these features reflect and support the principles explored in the literature - ready children, families, communities, services and schools. Whilst the literature considers these concepts somewhat discretely, in practice the overlap is clear – for example successful programs support meaningful school orientation visits that involve children and their families – thus contributing to ready children, families and schools.

Lastly, the report will consider critical gaps between transition theory and practice, and draw together key recommendations for future policy and practice in this area. Specifically it will explore the challenge of ensuring cultural competence within programs, the lack of targeted funding for supported transition programs, and the limited focus in practice on enabling 'ready communities' and 'ready schools'.

The report has significant implications for policy, research and practice. The analysis reveals significant strengths in current programs that, taking into account contextual requirements, have the potential to be replicated. The recommendations and discussion outline key areas of improvement in policy focus and direction, and as such provide a meaningful summary, specifically

targeted to governments and other stakeholders, of significant gaps in this area where further focus is required.

Lastly, containing a variety of practical examples, it is hoped that this report will be a useful reference to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of transition programs.

### Note on terminology and practice across states and territories

States and territories across Australia use varying terminology to describe the years of education before Year 1 primary school. This report explores the transitions occurring between home/early

childhood centres to primary school – including Year 1, or Kindergarten/Pre-School/Preparatory/Transition/Reception where these programs occur within a primary school.

TABLE 2: STATE/TERRITORY TERMINOLOGY USED

Australian Capital Territory	Pre-School	Kindergarten	Year 1
New South Wales	Pre-School	Transition	Year 1
Northern Territory	Pre-School	Kindergarten	Year 1
Queensland	Kindergarten	Preparatory (Prep)	Year 1
South Australia	Kindergarten	Reception	Year 1
Tasmania	Pre-School	Kindergarten	Year 1
Victoria	Pre-School	Preparatory (Prep)	Year 1
Western Australia	Pre-Primary	Kindergarten	Year 1

Each program is founded around a child centred approach that comprehensively considers the needs of each child and their family. Program staff interviewed perceive their transition programs to be more than just practical supports to enable a smooth start to primary school. They identify them as targeted family and child-specific approaches that prepare children for future learning and acclimatisation to school life. Family support is seen as an integral factor in each program, with supports and tools provided to families as key facilitators of a positive school transition.

This section will consider the foundations for and content of these program values and principles.

### 2.1 Strong program philosophies

Services demonstrated strong philosophical foundations for their programs that reflected the personal and targeted child-centred approach they applied to all children and families. Whether formally documented or not, these philosophies provided a meaningful and contextually specific platform from which the program elements flowed. The main principles identified were;

- Looking at each child in the context of their family;
- Working holistically to meet each child's transition needs;
- Removing any potential obstacle that could hinder a child successfully beginning school;
- Acting as an advocate for the child throughout the transition process; and
- Instilling in children a love of learning and a confident attitude.

The relevancy of these principles is that they display intentionality behind service practice. Transition is not viewed by the services as merely a functional or administrative process in a child's progression to school, but an important life phase that requires targeted support to both the child and family before, during and after school commences.

Services positioned the child at the centre of this practice, thus designing their programs according to the children's needs. Their philosophical approaches were brought to life in the day-to-day practices of the programs, staff behaviours and approaches. Examples of this include staff actively seeking to engage with and better understand children's families; services and staff remaining engaged in the transition period from 1-2 years prior to school to a child's first year of school; and service programs that supported the resolution of any ongoing health issues prior to a child commencing school.

These philosophies embody the holistic focus reflected within the literature of 'school readiness' as far broader than a child's academic or developmental readiness. The impact of these strong child-centred philosophies was clear through the consultations; through a focus on holistically supporting children's growth and development, early learning centre (ELC) staff, families and teachers believed that children were much more likely to be emotionally, socially, developmentally and physically ready for school, and their families supported and empowered.

### 2.2 Flexible approaches

From the case studies it is clear that transition programs are much more likely to meet the specific needs of children and families when they are adaptive, responsive and designed by ELC educators, program staff or teachers who know and understand the context in which they are working. Most services conducted regular review processes to determine whether children's needs were being met, and these encouraged program adaptation and flexibility. Staff indicated that programs need to be based on staff knowledge of children, with educators valuing and respecting children's differences. One ELC educator explained,

*"These are our kids, and we spend the first part of the term getting to know them."*



**Wanslea** believes that a personal approach to each family and child is key. Two particular practice examples embody Wanslea's flexible approach in meeting families' needs:

- *Transiency*: The community is fairly transient, with families often dropping out of the program for weeks or months at a time whilst they travel. Wanslea provides children's activity packs to families to enable them to continue activities whilst they are away. On the family's return, a Program Assistant will visit them to encourage them back to the group. Wanslea runs services across a number of locations, and so also encourages travelling families to link up with these to attend programs.
- *Transport*: Many families don't have their own transport, and so the program provides a pick-up/drop-off service to enable their attendance.

The consultations with schools revealed that being flexible included being open to adjusting the classroom format to suit new children - for whom the school environment and routines can feel very foreign.

**Natalie Gorey Preschool** is a strong example of a service that has adapted its classroom program to suit the transitioning children. For children from traditional bush settings, who are not used to being confined, constraining their movements can bring out behavioural issues. Responding to this, staff trialled opening up the outside doors to give children freedom to move between the inside and outside areas. They found approach to be very effective, working with the children's needs, whilst slowly introducing them to routines and appropriate ways to behave at preschool. The Director describes how making such changes requires schools to be prepared to think outside the box and adapt their methods.

Further ways in which services demonstrate flexibility in their programs include:

- Partnering with local ELCs or preschools to pool resources and deliver a shared program;
- Providing transport where needed to facilitate family access;
- Planning program schedules around child and family routines/lifestyles;
- Adequately staffing programs – including providing a higher staff-child ratio where needed.

The higher needs of Aboriginal children from the Alice town camps, and therefore the higher demands on staff time, were initially identified as a barrier to **Natalie Gorey Preschool** being able to provide for Aboriginal children. To counter this, Congress provides an extra staff member to the preschool in the first few weeks. This initial higher teacher-child ratio allows the teachers and children to develop a relationship without the preschool teachers having to worry about behaviour management: *"Congress acts as this extra support to ensure that the teachers and kids get off to a better start – and we find they don't need much support after that."* Once the children have settled in, Congress begins to pull back. Natalie Gorey have also allocated additional staff to raise the ratios, so even after the Congress staff have left there are still adequate staff to cater for the children's higher needs.

For the first month of each new school year, **Congress'** transition program provides transport to different preschools throughout Alice Springs. The bus picks children up in the morning, but operates off a flexible schedule that factors into the pickup time that the children may not be ready, or might be at a different house in the community. This means that many children don't miss out on preschool due to missing transport. The bus also provides flexibility in where children can be dropped off.

The bus ride is seen as an important part of the program, being the first stage in helping children to feel excited about preschool. Throughout the journey staff run activities such as nursery rhymes or story-telling, which makes the ride engaging for the children.

Congress provides the bus for the first month of term, and once the children have settled into the new routine the preschool then takes over. One of the Preschool teachers then drives the bus to ensure that staff have regular interaction with families.

The transition program **Congress'** delivers in collaboration with preschools also runs for four days, instead of two or three, but for shorter periods of time each day. This is based on evidence indicating that a higher frequency of days, for a shorter period of time, is a more effective strategy for engaging children in preschool learning. This allows for a drop in children's energy and concentration after lunch.



### 3. EARLY LEARNING CENTRE, PROGRAM AND SCHOOL STAFF

Service and program staff are a key element in providing a successful transition to school program. Local community staff are particularly vital – usually bringing with them existing relationships with families, and therefore community trust. They are also more likely to understand family and community dynamics. For example, one service explained that their local staff understand what's going on for each family

on any given day, and therefore better appreciate the factors that may impact upon a family and child's participation in the transition program. By virtue of their local connections and relationships, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are also well-positioned to support outreach work to enable more families and children to access prior to school support.

The role of a community engagement officer, such as the Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) system at **Echuca East Primary School**, can also be an invaluable one. At Echuca, the role of the KESO is multifaceted – supporting the cultural competence of school staff, programs and approaches; engaging with the community to enrol children in early childhood education; and playing a vital 'icebreaker' role as a bridge during the building of relationships between families and school staff.

**Wanslea** endeavours, where possible, to hire Aboriginal staff who participated in the program as parents themselves, and who had demonstrated that they valued it. As well as knowledge of the program, these staff bring with them a wealth of experience of the community, culture and child development. Being known within the local community, they are invaluable in helping other parents feel comfortable using the service. As these staff have developed their confidence and skills, they have taken ownership of the program and begun to drive it. The Coordinator explains,

*It doesn't matter how much cultural awareness you have or how many workshops you attend, it doesn't always work that way. The Aboriginal staff know their community; they know what works and what doesn't. And that respect angle is very valuable.*

The Aboriginal staff are employed in genuine roles that utilise their experience and knowledge, with their connection to the community highly valued as a key skill and experience.

As well as *who* staff are, participants explained that the attitude staff possess is also a critical feature to the success of any transition program.

Staff attitudes are all-important in **Congress' Preschool Readiness Program**. Many of the children participating live in the town camps, and experience a range of barriers accessing preschool such as family movement, parental incarceration, poverty and health issues. Some schools exclude children on the basis of health issues that are actually easily treatable and manageable at school, such as nasal and ear discharge. Other reasons for exclusion can include if the child isn't wearing a uniform or isn't toilet-trained. Congress staff believe that teachers need to understand the level of disadvantage the children may experience at home and adjust their approach to support these children accordingly. The program Psychologist describes this as,

*You have to have the mindset to let some things go, choose your battles. For example you can't worry about children not wearing shoes or hats – first you need to be at the gate welcoming each child to school. You need to remember why children are at school, they are here to learn and have a successful time, not to wear hats and shoes. That can come later when the relationship is there.*

The most fruitful programs were where all stakeholders – ELC educators, program workers and school staff - viewed themselves as having a role in transition. By gaining support from the Director or Principal, transition programs were more likely to be adequately resourced – for example within a school context this entailed allocating additional staff to the classroom at the beginning of the year to help settle children in.

Successful programs also had leadership teams who were open to learning from their local community, and who were committed to reflecting on barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing their programs, and how they could change this.

The support from the school is crucial – it starts with a Principal who understands early childhood and the context we are working in, and is fully supportive because she has seen that when children are in years 3-6, if they haven't had a successful time in the early years, they have very difficult behaviours. It's not because of the children, it's down to poor quality teaching and programs. So she's prepared to vest staff time, qualified staff and the right staff so that these children can have successful transitions.

Congress

The transition program at **Echuca East Primary School** was initiated in response to low enrolments of Aboriginal families. The school leadership undertook a period of reflection and discussions with their local Aboriginal community to explore barriers, and how they could overcome these. The Deputy Director speaks of the importance of having honest conversations with community during this period, and accepting that although these conversations can be challenging, because they involve deep reflection of and discussion on aspects that may not be working, they are still vital. The outcome of this process was a change in practices and attitudes across the school, which has now over time led to a much higher enrolment of and engagement with the local Aboriginal community.

At an individual level, how teachers and staff behave towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children plays a huge role in how that family

and child will engage with school in the future, particularly where there may be additional barriers to families feeling welcome and included at school.

The Preschool Director at **Natalie Gorey** believes that every child must be treated as unique and special, and that educators must work hard to make an individual connection with each child and their family. She describes their attitude to each child, “we look at them so that they think that they are the only beings in this world, and we love them.” When children and their parents arrive at the centre the staff warmly welcome them, so that the children and families understand that the staff want them to be there.





## 4. CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) results show Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children frequently achieve lower results across a number of developmental domains than non-Indigenous children.<sup>7</sup> Impaired development hinders children's progression through school, and so high quality transition programs focus on facilitating children's development across all domains to ensure that they begin school as capably as possible.

This section explores how the services interviewed firstly assess and then focus on children's development across the five developmental domains; fine and gross motor, social/emotional, cognitive and language.

### 4.1 Appropriately assessing a child's readiness for school

Several programs begin with an evaluation, either at the centre/classroom or at home, of children's abilities and skill levels across a number of developmental domains. This provides a tool to assess a child's ongoing progress prior to and at school and to inform the design and direction of the transition program. These assessments can include standardised tests such as the Peabody Vocabulary test (Congress, for example, runs this test both in English and in the child's first language).

Involving families in the tests builds their engagement and commitment to schooling, and so to aid this services explained that it was vital to have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff member present at the assessments to build trust and rapport with the family. When conducted or shared collaboratively with families these assessments can provide a valuable tool to use in discussions about a child's readiness to begin school, discuss school options, begin completing school paperwork, and identify any additional issues to be resolved.

### 4.2 Focus on social/emotional readiness

Across the five domains, services focused not just on building children's knowledge and skills, but on developing a range of social-emotional skills to empower them within a school environment, including their capacity to learn, their willingness to take risks and 'have a go', resilience in the face of

change, positive self-esteem and confidence in their culture and identity.

Staff spoke of the importance of prior to-school programs in supporting children to develop necessary social skills such as cooperation, sharing, and developing an understanding of behavioural boundaries and norms, all of which support a smooth adjustment to the new social and learning dynamics posed at school. Understanding that school schedules often have less time to focus on these fundamental skills, program staff felt that incorporating these into daily programs, meal times and collaborative play prior to school was a vital aspect of supporting 'school ready' children.

Services cited a number of reasons for why these areas were more important than purely developing children's knowledge and/or skills. Firstly, a number of services raised concerns that transitioning to a mainstream school – where the dominant school culture was often different to that of their family and community - presented particular challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and therefore required significant adjustment. A further concern was that the school context largely focuses on academic skills and development, with the assumption that children possess a certain developmental level of social and emotional skills. This disadvantages children who may not have developed these capabilities at home. Early childhood services therefore strongly viewed one aspect of their role as enabling children to develop social and emotional skills that will help them positively participate in a school environment.

### 4.3 Literacy/numeracy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children frequently begin school with lower literacy and numeracy skills than non-Indigenous children.<sup>8</sup> Given this, a focus on literacy and numeracy appeared as a key feature in all programs interviewed.

Some services focused on literacy through structured programs, such as the Macquarie University pre-literacy program, PreLit. This structured, play-based program concentrates on small group work and phonics to develop children's competency as readers. Other services

provide intentional literacy activities within their daily programs. At Noogaleek, for example, each child spends 10 minutes a day exploring a book with a staff member. This may not necessarily involve just reading the book, but is also to develop awareness and familiarity with books – for example talking about: the pictures; the cover, back and

title of the book; and what's inside. One service describes this as teaching children one of the important 'languages' that they will use at school. Several services also focus on facilitating children's access to books, as well as supporting families' familiarity with reading and books.

**Warmun ELC** established a 'borrowing library' in conjunction with their regular reading program. This helped parents and children become accustomed to the practice of borrowing and returning books. Adult literacy is an issue in the community, and so staff worked with families to understand that the most important part is not necessarily reading the book, but just sitting down with their child and opening the book, talking about the pictures and what's happening – to encourage children's engagement with books. Staff also encouraged parents to use the language they were most comfortable in - either the child's first language or English.

**Wanslea** works in collaboration with the local library to run a literacy program. Accompanied by an Aboriginal worker, the Project Officers visit families' homes to share books with the parent and child. Through role modelling, they encourage parents to read stories to their child, and are seeing positive results in children's literacy and the time parents spend reading with their child. The Coordinator explains how they have extended this to involve the community, further raising awareness of literacy,

*We involve the Men's Shed in Albany [in the literacy program] because one of the things that was identified was that not many families have books at home... And some of the mums were a bit worried about having the books because they are brand new and what would happen if they were torn or somebody took them? [So] we thought it might be nice to have somewhere special to keep the books, so I contacted the local men's shed, and they made up some bookshelves. [These] are being put together by dads, uncles, kids and mums, and then they'll decorate them and take them home. And that is going to be the special place for the books. So it is that sense of ownership and feeling proud.*

Several NSW services delivered the Patterning and Early Algebra Program (PEAP), which provided them with a comprehensive framework through which to focus on children's numeracy development. One service embedded the PEAP program within their

own daily program, and also adapted it for use with children with autism. Anecdotal program results have been highly promising so far, with schools reporting that children are beginning school with increased numeracy skills and confidence.

#### 4.4 Children with additional needs

A critical aspect of school readiness identified throughout all consultations was support for children with additional needs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience a higher level of health issues than non-Indigenous children.<sup>9</sup> Addressing issues prior to school commencing, as well as comprehensively communicating those needs to schools, therefore plays a significant role in a child's ability to smoothly begin school. Additional needs noted in the research were both diagnosed and undiagnosed, and included:

- speech
- hearing
- behavioural
- occupational therapy
- developmental delays
- post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Early childhood services clearly play an important role in connecting families with health services, enabled through their pre-established relationship with the child and family. Services usually focused

on a dual approach of direct parent/carer education and facilitating regular visits from health specialists to provide screenings at the service. This also helped familiarise families with health professionals, increasing the likelihood that they would approach them to seek support. Program staff believed that introducing the specialists in this way helped families to feel that they were not being scrutinised or targeted, instead providing an accessible and non-judgmental connection to the health services.

ELC's and family support organisations also viewed their role as supporting schools to understand children's additional needs. They expressed that this transferral of information was critical; if schools do not have the appropriate information about a child's needs, school staff are likely to label the child as having behavioural issues. A number of services therefore mentioned that where a child had additional needs, they would (with parent/carer permission) share this information with school staff to ensure that the school understood the child's needs.

**Noogaleek MACS** has approximately 30 families dealing with family violence or an incarcerated parent. A number of these children have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are not confident, and require specific transition support and a much higher level of care. Supporting these children is therefore a major focus at the centre, requiring increased staff attention. Within the transition program, staff need to be aware of how each child will respond to an activity – and know that if a child is stressed or too challenged by an activity they may shut down and become unresponsive. Staff dedicate extensive individual time to children to help them gain confidence in a non-pressured, supported environment. The Coordinator believes it is critical that this one-on-one support occurs within the ELC, as the lower teacher-child ratio at school will most likely mean that children receive much less individual support.

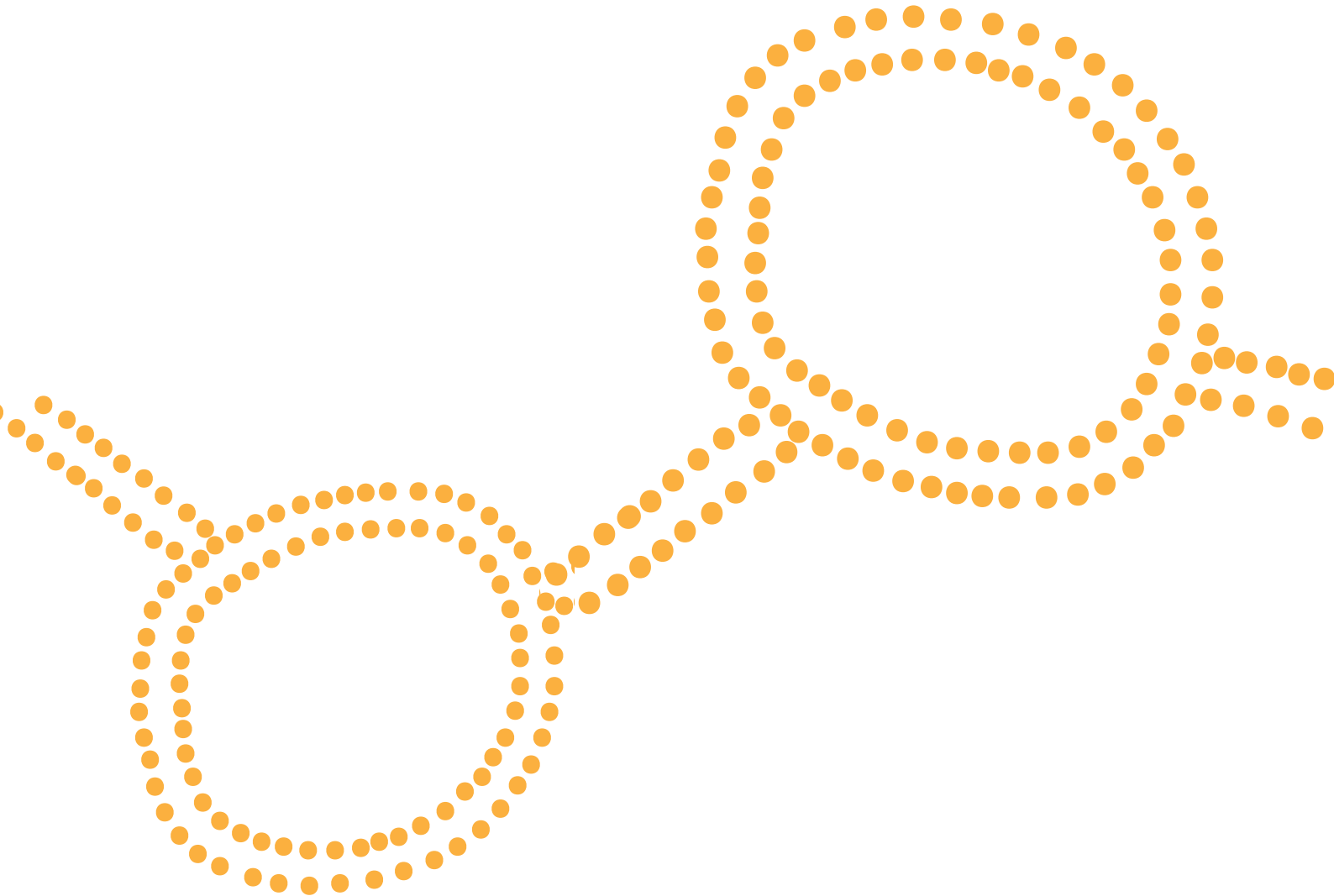
Noogaleek also focuses on talking to schools about this issue – including increasing their understanding of the issues children are facing, and how PTSD can effect children's brain development, growth and learning. They also work with the school on how to best support an individual child. Where staff have a particular concern about a child, a meeting will be held between Noogaleek staff, the parents, the teachers, the Aboriginal Liaison Officer (or similar role) and the Principal, together with child protection workers if needed. The meetings provide an opportunity for Noogaleek staff and the child's family to share with the school how they can support the child to smoothly transition.



#### 4.5 Health and hygiene

Lastly, health and hygiene were considered to be a critical building block for beginning school and therefore were a focus within all the programs investigated. Services reported that schools generally expect children to have adequate self-care habits such as nose-blowing, toileting, and hand-washing, and that children who do not have

these habits are often disadvantaged as support is not generally provided to learn these. For example, children who are not toilet trained are frequently excluded from attending school. These are therefore critical habits to develop prior to beginning school, but also need to be reinforced on an ongoing basis at school.



5.

## BUILDING SCHOOL CONNECTIONS AND FAMILIARITY

Schools form an essential element of the 'readiness equation', and as such all participants within the consultations focused extensively on the role of schools in the transition process. Consistent themes that emerged included the need for children to develop familiarity with the school environment - including through school visits and transition books - and the central importance of the relationship between the family service/ELC and the school as an enabler of collaborative school transition programs and information-sharing.

### 5.1 Familiarisation with school routines and environment

Many aspects of school are different from children's home and early learning centre environments. Unfamiliarity with school routines and environments can be a particular issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>10</sup> Building familiarity with these elements is therefore key to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comfortably and confidently adjusting to school life.

Services generally approached this aspect of transition by delivering an intentional teaching program that aimed to identify all elements - including activities, routines and concepts - that would enable children to comfortably move into school, and embedding these into the daily program and routine. Educators discussed the importance of starting from a strengths basis of children's current abilities and creating a bridge from what children can currently do to what they will need to do at school.

Important also was daily and ongoing discussions about how school looks and feels, and its unique processes, routines, activities, environment and people. These discussions were found particularly useful when held after children had participated in at least one visit to school. Key differences that services discussed with children included:

- Program structure - within ELCs children are given more choice over what they do, and learning is incorporated into play activities. The school environment is more structured with children being required to follow the activities and routines set by the teacher;
- Adult-child relationships - these are generally different between early childhood educators and school teachers. One ELC spoke strongly of the affectionate and loving relationships they have with their children, feeling that this differed from school where relationships tend to be more formal and less like those within a family, as they are at the ELC.
- Different buildings and environments - for example classrooms, toilets and playgrounds. Children at one ELC expressed anxiety that they may get locked into the toilets at school (being used to open toilets) - and so this required discussions and visually seeing the toilets to reassure them.
- Routines - these take time to adjust to, and include: wearing a uniform; attending and participating in assemblies; lining up and walking together; putting up hands to speak; bells to mark the periods of the day; meal times; hygiene and hand-washing; and sitting still for long periods of time.

**Wanslea - To gradually accustom children to sitting still in the classroom, Wanslea's program initially keeps mat sessions short - building them gradually up in length. They also provide large cushions to make a comfortable and inviting space for children to sit.**

Services also discussed a range of skills they considered foundational for children to engage positively in the school classroom and environment, and which they therefore embed into their daily programs. These included:

- Listening and responding to stories and games;
- Singing and rhyming;
- Arts and crafts, including painting and clay work;
- Gross motor skills - through activities such as climbing, balance, dancing, ball games and bike-riding;
- Fine motor skills;
- Puzzles and card games;

- Making and reading books;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, culture and storytelling;
- Improved concentration skills by supporting children to complete activities.

As well as the school environment, some services indicated that primary school assessments, such as the NSW *Best Start*, can be intimidating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is particularly so where children are assessed in a one-on-one situation with their new teacher shortly after commencing school. Supporting children's familiarity with assessments can therefore reduce this stress, and also increase the likelihood of positive – and therefore more accurate - test performance. Several services mentioned that preparing children for the test environment can take the form of sitting down with children to do one-on-one questioning through play and patterns, which mimics the assessment environment.

## 5.2 Relationship between ELC and school

The relationship between the school and early childhood service/family support program was consistently described as one of the most important determinants of a positive and effective transition program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Evidence from the literature confirms this, indicating that,

Close connections between early childhood educators and school teachers help early childhood educators understand what will be expected of children within the school environment. Such relationships also enable early childhood educators to communicate to future teachers information about each individual child's strengths and needs. This allows teachers to begin their interactions with a child on an individual basis that meets their unique needs.<sup>11</sup>

These relationships also enable ELC staff and teachers to understand each other's respective curriculum, and to create a common understanding of what constitutes 'school readiness' within their context.

Evidence indicates that relationships are built and maintained through:

- recognition and respect for each other as professionals;
- information-sharing and visit-exchanges; and
- the planning and implementation of shared transition processes.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.2.1 Recognition and respect for each other as professionals

The consultations revealed that positive relationships best occur when all parties respect each other's knowledge and value their respective contributions to children's development. Communication is an essential aspect of this, one aspect of which was described by an educator at Noogaleek as 'speaking the same language'.

Having been a school teacher herself, the transition Coordinator at **Noogaleek MACS** believes that part of effective communication with schools is speaking their 'language'. She highlights how, for example, schools do not talk about 'gross motor skills', whereas this is common early childhood terminology. Some of the schools Noogaleek works with use checklists with indicators of school readiness, so the MACS staff need to be aware of these so that both school and ELC are operating from the same basis. Once ELC educators and school teachers can use the same terminology communication can improve, which leads to improved outcomes for children. She comments, *"We can't just expect others to suit us, but instead think about how we can bridge gaps"*.

### 5.2.2 Information sharing and visit exchanges

Information-sharing is a further important aspect of the relationship between schools and early childhood organisations. Many services used individual child developmental records as an effective way to do this, as these can be more targeted to school needs and language than child portfolios. The records contained information about a child's health and developmental levels, and also their strengths, abilities and knowledge.

Services felt that providing this type of information encouraged schools to have high expectations of children, and provided invaluable information to teachers from which they could engage with each child on a strengths basis. This information indicates to schools that children have been engaged in learning prior to school, and encourages them to view children as capable and knowledgeable.

An example of a developmental record might read:

*"This child is artistic, is the oldest of six, likes mermaids, has had speech therapy, wears glasses, is left handed, can be shy and hates to get in trouble". (Gujaga MACS)*

Records were also used to provide valuable information about each child's interests and personalities, which provided teachers with an important base from which to connect with the child during the early stages of their relationship. ELCs shared the records with teachers both during school visits prior to school, and again at the beginning of the school year.

Part of most transition processes included ELC staff visiting schools, but equally important, although rarer, was for school staff to visit ELCs. This provided valuable opportunities for teachers to discuss the ELC program with educators and to see it in action.

It also enabled teachers to get to know the children prior to the beginning of school. Staff indicated that children can be shy in new environments, so this helped the teachers to see them in an environment in which the children felt comfortable. Staff also felt it was particularly important where children had additional needs or behavioural issues, as it allows the teachers to observe how these are supported or managed within the ELC; provides an opportunity for teachers and ELC staff to talk through these; and allows the teacher and child to meet in a safe and known environment to the child.

A strong example of ELC-school cooperation from Gujaga is detailed below.

**Gujaga MACS** participated in a valuable initiative several years ago involving a group of local school teachers and principals partnering with a group of local child care centres. The teachers visited the ELCs to see their programs and work in action, which gave them an appreciation and increased understanding of what the ELC educators do. The ELC educators also visited the schools. They then organised a community event one weekend to engage with children and families who weren't accessing early childhood programs – accessing these through the local Aboriginal health centres and playgroups. This helped to engage families before their children began school, and helped all parties to better understand each other's roles and potential for collaboration through the transition process.



### 5.2.3 Planning and implementation of shared transition processes

Educators and teachers reported that positive relationships and collaboration included where the teachers and ELC staff actively planned and owned the transition process together – including mapping out how many school visits would happen and how these would work.

A positive relationship with the school was perceived as a particularly strong asset where a child had additional needs. One service related that when they have a child they are specifically concerned about, they discuss this with the school and then usually organise to have additional orientation visits for a period of time, with an ELC staff member present.

**Noogaleek MACS** makes a particular effort to ensure that a teacher is aware of any concerns staff have about a child transitioning. As an example of this, the MACS recently supported a child with severe hearing problems through their transition program. The Coordinator attended the school orientation with the child and family member, and observed how the child and teacher interacted during the session. She was then able to provide feedback to the teacher on engaging with the child in ways that supported his hearing – such as not talking to him from behind, sitting him at the front, and maintaining eye contact with him. The teacher was very receptive. Communicating this type of information enabled the teacher to better understand the child and reduced the risk of labelling the child as ‘naughty’.

## 5.3 School visits

School orientation visits in the year before school are important to introduce families to school staff and to prepare children for the expectations, environment and routines of school. The visits provide key experiences which educators can expand on post-visit with the children.

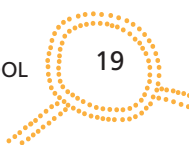
Most services conducted at least one visit to every school in the area, with some conducting a regular program of visits throughout the year. The number and type of visits was often dictated by the school, but ELC’s stated a strong preference for working with schools to collaboratively plan visit schedules and content. Educators indicated that this helps to ensure that the visits are more meaningful, targeted and participatory for the children and families transitioning.

### 5.3.1 Preparation for school visits

Family and child preparation prior to the visit was noted to be important to dispel any anxiety that children or families may feel regarding visiting school, and also to enable high participation. The services interviewed informed and prepared families leading up to the visit in a number of ways, including:

- Displaying all of the school transition times and school notices on a noticeboard;
- Sending out information about transition times to parents;
- Encouraging parents/carers to attend visits; and
- Providing transport to and accompanying children and families on visits.

They also prepared children for the visit by exploring with them what they thought school would be like, and talking through different things the children may see and do.



### 5.3.2 During school visits

Consultation findings indicated that positive school orientation visits contained a range of elements that enabled a meaningful and fun experience for children and parents. These included:

- Buddy systems – pairing transitioning children with school children to tour the school or participate in activities. This can work particularly well when children are ‘buddied up’ with friends or relatives already attending the school;
- School tours – to familiarise children with all areas of the school and grounds;
- Sharing recess or lunch with other children;
- Listening to the bells to mark the breaks and classes;
- Joining in with classroom activities;
- Meeting the Principal and significant staff;
- Visiting within a small group, to minimise disruption and ensure individual attention is paid for each child;
- Participating in meaningful activities that scaffold off children’s knowledge, to stimulate them without challenging them by a very new activity; and
- Assisting parents to fill out school paperwork during the visit.

**Gujaga** staff take photos during every school visit, recording each child in school locations such as the library, classroom, toilets and playground, and with their new teacher. These provide visual records and reminders of the experience for the child and family. Staff feel that photos are a more effective way to engage with parents than written notes, and are particularly important for children who catch the bus to Gujaga, as staff don’t have the opportunity to talk to their parents as frequently. The photos help parents to visualise school and demystifies it, as well as providing a focus to prompt conversations between parent and child.

Staff at **Gujaga** MACS feel that children benefit from peer support during the school visits, and so will take a group of children to each visit, even where only one child may be transitioning. Staff facilitate discussions about which school each child is going to so all children are clear about this. They feel that this process helps each child feel proud and confident because all their friends come with them for their first visit to their new ‘big school’.

**Gujaga** sometimes does a ‘cultural exchange’ during school visits to help children develop their self-confidence and identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This might include the school children singing a song, and in return the Gujaga children sharing a Koori dance or teaching the other children and teachers some words in Dharawul. These activities help to increase children’s self-esteem and sense of pride in their identity, highlight to school teachers that Koori children bring with them a lot of knowledge and experiences, and helps teachers to better understand the children’s cultures.

**Noogaleek** staff will attend the initial school orientation visits with parents to introduce them to the school and teachers, and support them to feel comfortable at the school. The child will then stay at the school for an hour, with their parents and/or a Noogaleek staff member if needed. Noogaleek staff meet with the parent and child afterwards to discuss the visit. In this way Noogaleek staff provide a safe bridge between the family and school, build parental confidence to engage on their own. Once the parent and child are comfortable, the parent will usually take the child on their own.

**Warmun ELC** found that one of their biggest challenges within their transition program was to build up parents' confidence that they had skills and knowledge to offer the school, and could have a role there. Believing this needed to be encouraged and facilitated by teachers, they talked to teachers about how they could do this. Warmun staff found that whilst the teachers were very welcoming to the parents and children, many were unsure what to do with them at the school. Using their experience of involving families at the ELC, Warmun staff worked with teachers to include parents in the morning classes, finding that the key to parents feeling included, relaxed and valued in the classroom was giving them a job to do – for example encouraging them to help with a particular activity.

Building relationships between teachers, parents and children was also key. Warmun staff focused on making every contact between parents and the school meaningful, worthwhile and positive – with each contact building upon the last.

Weekly visits to the school began in the last term, with a group of about 5-6 children, their parents and Warmun staff. The group joined in with school activities such as classroom work and assemblies, and met all of the school staff through a shared morning tea one week. These visits helped parents and children feel comfortable within the school, and enabled children to get used to the different routines – like sitting for long periods of time. The kindergarten teacher was particularly supportive, organising reading sessions or craft activities that involved the parents and children. This enabled both parents and children to feel that they were contributing and joining in. The Warmun Director describes that the basis of this is very simple, parents and children are *“in the room, they're feeling comfortable and have a role to play.”*

Attendance at school visits was consistent, with approximately 5-6 children out of the 10-12 in the transition program regularly attending. This was felt to be an exceptionally good number by staff and teachers and an indicator that the children and families were enjoying the program.

### 5.3.3 Post-school visits

Once school visits have occurred, services reported that ongoing discussions with children about their experience of the visit can help children to reflect on school and their upcoming transition.

This is particularly important as the summer holiday break creates a lengthy time between the school orientation visit and the beginning of term.

After several school visits, **Gujaga** staff create a school photo board to remind children what school is like, and to help them to feel that they belong in the school environment. The display shows a photo of each child doing something at their new school, and a caption of what they have said they think school will be like. Children's responses to this are generally about school rules, many of which are different at Gujaga, and so this photo board helps the children become familiar with the new rules. Before visiting school some children demonstrate anxiety that they will get into trouble and be sent to the Principal's office, so this process helps to take away many of their fears. Staff also regularly discuss the new school rules with the children throughout the year. Families often demonstrate an interest in the display, and so this also helps them to become familiar with the school environment.

## 5.4 Transition books

Transition books or kits can be an extra aid to school preparation, and were used by many of the services consulted. Personalised transition books were felt to be most useful once a child has had at least one visit to their school, as they can contain information and photos from the visit which can then be used as a prompt to help the child reflect on school.

Services also use transition kits to support families' preparation at home. These included puzzles, activities, books and games to enable children and their families to reflect and consolidate their

learnings from the ELC. Providing these in the final term gives children time to practice and learn these skills prior to starting school. These resources and activities are particularly useful for families who are absent for periods of time, providing them with activities to work on with their children whilst they are away.

Some services contained practical items within their kits, such as a backpack, drink bottle, stationary and sun hats. For families in financial difficulty, having these items was found to alleviate the stress associated with purchasing school equipment at the start of term.

**Gujaga** develops a personalised, bound book for each child that includes things like:

- Activities for the child to do that will help them prepare for school work;
- An assessment of their progress; and
- A one-page developmental summary that is also sent to their teacher.

Photos or descriptions are also included, of:

- The child at school, both individually and with their ELC group;
- Pictures of the child's friends who are going to the same school;
- Who the child might currently know at their new school, including relatives;
- The school uniform;
- A copy of the new school rules and examples of some of them;
- Pictures of the toilets with a caption such as 'At school the toilets are different';
- A picture of a school lunch with a caption such as 'I will take my own lunch';
- A picture of a school canteen with a caption such as 'My school might have a canteen where I can buy food'; and
- A general section that details the different things the school has, for example buses, a library, computers and music teachers.

Aside from the development assessment and progress summary, the book is written in child friendly language. The children take their book home at the end of the year to look at with their family – this helps to keep school familiar in their minds over the six-week break. Staff observe that the children love the book because they are in it – and so it's a much more personalised approach than a generic school booklet.

Schools consulted reported that a special book or picture page was also a positive way to share a child's first day of school with their family. These contained photos showing the child's day, and examples of their work. Schools then shared

ongoing portfolios or learning books with families throughout the year, feeling that these helped to communicate the value of school to parents and assisted them to feel involved in their child's learning.



## 5.5 Ongoing Support

Reflecting the child-centred philosophy discussed earlier, services described the transition phase as an ongoing process that should last as long as the child needed support - before and after starting school. Services indicated that in some cases children require ongoing, ad hoc support after they have commenced school. In such cases, having a familiar ELC staff member accompany a child and family for the first few days of school term was found to be helpful to settle the child and support their positive

behaviour in class. It also provided the parent with support from someone known and trusted. The ELC worker could then gradually pull back from being with the child in the classroom to accompanying them to the morning drop-off, and then eventually pulling out altogether. ELC staff also played an important role in supporting families when issues arose with the school by counselling them about how to raise issues with the school, and if needed attending meetings with the family and school.

**Congress' Preschool Readiness Program** begins in the week before a child starts preschool. The first phase involves a week of 'adjustment support' where the Congress worker will transport the child to and from preschool, and stay with them for the three-hour sessions. The main focus during this time is on ensuring that the child has a positive preschool experience, and that this experience is shared with their family.

Staff conduct observation-based assessments during this time. Many children have never been in a child care or playgroup-style environment, and so don't understand the rules and routines. Congress staff focus on familiarising children with the expectations and routines of school – such as what it means to transition from the mat to the table for morning tea, or hand-washing before meals. Staff find that over the course of the first week children pick these routines up, and teachers are then able to manage without Congress' support. One project worker describes, *"The teacher is then more than capable of picking up and dealing with any issues, because they have the beginnings of that relationship with the child."* She describes the positive benefits of this approach,

What is critical about this time is that it gives the teacher a week's window where they are not having to growl and discipline the child, set the boundaries and establish the routine, because someone else (ie the Congress worker) is doing this. So the teacher is able to establish a positive relationship with the child, as opposed to putting the child into an environment that they've never been exposed to, having them show behavioural problems, and then being constantly told off by the teacher.

Staff then conduct a review at four and twelve weeks, during which they: conduct the same tests they did prior to the child starting; look at the child's attendance rates and any reasons for low attendance; and explore whether the child requires any additional support. The preschool teacher also provides a report and together these provide a picture of the child's progress in preschool, assisting to identify any further support needed.

A persistent problem at **Sadadeen Primary School**, connected to **Natalie Gorey Preschool**, has been that Aboriginal children in the Transition and Year One classes are often either absent, truant from school, or are attending but disengaged from the program. Staff feel that this is usually because the children have missed out on early childhood education, and so have experienced gaps in important early childhood play experiences, such as imaginary play and immersion in early literacy and numeracy. This then makes it difficult for them to engage with school and to display appropriate school behaviours.

To counter this, the Preschool Director and the Principal jointly decided that it was more important to have the children at school than to have them in a particular class. They now allow these children to drop into the Preschool to relax and settle when they are starting to feel too pressured in their primary school class. When they're ready, they can then return to their primary school class. They also allow older children to drop in for 'a breather' when they need. The Preschool Director explains that these children have often experienced much failure in the schooling years, and are angry. She focuses on engaging with these children by being overtly friendly and enthusiastic that they are there – and then drawing them into help with activities, for example *"I really need your help to be the petrol station attendant at the pump today, would you like to do that?"* The children have become trusting of the Preschool staff, and will now let them know when they've dropped in for some time out. The Preschool Director provides the example of one child who usually stays for about 20 minutes until he feels calmer, and then goes back to the classroom. Staff believe that the play-based learning at preschool gives children a valuable break from the school structure.

As a result of this initiative, school attendance rates and engagement levels have risen significantly. The teachers report that the children are now more talkative, engaging better with staff and joining in activities that they wouldn't have before – in short actively showing that they want to be at school.



## 6. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, particularly those who have had negative educational experiences themselves, the school environment can be a challenging, and at times frightening one to engage with. This can lead to family reluctance to engage with school, a lack of understanding about school, or lowered expectations about how their child can benefit from school.

Non-engagement by families with school is a major barrier to children confidently and positively beginning school. Involving families in the transition process therefore forms a bedrock of a good practice program, helping to break down the barriers and overcome the fear families may feel towards school, replacing these with positive school associations for both family and child.<sup>13</sup>

A number of factors were identified through the consultations as significant in the engagement and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

### 6.1 Tailoring support to each family

In order to provide meaningful support, the consultations revealed that services and schools need to genuinely understand and tailor their support around each child's family – their needs, wishes and background. Valuable within this is appreciating the roles that extended family members may play within a child's support network, and actively involving these family members in the transition process.

During the first term at **Echuca East Primary School**, all classrooms run a unit on getting to know each child and their family - which involves sharing sessions and projects about each child's culture and home life.

### 6.2 Enabling families to feel comfortable within the school environment

A number of services indicated that some families feel anxious about interacting with the school. To counter this, educators and teachers discussed the need to enable families to feel welcome within and familiar with the school environment. Ideally this familiarity is established before the beginning of the new school year. Bringing families into the school before their child begins – for example through orientation sessions or more in-depth family support programs such as Families and Schools Together (FAST) – was seen as the most helpful way to overcome anxiety and enable families to feel confident at school.

From the consultations it is clear that early childhood services are pivotal bridges through which to do this, generally having pre-established, positive and trusting relationships with families. Part of this role is helping to foster the relationship between families and the school so that families can then feel comfortable raising any issues or queries they may have.

Staff attitudes towards families are vital in this. One transition coordinator at a preschool describes how,

All it can take is one [negative] look from the teacher and that parent or child will never come back again. So what [the Preschool Director] does is when parents arrive she's really enthusiastic: "You're [child's] parents! We love having him here, he's so good – come and look at what he's did today, do you want a cuppa?" If you do this stuff you will help parents to feel good about this – and they will come in and spend time in the centre. Many people think that parents don't want to engage, but it's not that. When you have the right attitude and environment, and you can make people feel engaged and welcome, they will come.

(Natalie Gorey Preschool)

One preschool found that making families feel welcome at the service or school was as simple as changing the environment. For example, adult chairs provided spaces for parents to sit and observe or join in, and photographs or television slideshows of the children gave parents something to look at and to draw them in.

...there are spaces for parents to sit and have a breather, watch the staff and children and have casual conversations with staff – which are the important conversations for building relationships. (Natalie Gorey Preschool)

Another service found that an additional benefit of engaging families in their child's transition is that it enabled them to build school peer support networks prior to their child beginning school, which supported the families's confidence to engage with the school.

### 6.3 Information-sharing

ELCs possess critical knowledge of each child's personality and needs, and also their family strengths and context. To enable a smooth transition in which a child and families' needs are met, this information needs to be passed on to schools. Services described the importance of building a three-way relationship between families, ELCs and schools to enable effective information-sharing. Services raised that a number of their families were experiencing significant issues, such as drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, reduced parenting capacity or family violence, all of which produce significant impacts for children. Whilst families are familiar with their ELC service, services reflected that the school relationship brought new challenges, with many families fearful of being negatively judged. Services report therefore that critical to a positive school-family relationship is that families feel that the school respects them and knows that they are doing their best as parents, which requires understanding of a family's or community's context. These relationships are also important to build families' confidence to engage with the school when things are going well, not just when issues arise.

One transition Coordinator explains that,

It's really important that parents feel comfortable to be involved when things are going well, because usually their only interaction with the school is when their child is in trouble or has some kind of issue. So they feel that no news is good news.

### 6.4 Child/parent support programs

Family support programs can provide an additional targeted support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families during the transition to school. There are several structured programs available that specifically support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to engage with their child's learning and school readiness. These can be delivered by or in collaboration with early childhood centres and schools. These include the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), the Indigenous Parent Factor program, which focuses on enabling parents to support their child's literacy skills, the Parents and Learning (PAL) program, and the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program.

Services indicated that some aspects of these programs require modification within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as: the provision of transport to and from the program; delivering the program at school rather than at home (as this can provide a more calm and better resourced environment); including local culture such as language or excursions out to country; and employing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are known and trusted by the community.

Service examples suggested that when run in conjunction with the local school, these programs support families to build a relationship with teachers, and created an informal avenue for families to raise any issues, questions or ideas with the school. This aided the creation of a history of positive contact between school and families and helped families to feel that communication with the school doesn't just have to be when something is going wrong.

**Gujaga** delivers the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY). Some modifications have been made to the program to better suit the families, so where a parent is not able or willing to deliver the program themselves, and where other possibilities in the immediate family have been exhausted, the tutor can work directly with the child. In a 2011 program evaluation, parents reported that the program had increased their child's confidence, supported parent-child learning, and helped their child prepare for school. Half of the parents also reported that *"HIPPY gave them both the ability to monitor their child's learning at school, and confidence to talk to their child's teacher or principal if they thought that the child's educational needs were not being met."* (HIPPY Evaluation, p102). Service staff report that the program plays an important role in supporting children to develop their self-confidence.

**Wanslea's** Family Fun and Learning program supports parents and children to learn new skills and knowledge together. Both the program and service environment are designed to be inviting and informal, and thereby lessen any intimidation parents may feel joining a group. The program is driven by what the parents want to do, and includes a combination of educational activities – such as introductions to further learning opportunities through TAFE or short courses, and fun activities such as massages, sewing and crafts. This helps to raise parent's attendance. The group also attends excursions to sites such as the library and sites of cultural heritage, and hosts regular guest speakers, for example from the Aboriginal health service. Such speakers provide a non-judgmental way to provide families with additional information, without singling them out. For example, one parent was experiencing issues with their child's iron levels, so the program invited a dietician to have an informal discussion with the group about nutrition, and to stay on afterwards so that parents could ask any questions they wished.

Many families of **Echuca East Primary School** participate in the Parents and Learning (PAL) program, which the Deputy Director believes has been influential in familiarising children with school learning experiences - such as literacy. The program helps to develop children's confidence to attempt new activities, lessening the intimidation they may experience when new activities are presented at school. It also engages with families, supporting them to assist their child's literacy development. Staff observe that families who participate in the program have more confidence to engage in school activities, and in talking to teachers about their child's developmental progress and how they can assist with this. Staff therefore feel that the program has been a significant factor in building families' confidence to engage with school, as well as improving children's confidence and literacy.



## 6.5 Positive practices

A number of additional positive practices were identified that facilitate positive parental/family engagement and involvement, and communicate respect for families as pivotal players in their child's school readiness and development:

- Involving parents in every aspect of the transition process – from children's preparation for school, discussions about school and school orientation visits;
- Creating and using child developmental records as a basis from which to talk about children's learning with parents;
- Ensuring that parents are aware of and invited to school transition orientation visits through notices at the centre, newsletters, texts, phone calls and face-to-face conversation;
- Supporting parents with literacy or transport issues;
- Providing parents with the option of meeting at the centre and travelling to school on the bus with staff and the children, acknowledging that this may be less overwhelming;
- Assisting parents to fill in enrolment forms or to locate enrolment documentation such as birth certificates;
- Role-modelling to parents confident and positive engagement with the school;
- Demonstrating to families that their knowledge and role in their child's education is valued, as well as supporting parents to learn new developmental games and activities, so that they can reinforce children's learning at home;
- Counselling parents in feeling confident to 'speak up' at their child's school and to communicate to teachers what they want for their children;
- Personally introducing parents to teachers and attending meetings with them to discuss their child's schooling;
- Talking with parents about aspects of school like uniforms, school rules, resources/stationary and food they need to bring; and
- Regularly checking-in with families about their feelings about their child's upcoming school transition.

Several service examples outline these approaches in practice.

Much of the pre-kindy learning you can just do through role-modelling. It shouldn't be about telling people what to do. It's really helpful for the mums to be able to watch the workers doing things with their kids that they might not have thought of, or using resources they didn't know about. The staff will show the mums new programs that they have learnt about, and discuss what works and what doesn't with them. And then you see the progress from this. (Wanslea)

**Echuca East Primary School** has a proactive policy to build teacher-family relationships during the first term. Each teacher must make at least three positive and meaningful contacts with new families – through email, phone calls or meeting them at pickup or drop-off times. Staff believe this to be vital in building positive relationships with parents that last throughout a child's education.

Knowing that many families are not confident to talk to their child's school, staff at **Noogaleek** focus on empowering the parents to communicate with the school themselves. They talk through communication strategies families could use with the school, including asking for issues to be clarified if they don't understand them, and requesting meetings with their child's teacher. If the family wishes, Noogaleek staff can then attend these meetings with the family to give them confidence and extra support in articulating their needs.

Realising that many families did not have accessible birth certificates to meet school enrolment requirements, **Noogaleek** has changed their own enrolment policies to include needing to sight the child's birth certificate. They can then assist families to track this down well before they start school, which takes away another element of panic and an obstacle to a smooth transition for child and family.

When **Warmun ELC** began their transition program, family engagement with the ELC was fairly low. To better engage families, staff initiated 'Play and Learn' mornings. Transport was provided for families to and from the centre, and different activities were run with the families and children – such as cooking up a group lunch. Over time, families started to appreciate these mornings and engage independently with the centre.

Once families were engaged with the ELC, staff then found that the most challenging aspect of their transition program was getting families to engage with and attend the school – beyond dropping the children off at the front gate. Many parents felt that it was not normal or expected for them to go in to the school. To counter this ELC staff began by preparing families before the school visits began, talking about school at pickup and dropoff times, and providing reminders to parents about upcoming school visits. They also yarned with parents about things like what would happen during the school visits, what the school looks like, and why it was so important for families to come to the visits. Crucial in this preparation were existing staff relationships with families as well as staff using humour and being relaxed about the whole process. The first visit began with a low-key introduction for the families to the teachers, with families joining in classroom activities on subsequent visits.

At **Wanslea Family Services** staff feel that a key to engaging with their families is to foster their ownership of the parent group.

The addition of potential new group members is therefore always discussed with the existing group first, as staff strongly feel that the group belongs to the parents, and the success of it depends on the relationships between the mothers, and their ability to support each other. The coordinator describes *"they become the strength that binds and drives the program. This is what it should be about – not Wanslea providing the program - but the participants owning it."* Many of the women have been attending the group for some time, and for many it has become an extremely important aspect of their lives. The parents are always encouraged to speak up about how they want the group to operate, or raise any issues they may have.

Important also is staff showing parents that they care about their children, and have an interest in what is happening in their lives. Staff make home visits where needed, which helps them to build relationships with families and better understand their circumstances.



## 7. CONCLUSION, GAPS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst traditionally transition was considered narrowly as a child's (usually academic) readiness for school, transition actually involves a continuum of early learning experiences that prepare children and their families for future learning success. As evidenced throughout this report, participation in a high quality, targeted transition program provides a number of clear benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, including:

- increased development across the fine and gross motor, social/emotional, cognitive and language domains;
- improved health outcomes;
- the development of positive relationships with school staff; and
- improved confidence with the school environment, routines, staff and curriculum.

The benefits to schools are myriad and valuable, including:

- pre-established relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families prior to children beginning school;
- improved working relationships with local early childhood services;
- improved knowledge of children's developmental levels and needs; and
- improved cultural awareness.

Cumulatively these impacts have the potential to deliver significantly improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families over the long term. However, significant barriers still exist in achieving this. The effects of colonisation endure today in the lack of trust of and disengagement from educational institutions experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in the significant additional challenges experienced by a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in smoothly transitioning to school. These include:

- transitioning to a school where the dominant culture may be different to that of their family/ community – including school environments where their cultural needs may not be met;

- lower levels of participation in prior-to-school learning opportunities – including through early childhood education and care programs;
- generational cycles of parent and family distrust of and anxiety around engaging with educational institutions;
- lower developmental levels across a number of AEDI domains;
- higher rates of additional needs – including health, development and family support.

Given this, the provision of appropriate support is vital to break this cycle and enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families to feel supported and welcomed, and to experience success at school. Despite the hard work and commitment of numerous services and schools across Australia who do deliver high quality programs, it is clear that a significant number of gaps remain.

Firstly, the transition to school is a significantly overlooked educational phase. Despite their critical importance in helping to secure long-term positive school outcomes for children, transition programs are significantly underfunded. Whilst many other initiatives such as numeracy and literacy received targeted support through funded programs, very few funded programs exist to provide support across the broad spectrum of transition activities and processes.

Although the programs detailed demonstrate strong, high quality practices that lead to meaningful results, there is a startling dearth of structured, targeted and ongoing funding to enable effective transition programs. The majority of services consulted outlined the challenges of providing a comprehensive program with little or no additional funding. Staff frequently spoke of working in their own time to support transition programs, and expressed their frustrations that they were often not able to support each child fully according to their needs, and were limited in the range of program elements they were able to provide. It is clearly a testimony to these services that they achieve such high outcomes despite the paucity of targeted funding for transition programs.



It is clear from this report that successful transition programs are uniquely designed by services and schools to match their community's needs. Crucial to the effectiveness of transition programs is that services and schools be given the flexibility to design their own programs – a blanket approach to transition will fail to do this.

SNAICC recommends that:

State and/or Federal Governments invest in adequately funded, high quality, evidence based and locally designed and driven transition programs in the year prior to school. Such programs are to be adequately funded to provide for family support, children with additional needs, school visits and liaison, literacy and numeracy programs.

**(Recommendation 1:**  
Adequate program funding)

The second gap is to be found within the cultural competence of services and schools. Evidence indicates that the cultural competence of staff and programmatic approaches is critical across all aspects of a successful transition – ready families, communities, schools, services and children. Whilst there is a lack of consensus within the literature on a definition of cultural competence, the definition given by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is widely recognised within the child and family support services sector as the most current, accurate and comprehensive. The Framework sets out key cultural competencies as being; a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respectful partnerships; cultural awareness; cultural respect; cultural responsiveness; cultural safety; and cross- cultural practice and care.

Many of these elements were apparent in the practices and philosophies of the services and schools consulted. All services still however spoke of the challenges presented by prevalent attitudes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not require specific support during transition, and by widespread ignorance on how to support their transition in a culturally safe and appropriate

way. Further work is needed to define what cultural competence looks like within the transition process; the different roles played by early years services, family support services and schools in facilitating culturally competent transitions; and how change can be realised both within individual attitudes and broader systems.

SNAICC recommends that:

Cultural competence training/resources are developed:

- For schools on how to appropriately assist and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and their communities in the transition to school, and how to work with early years services to support culturally competent transition preparation; and
- For early years/family support organisations on how to assist and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families, and their communities prior to school commencing.

**(Recommendation 2:**  
Cultural competence training development)

As with cultural competence, the emphasis accorded in the literature to community readiness is not reflected in practice, with few programs focusing on facilitating a 'school ready Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community'. No doubt this is due as much to a lack of knowledge about what a 'ready community' looks like, as to the paucity of program funding provided, which necessarily limits the scope of any intervention.

Two examples of community involvement in the transition to school did arise during the consultations, from Wanslea Family Services and Gужаgа MACS.

Wanslea involves the local Men's Shed in their literacy program, engaging them to build bookshelves to house books borrowed from the library. These are then collaboratively decorated by the family, which helps to instil a sense that the community is involved in children's development,

the Coordinator describes “it is that sense of ownership and feeling proud.”

Gujaga MACS described a one-off community event organised several years ago to gather together all local schools, early childhood centres, families and children, with a particular emphasis on engaging with children and families not accessing early childhood programs. The Coordinator feels that this event involved a strong community partnership approach that enabled all parties to better understand each other, and strengthened the potential for collaboration (see page 16 above).

For the genuine engagement of communities in school readiness, events or actions such as the two described above cannot however occur in isolation. Further understanding is required around what constitutes community readiness, and what support is required to implement program approaches that enable it.

SNAICC recommends that:

Further research to be conducted into what constitutes ‘community readiness’, in particular to better understand the community supports and strengths that help prepare and support children and families for school, and to appreciate the role of community leadership and ownership of transition processes.

**(Recommendation 3:**  
Community readiness research)

Lastly, the literature emphasises schools as forming an equally essential aspect of the readiness equation of ready children, families, communities and services. In selection of consultation sites for this paper however, the majority of applicants were early childhood and family support services. This report therefore reflects the perspectives of these services. Whether this provides an accurate outlook on the interest or capacity of schools to implement transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children or not, there still remains a gap in research, understanding and practical examples of how schools can appropriately and positively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families to commence formal schooling. Inconsistency and a lack of effective supports for

relationships between early years services and schools were also apparent. These findings relate strongly to requirements for cultural competence to support the relationships.

SNAICC recommends that:

Further research to be conducted into what constitutes ‘school readiness’, in particular to better understand the role that schools can and should play in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to transition from early childhood environments and/or home to primary school, and what supports (including training and resources) schools may require to fulfil these roles.

**(Recommendation 4:**  
School readiness research)

Supports are put in place to encourage and facilitate genuine partnership relationships between early years services and schools. These supports should especially target cross-cultural relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-run early years services and mainstream schools. Alternatively, supports should promote meaningful ways to include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in a three-way partnership where the early years provider is not community-run.

**(Recommendation 5:**  
Genuine partnerships supporting school readiness)

## ANNEX 1 – LIST OF SERVICES AND SCHOOLS CONSULTED

### **Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and Natalie Gorey Preschool, Alice Springs (Northern Territory)**

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) is an Indigenous health service that provides a comprehensive transition to preschool program by partnering with local preschools to deliver an intensive support program during the first few months of school term.

One particularly successful partnership has been with Natalie Gorey Preschool. The two services collaborate to run a Preschool Readiness Program that addresses the low number of Aboriginal children enrolled in and prepared for preschool. The program predominantly targets children from the town camps in Alice Springs. The program focuses on school, child and family readiness by engaging with families to collaboratively provide a supported transition to preschool for their child, and by working with local preschools to support this.

### **Echuca East Primary School, Echuca (Victoria)**

Echuca East Primary School runs a transition program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children beginning primary school. The program focuses on genuine partnerships and ongoing engagement with the local Aboriginal community to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment and participation in the school. The school leadership and culturally inclusive school practices have been keen in facilitating this.

### **Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS), La Perouse (NSW)**

Gujaga MACS provides a long day care and preschool program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the La Perouse area of Sydney. The program supports children starting kindergarten through a transition program consisting of structured school readiness activities, family support and orientation visits to receiving schools. The program is run over the entire year prior to school to allow adequate time.

### **Noogaleek MACS, Wollongong (New South Wales)**

Noogaleek runs an annual transition to school program from Preschool to Kindergarten. The program provides a structured daily school preparation program, a series of school orientation visits throughout the year, and targeted support for children who have additional needs.

### **Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre, Horn Island (Queensland)**

Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre is an Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) located on Horn Island. The ECEC supports children to transition to the local primary school through their pre-prep program, which they have run for four years. Information-sharing and strong relationships between educators and teachers, as well as strong family and community involvement are key aspects of the transition program.

### **Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, Thursday Island and Hammond Island Campuses (Queensland)**

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) School has campuses on both Thursday and Hammond Islands. Both campuses run a pre-prep/kindy program. The program runs throughout the year prior to formal schooling, and involves early years students attending the school prep class each morning. The program is located at the school to develop children's confidence and familiarity with the school environment before they begin full-time schooling. The key program elements centre around an intentional teaching program, a focus on child development, and relationships between educators, teachers, families and children.

### **Thursday Island Child Care Centre, Thursday Island (Queensland)**

Thursday Island Child Care Centre is an Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) located on Thursday Island. In the year before formal schooling the centre runs a Pre-Prep program to support children's transition. The program focuses on genuine relationships between educators, teachers and families, information-sharing between educators and teachers, community engagement and culturally inclusive practice.

### **Wanslea Family Services, Albany (Western Australia)**

Wanslea Family Services is a family support service operating in Western Australia. The service runs two programs in Albany and Mount Barker that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families with the transition to primary school. These are the Pre-Kindy Program and Family Fun and Learning program. Both programs focus on child and parents' readiness simultaneously, and familiarisation with school through a playgroup-style format where parents accompany their children to weekly sessions. The two programs operate with a Program Coordinator, Cate Ham, and a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Program Assistants.

### **Warmun Early Learning Centre (ELC), Warmun (Western Australia)**

Warmun ELC is located in the remote Aboriginal community of Warmun, East Kimberley, WA. The transition to school program ran from 2006 – 2011, but ceased when the Director left the centre. The program comprised a series of regular, supported visits to the school with ELC staff, parents and children, as well as a focus on children's school readiness through a structured program of play-based learning.

### **Yarrabah Child Care Centre and Yarrabah Primary School, Yarrabah (Queensland)**

Yarrabah Child Care Centre is a long day care centre that supports children to transition to formal schooling through a pre-prep transition program delivered in collaboration with Yarrabah Primary School. The program has several key elements, including an intentional transition program; a focus on relationships between educators, teachers and families; a focus on child development and confidence; a community school attendance strategy; and community engagement.

### **Yipirinya Aboriginal School, Alice Springs (Northern Territory)**

Yipirinya School is an independent Aboriginal school in Alice Springs, Northern Territory (NT), catering to children living in the town camps and outstations of Alice Springs. The school delivers two programs to assist children, both those attending an early learning centre (ELC) and those not, in their transition into the first year of primary school. These are *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters* (HIPPY) and the *Families and Schools Together* (FAST) program.

## ANNEX 2 – PROGRAM PROFILES

### A. Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Preschool Readiness Program Alice Springs, Northern Territory

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#### 1. BACKGROUND

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) began running a Preschool Readiness Program in mid-2011 to address the low number of Aboriginal children enrolled in and prepared for preschool. The program predominantly targets children from the town camps in Alice Springs. These children come from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and generally haven't accessed early childhood care and education services. They often face many levels of disadvantage, exclusion and barriers to accessing preschool such as family movement, parental incarceration, poverty and health issues.

Congress' program focuses on school, child and family readiness by engaging with families to collaboratively provide a supported transition to preschool for their child, and by working with local preschools to support this. The first step is an in-home orientation to get to know the child and family, followed by a supported visit to preschool. For the first six weeks the child is accompanied to preschool by a Congress worker, with evaluations taking place at key times to ensure that the child is settling in well. Ongoing support is then provided to the child and preschool, with the child attending preschool for 15 hours per week, over 3-4 days.

#### 2. CURRENT PROGRAM

The program team brings together health and early childhood experience, currently consisting of a psychologist, an Aboriginal family support worker, and a case manager. This team makeup ensures a diverse but complementary skill set, as the staff describe, "no one profession could do all of the program themselves."

The program is based on evidence indicating that a key aspect of supporting disadvantaged children to successfully begin school is intense support for at least the first fortnight of term, and a high quality program that shows children that preschool is a great place to be.

#### 3. PROCESS

##### 3.1 Referrals

Engagement with the program begins with a referral of a child nearing preschool age, either from within or outside of Congress. Most referrals come from the Congress health clinic. The clinic's child health nurse, through a list of developmental milestones and physical observations of a child's health and wellbeing, will determine if a child

is at risk or is vulnerable, and therefore in need of extra support. Staff then talk to the family about the preschool readiness program, and whether the family would like to participate in it. Other referrals come from caseworkers in the town camps, or from other Aboriginal organisations like Tangentyere Council. Very rarely children will be referred from preschools themselves, although this is occurring more now that the program is becoming better known.

As the program becomes better known throughout the Aboriginal population, more families are requesting to join it. Prior to the program beginning, very few 3-4 year olds would be enrolled in preschool. Now community attitudes towards preschool are becoming more positive, with increasing numbers of families who might not traditionally have accessed preschool getting their children enrolled and attending, independent of the program.

Congress' initial referral form provides the team with information on whether there are any health, development, immunisations, social or environmental concerns for a child. This gives the team an opportunity to make any further referrals or appointments that the child may need.

##### 3.2 Home visit

In the month before school begins, Congress staff, including an Aboriginal staff member, arrange a home visit to meet the family and child, discuss school options, child and family readiness, and ensure that school paperwork is underway. This visit covers standard questions around the child's school readiness, and any concerns the family may have around the child starting preschool. Staff then conduct the Peabody Vocabulary Test with the child. This is a standardised, non-referenced test, and was deemed the most appropriate as it is easy to administer and to train others to use. The test provides a baseline of the child's receptive language skills, and is conducted in English and the child's first language. Staff try to involve a family member in administering the test, finding that this is a positive way to show that staff trust families and respect their language skills. Families tend to respond very positively to the test – and have been observed joining in with the test, and proudly filming their child on their phones.

Often a child's first language levels will be more advanced than their English levels, so testing children in both English and their first language helps to present an accurate picture of their language skills. At school children with English as a second language (ESL) are sometimes thought to have hearing problems, so this helps to qualify that.

Families are observed to often join in with the visit, and appear to be very happy and proud to be watching their child getting ready for school. These conversations and the rapport that develops helps make these first visits positive and to begin to form the relationship between the families and Congress staff. Case Manager Gayle describes how,

There's a lot of laughter – often because the families haven't seen their children in this situation. They laugh and are happy that their child knows the answers to the questions. It's also really strong for the families to see that the workers have come out just to see their child, and think that they are special. And it's also to acknowledge that school is about English and is an English environment, but this is your first language, it's important and that's why we test it.

Congress staff also supply the family and child with a preschool pack, containing a school backpack, hat, drink bottle, program t-shirt and pencils. This helps to ensure that children are ready to start preschool well-equipped and without their family having to worry about finding the money to buy these things.

### 3.3 Preschool orientation

Shortly after the home visit Congress accompanies the family on a preschool orientation session, as well as booking any remaining health checks. The family are collected for the orientation, and then attend preschool with the Congress worker, who introduces the family to the teacher and other children. Whilst the child plays, the Congress worker sits down with the parent to fill out the enrolment forms, and together they give the teacher an overview of the child and family's background, their language levels, and any concerns the parent may have. Congress staff then take the child and family to the clinic if any further health checks/immunisations are needed, before dropping them back home. The child then begins preschool the following week.

### 3.4 First week at preschool

The first week involves targeted support where the Congress worker transports the child to and from preschool, and stays with them for the three-hour sessions. The main focus during this time is on ensuring that the child, and therefore indirectly their family, have a positive preschool experience.

Congress staff conduct further observation-based assessments during this time. Having never been in an environment like child care or playgroup, many children don't understand the rules and routines. Congress staff therefore focus on familiarising children with the expectations and routines of school – for example transitioning from the mat to the table for morning tea, sharing food at meal times, and washing their hands in the bathroom. Over the course of the first week the children generally pick these routines up, and by the end of the first week the teachers usually report that they can manage without Congress' support, which is largely because they have had a week to begin to develop a relationship with the child. The positive benefits of this approach are described by Gayle as,

What is critical about this time is that it gives the teacher a week's window where they are not having to growl and discipline the child, set the boundaries and establish the routine, because someone else (ie the Congress worker) is doing this. So the teacher is

able to establish a positive relationship with the child, as opposed to putting the child into an environment that they've never been exposed to, having them show behavioural problems, and then being constantly told off by the teacher.

### 3.5 One and three month reviews

One month after a child has started preschool Congress conducts another review. This includes another Peabody language test, as test results usually improve as children gain confidence with the test and staff. Congress staff also look at attendance and any concerns with this – such as family concerns or transience. A teacher's report is also included, which includes the child's engagement, behaviour and any concerns. Generally additional support is no longer necessary, but can be provided if needed. In 2013 out of 30 children in the program only one child required further support. Congress staff feel that this is due to the intensive initial support, which fosters teachers' confidence in their own abilities to tackle any issues that arise.

A final evaluation then takes place three months after the program has started. In addition to the same features as the previous review, it also examines the child's health status to ensure that any health concerns previously identified have been addressed, and any further appointments/referrals are then booked and flagged in the child's Congress file. This is then the program endpoint.

## 4. KEY STRENGTHS

### 4.1 Importance of the medical model

A significant aspect of the program's success is its situation within a medical system, being perfectly positioned to pick up children who may need additional support, and ensuring that all aspects of children's 'readiness' are supported. Congress staff know that parents are more likely to take their child to the health clinic than to a preschool enrolment day, and explain that, "Having [the program] through Congress makes it much easier for clients to connect with the program, and vice versa. Clients don't have to make an appointment to come in and see someone, it's much less formal and there are more entry points." Setting the program within the medical model also assists the health staff to understand that education is a vital factor in a child's health outcomes, for example through children learning to eat fruit every day and to blow their nose regularly.

### 4.2 Staff attitudes

For the program to work, teachers and schools need to have the right attitude. Gayle describes how, "Whilst other preschools...have some very experienced teachers, if those teachers don't have the right attitude towards being inclusive in their classroom you can feel this as soon as you step in." Children are often excluded from preschool for a number of reasons, including health conditions such as skin conditions, scabies, infected sores, nasal and ear discharge, because they aren't wearing a uniform, aren't toilet-trained,

or because the preschool won't provide transport for children under five. These are all things that can be managed quite easily at preschool. Exclusion is usually a symptom of not understanding children's backgrounds. This means that children who most need preschool don't attend. Gayle, and Aboriginal Family Support Worker Judith remark that,

There are many issues that Aboriginal people have to deal with on a daily basis...children might not have been fed the night before, or are going to school dirty and in the same clothes they've been wearing for days. They aren't used to the structures of school. When food comes they might want to take the whole plate because they might not have eaten since they were last at preschool. Children have to be given the chance to learn the routines. If a child goes to school dirty, some places will turn them away, others will bath the kid and then the child has a good day, so it's about how they approach it and how they understand the level of disadvantage. The houses the kids live in are also always changing – they might have a few people or they might have 20. Children see a lot of violence and so preschools have to deal with the issues this causes. Preschools need to make [Aboriginal] children welcome like they do everyone else. But sometimes the preschool wants to get rid of the child.

This goes back to educators' attitudes, Judith and Gayle remark that "some preschools lower their expectations for Indigenous children – they think that because the kids have poor attendance, or come in dirty, or with health issues, that they can't learn like other children." Teachers need to have both passion and experience, and understand the context that they are working in. Program psychologist Patrick indicates,

You have to have the mindset to let some things go, choose your battles. For example you can't worry about children not wearing shoes or hats – first you need to be at the gate welcoming each child to school. You need to remember why children are at school, they are here to learn and have a successful time, not to wear hats and shoes. That can come later when the relationship is there.

Preschools must also be open to including children's families. Gayle describes how, "There is still a big barrier between preschools and families – in particular for families to feel welcome, comfortable and confident enough to enter a preschool and be part of it." Patrick describes how,

The way we engage with parents is also really important – we could spend all of our time talking to the parents about the importance of school, but our approach is just to make sure that the kids have a high quality experience, and that experience is shared with the parents. This helps the parents to be enthusiastic about preschool – as they see their kids running out the door to the bus. Kids can sell things to their parents much better than we can – just by coming home smiling and with a painting they've done. We can talk about research and long-term

studies and the importance of school readiness, but photos or seeing their child wanting to go to school is much more meaningful. When they don't want to go to school it's much harder to undo.

He describes that when the parents and families are engaged and viewing preschool positively, it helps to encourage more Aboriginal families to enrol their children. He enlarges on this,

Getting the critical mass is also important – when the program started it wasn't the norm to send kids to preschool. The more parents who do this and have a positive experience, the more kids who will come. One of the main barriers is that parents have had a negative experience at school themselves. They're not resistant, but they're not pushing it – knocking on the door to get their kid in. They don't mind if their kids don't go as they don't have high expectations of what their child could get out of school. So a big part is helping parents have higher expectations of what school could mean for their children. A huge part of this is if their children come home happy at the end of the day.

Change is however slowly taking place – interaction with the program is challenging the thinking and teaching approaches of many teachers who previously haven't had to deal with these complex issues. As the program gathers momentum and becomes better known, these impacts will grow.

#### 4.3 Establishment of a routine

One further outcome and program strength worth mentioning is that through the regular program, children are becoming accustomed to routines such as getting up on time, showering, and coming to preschool. Judith and Gayle describe how "When there's a reason to come to school and [children] enjoy it, their presentation improves – they have new outfits, their hair brushed. The parents start investing more and feeling pride in their kids. The Congress staff don't even say anything - the parents do this of their own accord." These regular routines spread to the rest of the family. Gayle and Judith observe that,

Many of the families improve their functioning in terms of getting up, getting kids ready for school, then going to do the shopping and being home in time for the kids to return. So it puts anchor points into the day for families who don't have much structure or routine. It ends up being a really efficient way to do it, because Congress aren't having to tell parents what to do, but are just providing a really good quality service.

## **B. Natalie Gorey Preschool, Preschool Readiness Program Alice Springs, Northern Territory**

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### **1. BACKGROUND**

Natalie Gorey Preschool is attached to Sadadeen Primary School in Alice Springs. Concerned about low Aboriginal enrolments, in 2012 the school partnered with Central Australia Aboriginal Congress to design and deliver a Preschool Readiness program. Through this intensive transition program, Aboriginal preschool enrolments have now risen significantly.

### **2. PROGRAM FEATURES**

#### **2.1 Leadership and attitudes**

The program is supported at all levels of the primary school. Preschool Director Kate describes,

The support from the school is crucial – it starts with a Principal who understands early childhood and the context we are working in, and is fully supportive because she has seen that when children are in years 3-6, if they haven't had a successful time in the early years, they have very difficult behaviours. It's not because of the children, it's down to poor quality teaching and programs. So she's prepared to vest staff time, qualified staff and the right staff so that these children can have successful transitions.

The additional allocation of experienced staff to the preschool allows for free-flowing play and in-depth attention, which is particularly important at the start of the school year as children are adjusting.

Positive attitudes within the classroom are also vital. Kate believes that every child must be treated as unique and special, and that educators must work hard to make this connection with children and families. She describes that when each child walks into the centre "we look at them so that they think that they are the only beings in this world, and we love them." Families are also warmly welcomed upon arrival at the centre. Congress psychologist Patrick outlines the importance and impact of positive staff attitudes at Natalie Gorey,

You need a few key people who are determined to make it happen, and who will problem solve and work through issues. Attitudes are the biggest difference. And so you'll have some teachers who will say that a child's behavioural problems are so great that they can't have them there, or that the child isn't ready. This can be said directly or indirectly – all it can take is one look from the teacher and that parent or child will never come back again. So what Kate does is when parents arrive she's really enthusiastic: "You're E's parents! We love having him here, he's so good – come and look at what he did today, do you want a cuppa?" If you do this stuff you will help parents to feel good about this – and they will come in and spend time in the centre. Many

people think that parents don't want to engage, but it's not that. When you have the right attitude and environment, and you can make people feel engaged and welcome, they will come. You can't use challenges as excuses for poor outcomes. For example unfortunately some of these kids will leave and go out bush, but they will still have had this good 10-week experience. These kids are much more likely to go and find preschools when they're out bush, because they've had this experience.

Kate and the staff believe that their program is all about relationships with children, families, fellow professionals and partner organisations. Kate describes how all parties have to be open and 'on the same page' – they must all have high expectations of the children and the program, and share an image of children as being capable and coming with knowledge.

#### **2.2 Adaptive and flexible program**

The program runs four days per week for three hours at a time, based on evidence that a higher frequency of days for a shorter period of time is a more effective strategy for engaging children in preschool learning. This allows for a drop in children's energy and concentration after lunch. The program also begins later than most preschools – starting at 9.30 am to allow time for the morning pickup. Natalie Gorey has also taken the decision to give children extra preparation time in preschool, by taking three and a half year olds into the Indigenous preschool program.

#### **2.3 Higher staff to child ratios**

The higher needs of Aboriginal children, and therefore the higher demands on staff time, were initially identified as a barrier to Natalie Gorey being able to provide for Aboriginal children. The extra Congress support worker therefore greatly assists with the higher needs of the children in the first few weeks, and allows the teachers and children to get off to a positive start and begin to develop a relationship. Natalie Gorey have also allocated additional staff to cater for the children's higher needs after Congress has left.

#### **2.4 Provision of transport**

The provision of transport was also identified as a barrier preventing Aboriginal families from accessing the service, and so is provided as an integral part of the program. Congress provides the bus run for the first month of term, and views the bus ride as the first stage in getting the children excited about preschool. Staff run activities such as singing or story-telling to make the ride engaging for the children. Patrick describes that after a few weeks,

The kids have been having a great time, they are already in the routine of jumping out to get the bus in the morning and so it's easy for them to then transition into getting the school bus. It wouldn't have worked for the school bus to pick them up in the first few weeks as they run on a tight schedule – if the child isn't there then the bus will go. Whereas the Congress bus can take the time needed – it can



go to the school, back to the communities, wait, etc – they have this flexibility at the start.

Once the children have settled in, Natalie Gorey begins running the bus themselves, with a preschool teacher driving the bus to foster relationships with families and to better understand what's going on for them. The teacher can then get an update from the families about how the child is going and can feed this knowledge back in the daily activities.

## 2.5 Engagement, involvement and relationships with parents and families

Involvement of families is vital to the program. Kate explains that,

We consider that parents are very valuable in their children's education. Children and parents come with lots of experience and information, and we need to use this to build our program on. So for example, one mother has come in today and has asked if she can make a cuppa. She's then made this and drank it whilst her daughter settled. Her daughter is now settled and playing, where previously she was clinging to her mum and wouldn't let her go. So there are spaces for parents to sit and have a breather, watch the staff and children and have casual conversations with staff – which are the important conversations for building relationships. (Kate)

The preschool environment is designed to be comfortable for families, with chairs to relax in and a television slideshow showing photographs of the children involved in activities at the centre. This gives families something to look at and engage with. It also helps children reinvestigate and re-engage with previous activities, and encourages them to feel a sense of belonging at Natalie Gorey.

Family feedback is frequently sought on the classroom environment, appropriate resources and activities, ensuring that the preschool suits the children and their families. Kate describes this as "Continually asking parents what they think and want, without assuming that you know", and adds that this takes time and effort, but is critical for engaging Aboriginal families. Families can also choose how they want to be contacted. Following a recent parent survey, one mother reported that she wanted to take the children down a creek bed to show them what they should do if they get lost, and how to find water and bush tucker. Kate asked the mother if she could help them do this, and they then planned the activity together to run it in winter.

Kate provides a further example of the ease families are starting to feel at the preschool; one child's grandmother accompanied him several times on the bus as he was having difficulty settling in. One day she started painting a honey ant picture at the centre whilst he settled, attracting the children's attention. Kate then asked her to come in and do some painting to let the kids watch and learn. The grandmother has since created a painting that represents families and communities supporting children through preschool.

Whilst Natalie Gorey encourages parents to be part of the program, they also understand that it can be difficult to make this happen – particularly when parents are reluctant to come into the preschool. Natalie Gorey therefore uses events like Easter to hold family morning teas to help families feel comfortable and included. They provide families with a personal invitation to this, transport to and from the service, provide food, and have the children show their families things they have been doing.

These efforts have led to parents and families becoming visibly more involved in the program. Families are often observed happily spending time in the classroom watching what their children are doing, and engaging with the children in English or first language about the activity and sometimes also recording this on their phones. Congress staff member Patrick feels that these are great ways to engage and enthuse parents in their children's learning, and at the same time children are learning home language, numeracy and other skills through EYLF based play experiences.

As staff learn and evolve their practice with the program, they have noticed that the families love photos. Therefore to celebrate each child's first day of preschool they create a laminated photo page of the child's day to give to their family. As an ongoing way to demonstrate to parents the value of preschool, and help them to feel involved in their child's learning, every time the child attends preschool the teachers then send something home with them – such as a painting, photo or newsletter. Each child also has a portfolio or 'learning book' that the parents are encouraged to look through, containing examples of the child's work, learning stories and photos. Halfway through the year a 'brag book' is created for each child, featuring pictures of the child doing activities, and a sentence describing the learning they are experiencing. These books are laminated, bound, and sent home for families to keep.

Natalie Gorey has also hired an Aboriginal Education Officer who knows the families, and so can support engagement, outreach and relationships-building between the families and preschool.

## 2.6 Outreach

In addition to the preschool program, Natalie Gorey runs an outreach program at Hidden Valley town camp. Based out of the community centre, this operates from Monday to Wednesday as a playgroup/preschool program for children from two years onwards to attend with their parents. The outreach program has shown positive outcomes so far, with high attendance rates, and staff observing the children becoming comfortable with educational activities and the preschool staff. Kate describes that this program focuses on two key things: a high quality educational experience and high expectations of children. The same teacher then attends Natalie Gorey on Wednesday to Friday. This provides a bridge for the children, if they are comfortable, to then attend Natalie Gorey with the teacher to participate in the preschool program for the remainder of the week.

## 2.7 Evidence-based program

Natalie Gorey have built their program off evidence, data and research, and have found the focus within the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) on relationships and building off children's interests to be valuable in connecting with the children. For example, sitting still for learning sessions is an important school skill, but can be challenging for children not accustomed to 'mat sessions'.

Kate highlights that,

Once you have relationships you understand children's interests, and then program meaningful things for them, and so children will then engage and learn. It's also got to flow – children aren't ready to formally sit down in front of a teacher at the beginning of the year. This expectation is absurd, these children have never done it. However if they are allowed to sit on the periphery of a group of children, nine times out of ten they will start to tune in and come over when they're ready. You can't force them to join in.

By fully incorporating the EYLF concept of free-flowing indoor-outdoor play, the centre allows children to self-regulate and develop concentration in an environment that they can explore. Stringent boundaries between 'indoor' and 'outdoor' time don't work for children who are not used to being confined, and can result in behavioural problems. At Natalie Gorey these are reduced because children are given freedom, which better reflects their home environment, whilst still slowly introducing them to routines and appropriate ways to behave at preschool. This relaxed play-based environment with guided support also helps children develop their socio-emotional skills, with staff regularly witnessing new imaginary and cooperative play as the children mature.

The EYLF focus on belonging, being and becoming is also vital, and is fostered in several ways. Kate describes,

You can't be if you don't belong, and you can't belong if you're not being. The first part is the belonging. At the beginning of the year we were very structured with routines to set it up so that kids had the expectations of where to go and what to do – in terms of hand-washing, toileting, sitting at group time and listening.

One way they foster children's sense of belonging is by providing them with their own physical space within the preschool. A display board contains velcro labels of each child's name and picture that children can attach to the locker they choose each morning to put their things in. The children respond enthusiastically to this. It also helps them to learn their name in written form, and to feel they belong at the centre.

Kate believes that only when children are engaged through their interests will they have joy in learning, and be empowered in their own learning. She outlines that the children's voice is very important, and so children are encouraged to bring their interests into the classroom.

Many of the children enjoy nature, and so staff use a variety of natural materials such as clay and wood.

## 2.8 Focus on health and hygiene

Personal hygiene and health routines, such as regular hand-washing, teeth-brushing and nose-blowing, are incorporated into the daily program. Within a few weeks of first term the children are doing this independently, and after only one month in the program staff generally notice a marked improvement in children's nasal discharge and infections. This results in fewer cases of otitis media and hearing loss. In several cases children's weight problems – such as obesity or being underweight – have also improved through healthy eating and exercise. Having developed these healthy habits children are then more likely to continue these at home.

Natalie Gorey staff understand that sometimes home situations mean that children haven't showered or aren't wearing clean clothes. Staff therefore take on the extra care needed to make children comfortable – for example helping them to shower and change their clothes. This attitude is about respecting children and understanding what they need to feel confident. Kate explains, "children like to feel clean and smell nice – they walk out of the shower with their heads high. But they will only do this when you have that trust. This isn't needed very often but it's there for when it is."

Each day Natalie Gorey provides a nutritious lunch to the children, understanding that this might be the main and most nutritious meal that a child may have that day. Parents can sign a Centrelink form to allow part of their Centrelink benefits to be taken out for lunches. The preschool also has provision for emergency lunches whilst children's forms are being processed, which ensures that no child misses out.

## C. Echuca East primary school Echuca, Victoria

### 1. BACKGROUND

Echuca East Primary School is based Echuca, Victoria, and runs a transition program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children starting primary school.

In initiating the program the school leadership engaged in discussions with local Elders about how they could work with the community to increase Aboriginal enrolments. These conversations informed a program based on genuine and ongoing engagement and partnership with the local Koorie community – including Elders, early childhood services and families. This focus has significant positive effects – involving the local Koorie community in the school and greatly increasing enrolment attendance of Aboriginal students, where previously Koorie involvement and enrolments were low.

Several elements are considered key to the school's approach, including the school leadership; a comprehensive prior-to-school preparatory program; meaningful

engagement with families and community; and culturally inclusive practice. These are explored in further detail below.

## 2. PREPARATION PRIOR TO AND AFTER SCHOOL COMMENCES

The transition program commences in April with a family information evening at the school. Outreach work also begins early, with Kellyann, the Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) visiting Koorie families with school aged-children to talk to them about the enrolment process and help them to complete enrolment forms.

Families then individually meet with the school. Originally this took place with reception staff, but the school recently changed this so that families meet with the Deputy Principal, Chrissy. This means that Chrissy – as a key person during the transition - gets to know each family and child.

These informal meetings are used to discuss children's needs, their interests, and map out which other children they may know at the school.

To help school staff and children get to know each other before school starts, school staff also visit local early childhood education and care centres (ECECs), such as Berrimba Multifunctional Aboriginal Service (MACS). This helps teachers connect with children and families on their 'turf' and therefore in an environment they are comfortable in. Chrissy believes that this demonstrates to families that school staff are willing to go out into community to engage with them and their children. A further advantage of this is the relationship that has built up between the school and early childhood staff. Chrissy describes,

...we also use [the Director at Berrimba] as the most amazing resource, because she knows those kids so well...we will go and sit with her and I'll take my book and she will give us strategies.

This is particularly valuable where children have additional needs. Kelly-Ann describes how this enables school staff to have "the whole picture of this child coming in...you see them holistically".

In October/November children and families attend four orientation visits at the school, with additional visits arranged as required. The visit schedule is flexible to ensure that all children receive the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the school environment, and therefore to feel safe and confident before they begin school. These visits are felt to be particularly important for children who haven't attended an early childhood learning program.

A half-day 'transition day' is also held for all transitioning children. This provides the opportunity for Chrissy, Kellyann and the teachers to assess which classrooms children should go into – matching them with teachers and peers. Children are allocated a 'Buddy' from grade four, who will be with them from Prep through to grade two. The aim of this is to provide children with a friendly face and peer support for their first three years within the school environment.

A further parent/family information night is held after the

transition day for teachers and families to meet. Anyone who is part of the child's life – including extended family – is invited. Informal activities encourage parents to meet each other, helping to build relationships between new families. All children receive a 'show bag' to make the event fun and appealing. Kellyann will then visit families who weren't able to attend the night afterwards, taking with her the showbag and parent information.

The school also provides each family with a 'routines booklet'. This outlines what a school day looks like, and aims to provide families with as much preparatory information as possible to enable them to best support their child during transition. The children also receive a booklet, written in child-friendly language, with the names and photos of all children in their grade. Children use and add to this book throughout their first school year.

School staff actively seek information about the children transitioning to ensure the school is ready to cater to children's individual needs. Information is gathered from a variety of sources including ECEC educators, the KESO, the Koorie Preschool Assistant, and Transition to School statements. School staff value the Statements for the insight and strategies they provide in supporting the newly transitioning children.

Chrissy explains how information from these sources enables staff to comprehensively understand what support children may need during transition – for example understanding their fears. She feels that the Transition Statements are particularly useful in providing a thorough picture of the child from those who know them best – their parents and the early childhood educators.

Early in term one the teacher, family and child meet to discuss the child's interests. This information is used to feed into activities to encourage children to engage in their learning.

Where needed, school staff continue to engage with the ECEC staff after children have started primary school. Where school staff are experiencing difficulties engaging with a child they talk to the ECEC staff about useful strategies to implement. This recognises and appreciates the expertise and knowledge the ECEC staff possess.

## 3. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Relationships with families are at the heart of the transition approach. The school KESO plays a vital 'icebreaker' role as a bridge during the building of relationships between families and school staff. The KESO is present at initial meetings between the parents and school, with the guiding aim being to develop the relationship so that parents then feel empowered to interact with the school on their own. Chrissy explains,

...for me relationships are at the centre of all education, and they are at the centre of all transitions. If we can create those positive relationships, then that's probably the most important thing for our kids coming in. And if the kids can see that their parents are more at ease

dealing with the leadership of the school or with their prep teachers then they are more comfortable too.

Family engagement is focused on throughout the transition - even after children have commenced school. During term one the whole school runs a unit on getting to know each child and their family - which involves sharing sessions and projects about each child's culture and home life. As part of this all teachers are expected to make three positive, meaningful contacts with all parents - through email, phone calls or meeting them at pickup or drop-off times. Chrissy believes this is vital in building positive relationships with parents that last throughout a child's education. She explains,

...we all know there will be rocky times in education, but if you've got that relationship where you have been given three positive contacts within that first term, then when there is a bump in the road it makes it so much easier to deal with.

The school policy is that where a child is sick for more than two days the teacher will call the parent to check how they're going and whether they'd like work sheets dropped off. The school is now finding that parents will often independently call to ask for these when their child is absent from school. Chrissy and Kellyann both attribute the school's high attendance rates of Koorie students to this personal contact and relationships with parents.

A further important factor in parental engagement is the Parents and Learning (PaL) program, which is attended by many children at the school. Chrissy believes this has been influential in familiarising children with school learning experiences - such as literacy. She describes how the program helps to develop children's confidence to attempt new activities, lessening the intimidation they may experience when new activities are presented at school.

Families are invited to read with the children at the school between 8.30-9 each morning. PaL supports families to build their children's literacy skills, empowering them with knowledge of how to best enhance their child's learning. School staff observe that families who participate in the program are more confident and engaged in participating in school activities - such as reading mornings - and in asking teachers about the purpose of and best way to facilitate learning activities with their children. They are also more familiar with the language used by teachers, and therefore less daunted by this and more confident discussing their child's learning with teachers.

PaL was originally based at the school, which staff felt was a significant factor in building families' confidence to engage with school - bringing families into the school environment and helping them to feel that it was not a daunting place. Staff believe that the confidence families now feel at school is reflected in their children's confidence at school.

#### 4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INTERACTION

Community support has also been an essential element in the success of the program. The school celebrates days of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and engages with the local Koorie community during community events - such as the local Koorie community awards night. This allows families to meet school staff in an informal setting, and demonstrates to them that the school staff are interested in the community. Chrissy believes that these informal connections - which help to establish genuine relationships between the school and Koorie community - directly lead to the school's high enrolment and attendance rates.

School staff also host a morning tea every year during Reconciliation week, inviting local Elders, families and community members. This is treated as a significant event within the school community. Staff make the morning tea themselves, which as Chrissy describes, "is a really simply gesture but it means a lot to our staff and I think it means a lot to our community as well."

#### 5. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The commitment of the school leadership to working in partnership with the local Aboriginal community is clear. The program was instigated after an open review conducted by the school that investigated how they engage and partner with families. Chrissy speaks of the importance of involving community Elders in education - and having honest conversations with them to learn how things can be done better. Crucial to this has been accepting that although these conversations may be difficult to have, because they involve deep reflection of and discussion on aspects that may not be working, they are still vital. The outcome of the review was a change in practices and attitudes across the school - initially implemented within the school leadership team and which then spread throughout the school.

The role of the KESO is invaluable in the success of the transition program. The KESO's role is multifaceted - supporting the cultural competence of school staff, programs and approaches; engaging with the community to enrol children in early childhood education; and supporting families and children to build a relationship with school staff. Importantly, the KESO's position is not viewed as just pertaining to the school - but to the whole community. Chrissy describes,

We want the best for our kids and we want the best for our whole community. We are not working as a school...only focused on those kids [in East Echuca]...we want all kids to succeed. (Chrissy)

As a primary connection to community and culture, the KESO is an invaluable part of the school leadership team. The school leadership openly appreciates that her role within the school and wider community is paramount to a successful and smooth transition to the school for Koorie

children and families. Kellyann describes how through her role she builds community trust and relationships with the school,

...once a parent sees you out and about in community, they know you are genuine about wanting to know them and their mob...the reason why people want to come here, the reason they want to come to this school is because I'm out there, in community, engaging and promoting the school. And they know I am going to be here to look after their kids. I am an Aunty as well, so...that's why people are willing to come here.

The school support in enabling Kellyann to be active in the community has been critical to this.

The commitment of the school leadership team towards Koorie children's involvement and development is also a key component to the success of the transition program. Kelly-Ann describes how the school leadership team display an obvious commitment to enabling all children in the community to succeed, and,

...that's why our community is more willing to send their kids here. They know that their kids are going to be looked after...that they [school staff] don't just take a one size fits all approach...they meet the needs of individual kids and families.

## 6. CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

The school recognises that to partner with the local Aboriginal community their practices, attitudes and approaches must be culturally inclusive, and they must focus on enabling children and families to feel welcome and included within the school. The KESO has been instrumental in facilitating this, providing cultural knowledge and guidance to staff. The KESO has worked to build open relationships with staff, and perceives that staff now show a willingness to engage with her, to "not be scared to ask a question even if to them it might seem like a silly question".

All school staff receive professional development in culturally inclusive practice. The school leadership team have also focused on working with school reception staff on cultural competency and ensuring that families feel welcome and comfortable, as Chrissy describes, "It is simple things, like making the office welcoming, that are really important."

## 7. PROGRAM RESULTS

Since the program began, school staff have observed a number of positive changes, including higher enrolments and attendance rates of Aboriginal students; increased engagement by children in their own learning; higher cultural competence of staff; high attendance of families at school events and increased family participation in classroom activities – for example as parent helpers.

## D. Gujaga Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service

La Perouse, New South Wales

### 1. BACKGROUND

Gujaga is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) based in La Perouse, Sydney. To support children starting kindergarten, the centre runs a transition program consisting of structured school readiness activities, family support and orientation visits to receiving schools. The program is run over the entire year prior to school to allow plenty of time.

Three particular elements will be discussed in this case study – family support, school orientation visits, and relationships with the school.

### 2. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

Many of the parents – particularly the younger ones - are not comfortable going into a school environment due to their own negative experiences with schools. However, staff observe that children whose parents are actively involved in the school orientation visits and are engaged in the transition process, settle in better. The challenge is therefore to support parents in feeling comfortable to do this.

There are a number of ways in which Gujaga facilitates parent engagement and involvement:

- Involving parents in every aspect of the transition process and engaging them in the idea of transition from the beginning of the year;
- Encouraging parents to attend all school transition/orientation visits, including the provision of transport to and from the school;
- Providing particular support to parents with literacy issues;
- Assisting parents who need help to fill in enrolment forms or to locate enrolment documentation such as birth certificates;
- Working as a bridge to transfer the positive relationships Gujaga has with their parents to the school;
- Counselling parents in feeling confident to speak up at their child's school and to provide input to teachers about what they want for their children;
- Personally introducing parents to teachers and staying with them to sit down for a chat to discuss their child's schooling; and
- Talking to parents about what their child will need to take to school, for example lunch choices and how to help their child practice things like unwrapping glad wrap and opening lunch boxes.

### 3. SCHOOL VISITS

Gujaga runs between one to eight school visits in the second half of the year, visiting every school where a child will be transitioning to. The number and type of visits differs between schools - some have their own strict process, and others will negotiate and plan with the transition coordinator, Priscilla, in regards to the number of transition visits, tours of the school and buddy systems with relatives or friends of each child.

Prior to the school visit Gujaga will inform parents about the upcoming visit through the centre noticeboard, discussions at pickup and dropoff times, and sending home information to parents.

The aim of the school visit is to introduce the child and family to the teachers and school staff, accustom the child to the school environment, and have them practice a few sample school activities. Key successful features of the visit include:

- Gujaga staff focusing on behaviour-managing the children to enable the teacher to focus on engaging positively with them;
- Touring the school and taking photos in all areas – including the toilets, playground and classroom;
- Joining in with the classroom to complete an activity (ie maths, music, story-time) – which can include each Gujaga child being ‘buddied up’ with a primary school child;
- Sharing lunch or morning tea with the primary school children and learning what the bell means; and
- Meeting the Principal and other school staff.

The follow-up work back in the centre post-visit is just as important as the visit itself. This involves regular discussions with children about what was different at school, how it looked and felt and the unique rules and activities that happen there. The photos taken during the visit/s provide a valuable prompt for these discussions, and are also used to create transition books and photo board.

**Transition books** are created for each child, and include:

- Activities for the child to do that will help them prepare for school;
- An assessment of their progress;
- A one-page developmental summary that is also sent to their teacher; and
- Photos or descriptions of:
  - o The child at school, both individually and with the Gujaga group
  - o Which of the child’s friends are going to the same school
  - o Who the child might currently know at their new school, including relatives
  - o The school uniform
  - o A copy of the new school rules and examples of some of them – such as putting up your hand when talking, not talking during story-time, or sitting at a desk to do school work

These books are taken home with children at the end of the year, which helps to keep school familiar over the six-week break.

A **school photo board** is created and displayed in the centre to remind children what school is like, and to help them to feel that they belong in the school environment.

The display shows a photo of each child doing something at their new school, and a caption of what they have said they think school will be like.

Priscilla ensures that visits to the school are not just about going in to the school and doing a discrete activity – they are about building real relationships between the school staff and the child. To enable this, Priscilla’s preference is to join in with regular classroom activities that are happening. However sometimes she also asks to do extra things beyond orientation visits – like music classes or maths activities. She finds that this is a good way to ease children into the new environment, whilst still providing the familiarity of known activities and staff.

### 4. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

An ongoing relationship with the local schools is a critical feature of Gujaga’s program. Gujaga focuses on providing a bridge to build the relationship between school and families. Having a Gujaga worker attend school meetings with parents helps to build parents’ confidence to then engage with the school on their own, and provides them with a support through which to talk through any issues. This relationship is critical if schools are to better understand children and their families, and the issues facing families such as drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, parenting skills, domestic violence and abuse. Gujaga staff know that it is fundamental that parents feel that the school respects them and knows that they are doing their best as parents, which is easier when school staff understand the context.

It’s really important that parents feel comfortable to be involved when things are going well, because usually their only interaction with the school is when their child is in trouble or has some kind of issue.

So they feel that no news is good news. Priscilla, Transition Program Coordinator

In addition, Gujaga also provides vital information about each child to the school – their strengths, abilities and interests, to help the new teacher connect and engage with them.

## E. Noogaleek Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service

Wollongong, New South Wales

### 1. BACKGROUND

Noogaleek is a Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Berkeley, Wollongong. Noogaleek runs an annual transition program for their children moving from preschool to kindergarten. This involves a structured daily school preparation program, a series of school orientation visits throughout the year, and targeted support for children with additional needs.

### 2. INTENTIONAL PROGRAM

The intentional teaching program is run all year in collaboration with the adjacent Winnanggay Preschool, which enables both services to pool their resources and staff. The older children from each service spend 1.5 hours each morning at Winnanggay whilst the younger children stay at Noogaleek. This enables staff to provide targeted transition support to the older children, and enables children to become familiar with lesson-based learning.

The program is rigorous, and all activities are done with a purpose. Children will often express fear at activities that they may not be familiar with - such as literacy and numeracy. Through a variety of different activities, routines and concepts the program therefore aims to progressively cover every element that will enable children to be more comfortable and confident moving into school. Building children's familiarity with school processes, routines and activities is felt to be particularly important for Aboriginal children transitioning to mainstream schools.

Each child begins the program with an initial screening, which provides a base level from which educators can design the program to ensure they are meeting children at their existing skill level. This strengths based approach builds off children's current knowledge and capabilities.

The key program focus areas are literacy, numeracy, group times (including story, drama and social skills), fine and gross motor skills. These are fostered through hands-on, fun and practical activities delivered through group sessions, with individual children receiving targeted attention depending on their needs.

As well as focusing on skills and knowledge, the program also concentrates on children's behaviours and attitudes. It aims to foster resilient, confident children who understand that 'having a go' is more important than getting something right.

Complementing the foundational skills, the program also focuses on particular additional themes such as health and fitness, technology, community awareness and involvement and knowledge of school routines and practices. One recent activity focused on community awareness and wider involvement. To build the children's pride, confidence and connection to their community, children rehearsed and then performed a song at the *Keep Them Safe* day at the

local Aboriginal Men's Group. These types of activities help expose the children to different experiences – including presenting in front of large groups, to foster their confidence and their identity.

The Early Childhood Teacher believes that a key strength of the program is that Noogaleek and Winnanggay staff have designed it themselves, making it a collaborative effort that responds directly to the needs of children at both centres. Each year staff review and if needed adapt the resources and program to best suit the particular group of children. The program is also adapted throughout the year, as the Early Childhood Teacher explains, "These are our kids, and we spend the first part of the term getting to know them."

### 3. CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Approximately one quarter of all children at Noogaleek have additional needs, and so the centre delivers a casework approach to ensure these are met. They encourage families whose children have additional needs to have their child formally assessed and diagnosed before they start school. Having a formal diagnosis gives Noogaleek staff the information they need to provide a targeted support program for the child. If these issues are not addressed prior to the child beginning school there is a risk that school staff may label the child as having behavioural issues. This approach is therefore about setting the child up to succeed and working from a strengths based model with appropriate information.

Across the services there are approximately 30 families dealing with family violence and/or an incarcerated parent. A number of these children have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are not confident, and require specific transition support and a much higher level of care. Supporting these children is therefore a major focus at the centre. Within the transition program staff need to be aware of how each child will respond to an activity – and know that if a child is stressed or too challenged by an activity they may shut down and become unresponsive. Staff dedicate extensive individual time to these children to help them gain confidence in a non-pressured, supported environment. The Coordinator and the Early Childhood Educators believe it is critical that this one-on-one support occurs within the centre, as the lower teacher-child ratio at school will most likely mean that children receive much less individual support.

Noogaleek also focuses on talking to schools about this issue – including increasing their understanding of the issues children are facing, and how PTSD can affect children's brain development, growth and learning. They also work with the school on how to best support an individual child. Where staff have a particular concern about a child, a meeting will be held between Noogaleek staff, the parents, the teachers, the Aboriginal Liaison Officer (or similar role) and the Principal, together with child protection workers if needed. The meetings provide an opportunity for Noogaleek staff and the child's family to share with the school how they can support the child to smoothly transition. They also enable the school staff to better understand how to work with children suffering from PTSD or similar symptoms.

## F. Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre Horn Island, Queensland

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Nurapi Kazil Child Care Centre is an Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) located on Horn Island, Queensland. The ECEC supports children to transition to formal schooling through a pre-prep program. This program runs in the year prior to formal schooling. The ECEC Director and staff have noticed many positive benefits for the children who have participated in the program, as well as for their families. The program contains several elements key to its success, including an intentional curriculum, a focus on relationships and high level of community involvement.

### 2. CURRICULUM

The program curriculum is structured to build off children's existing knowledge, whilst encouraging new skills and experiences that are foundational for school. Educators and teachers regularly share information on curriculum goals, programming approaches and children's progress to ensure that they are each building on and then extending children's prior learning.

The ECEC staff believe that it is important to link the learning children receive at home with the learning they receive at the centre. The staff actively seek information from the families about their home life and learning. They also provide families with a feedback sheet and encourage their input throughout the year. This information is then incorporated into the program and daily activities.

Many of the pre-prep children speak Creole, and this is therefore encouraged in both the ECEC and school environments. Educators and teachers appreciate the importance of children's first language both for their personal development, and also for the continuation of the language and culture. Educators and teachers appreciate the importance of children being strong in their culture, as the Director describes,

Children being strong in culture is very important... a strong sense of self, being able to communicate with others, feel safe and feel like they belong are all important for a successful positive transition.

At the end of the year the ECEC staff prepare transition to school statements, which capture each child's developmental progress. They also incorporate family input to portray a holistic picture of the child's development and interests at the ECEC and at home. These statements are received well by teachers as providing valuable information on each child.

### 3. POSITIVE AND OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

Educators and school staff have strong relationships and work collaboratively to support the pre-prep children during the year before formal school and during the transition process. The Year One school teacher regularly catches up with the ECEC Director, Jodie, to yarn about the children's progress, and to discuss ways to build off the children's skill

and knowledge in the classroom. Jodie provides monthly progress updates to the teacher on the children's progress, and any children who may need particular support.

Families are also considered vital partners in the transition process. The service philosophy respects families as children's first teachers and the people who know their child best, and utilises their knowledge of a child during the transition. The Director states that "Teaching comes from the home before the children come to childcare." Staff also appreciate that events happening at home will impact upon the child's learning, and so are responsive to this. Educators and teachers encourage families to feel included and welcomed within the school environment. The Director believes that each staff member is key in this, describing how,

We strive to have staff that are really open and non-judgemental. It makes the centre more welcoming and people feel more welcome to come and have a yarn and get involved.

### 4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The ECEC and school both engage in and actively support educators and school staff to participate in days of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In particular, the ECEC and school staff believe that participating in community life shows respect to the community. For example, Sorry Business is a very hard time for the community, and so it is important that the ECEC and school staff participate where appropriate in this to show their respect of and understanding for the community and culture.

## G. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School Thursday Island and Hammond Island, Queensland

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) School has campuses on both Thursday and Hammond Islands. Both campuses run a pre-prep or kindy program, where students attend prep class for part of the day in the year prior to commencing formal schooling. The program was initiated in response to community and family wishes for a preparatory program for children prior to school, and is therefore very much supported by the community. It is located at the school to develop children's confidence and familiarity with the school environment before they begin full-time schooling.

The key program elements centre around an intentional teaching program, a focus on child development, relationships between educators, teachers, families and children and a strong cultural underpinning to the work they do. These elements are outlined below.

### 2. INTENTIONAL PROGRAM

The teacher on the Hammond Island campus works through the Remote Indigenous Professional Development (RIPD) Project, which supports Indigenous early childhood



educators in remote parts of Australia to successfully deliver the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), the curriculum used within early childhood centres. The program helps to break the EYLF down into easy to use elements, and is more visual than the mainstream version. This makes it much easier to share with families, and to show them how the framework supports their child's development. For many children at the school, English is a secondary language, and therefore having a visual representation of the EYLF helps to overcome the language barrier for both family and child.

The program is delivered jointly by the prep teacher and an early years educator. The pre-prep students participate in classroom activities with the prep students. This enables valuable peer learning – and teachers feel that this approach means that pre-prep children pick up skills and knowledge faster than learning on their own. As one teacher explains, “they watch everything at that age and they pick everything up.” To gently encourage learning without pressure the children are allowed to choose which activities to do, and are then guided through these.

To build off children's strengths and knowledge and enable continuity of learning, the program combines both the early years program and the prep curriculum. Key to this approach is that the teacher of the Thursday Island kindy/prep class has a working knowledge and understanding of the Early Years Learning Framework. She uses this knowledge to frame the design of the kindy curriculum, which ensures that the kindy program scaffolds off the pre-prep program, whilst still appropriately challenging children. Teachers and educators work together to design programs that build off the pre-pre children's strengths, the teacher explains, “as teachers we work together with one mind, when we are planning we just plan together.”

Both campuses have a high Indigenous student population, with many students speaking English as another language. Children are encouraged to speak their first language at school, and teacher's aides who speak Creole support the children and their families.

### 3. CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Various elements are focused on within the pre-prep program, including literacy, communication – in particular oral - and confidence. The program teachers feel that developing children's confidence is particularly important during pre-prep as this will enable children to engage confidently with their teachers and peers during school, and to be interactive learners. Teachers perceive that critical to fostering children's confidence is fostering their sense of identity. This helps to place them in the world, as the Principal of Thursday Island School explains,

Having their culture as their foundation is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It means they can say: 'I know who I am and I am from my family. I am strong in my family and I can do this if I try, I can do this.'

(Helen Kett, Principal – Thursday Island)

School staff believe that holding high expectations of children is vital – in addition to giving children appropriate

support to develop. The school's programmatic approach is described as a supportive, strength based program that enables children to learn at their own pace and according to their own learning styles. As one educator explains, “It is their learning journey and we just support and provide guidance alongside the other supports in the child's life.”

### 4. RELATIONSHIPS

Good relationships between all parties are felt by all staff to be a key element to the success of pre-prep students transitioning smoothly in to the school. School staff have regular contact and communication with the pre-prep students, their families and early years educators. Staff believe that children need a holistic support network – involving their families, early years educators, school staff and the community – to ensure that their health, emotional, social and developmental needs are being met. All parties must be engaged and connected to ensure that transition is a smooth and positive experience.

To encourage pre-prep students and their families to feel part of and welcome in the school community both school campuses encourage and support families, Elders and community members to visit to share culture within the classrooms. The Thursday Island School Principal explains, “One of our key strategies is for the community to be involved in the school and the school to be involved in the community.” Families are invited into the school through regular morning teas, and activities such as reading. Staff focus on sharing with families strategies to support their child's development – for example talking with them about how they can share reading and stories with their child.

School staff feel that having families involved and engaged at the school is a key element to support children during the transition process. Families help to socialise and settle the children within the school through their active involvement at transition days, morning teas and school events. Staff express that when children see their family engaged within the school community, comfortable within the school environment and enjoying a good relationship with their teacher, they are more likely themselves to be confident and have a sense of belonging within the school and with their teachers.

To connect with children and families, teachers focus on engaging with parents through positive interactions, and taking an interest in their child – including learning about their interests and personalities. Teachers can then incorporate the children's interests in to their lesson plans – which utilises a strengths based approach that ensures children are engaged and active in their learning.

### 5. CULTURE

All staff understand the importance of students and school staff being involved in cultural teachings and experiences within the school. At both campuses there are teachers and teachers aides that speak English and Creole, lessons are conducted in both languages. Community members and Elders visit the school to provide cultural sessions with the children, including Islander songs and dances. The schools

celebrate days of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and actively participate within the local community. NAIDOC is a special event for the community and within the school. Elders and community are invited in to the school to celebrate and at both campuses school staff are given time off to be actively involved in community NAIDOC activities.

Staff believe that children need a strong sense of culture and identity for their development, and that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are strong in their culture and have a sense of pride about themselves, they also have healthy self-esteem, higher confidence and resilience. All these factors together support the child to be better prepared for the change in their learning environment from an early years service to formal schooling.

## H. Thursday Island Child Care Centre Thursday Island, Queensland

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Thursday Island Child Care Centre is an Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) located on Thursday Island. In the year before formal schooling the centre runs a Pre-Prep program to support children's transition. Children within the program visit the local school every day for a few hours in the morning to participate in the Prep class. The school provides an additional Kindergarten assistant to cope with the higher numbers.

The Pre-Prep program focuses strongly on building positive relationships between children, families, educators and teachers, on a shared curriculum to develop children's knowledge, skills and confidence, on community engagement, and finally on a deep cultural foundation for the program. These elements are discussed below.

### 2. RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships between ECEC educators, families, children and school staff are a key aspect of the Pre-Prep program. Staff involved in the program observe that where teachers, educators and families have positive relationships, children transition more smoothly and are more comfortable within the school environment.

ECEC educators specifically focus on building and maintaining trusting relationships with families and school staff to support transition. Educators believe the key to building and maintaining trusting relationships with families is open and frequent communication. They use a variety of communication methods to engage with families – including emails, texts, phone calls and talking to parents at pickup and drop-off times

Staff within the ECEC and school environments focus on enabling families to feel included and welcomed. The ECEC educators and school staff actively seek family participation at service/school events, and invite them to come in and participate in learning activities with the children. These learning experiences include activities such as cooking,

yearning and storytelling and Island dancing. This gives families a sense of belonging within the ECEC service and the school environment.

### 3. CURRICULUM

Educators and school staff regularly communicate about each other's programs and curriculum. This enables the ECEC educators to be better informed in preparing children for the school curriculum, and ensures that school teachers have a better understanding of children's development at the ECEC centre.

ECEC educators intentionally plan the pre-prep program and activities to focus on similar skills and knowledge as those covered at school. They particularly focus on supporting children's emotional development – encouraging resilience and confidence in communicating with adults and peers. The ECEC educators provide learning opportunities for the pre-prep children that build off skills and knowledge learned in the school environment. This ensures that learning is kept alive and continuously developed. For example, the pre-prep children are encouraged to retell stories they learnt at school to their peers at the ECEC centre. The centre has a 'story board' with felt pieces that the children can use in retelling the stories. This encourages the pre-prep children to re-apply their new skills, further developing their communication skills, as well as confidence and pride in their abilities.

Educators take videos and pictures of the children engaged in learning within the program, and then use these to help children reflect on and recall their learning. Educators believe that this helps to solidify the learning experience, and enables the children to remember the positive feelings they had about the learning activity.

To build off their school experiences, when the pre-prep children return to child care they are encouraged to talk about school with the younger children – sharing what the activities and lessons they participated in. This enables the younger children to learn from the older children, and encourages them to try new activities – such as writing.

Educators notice that the children who participate in the pre-prep program are excited about going to school, which helps with separation anxiety and to build trust with their teachers.

### 4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The ECEC actively involves families, Elders and community members within the centre. The centre participates in significant community and cultural events such as Family Fun day, Under Eights day, National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD) and NAIDOC. Staff are encouraged and supported to attend these celebrations and engage with the community during these special times.

### 5. CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Fostering identity and cultural strength, including first language, is considered an important foundation to the program. Educators and teachers focus on being culturally

aware and inclusive. The Indigenous teachers and aides are thought to be particularly important for supporting children's sense of identity, and cultural competence within the ECEC and school. It is also vital to have staff who speak Creole and other first languages.

## I. Wanslea Family Services, Pre-Kindy Program Wanslea and Mount Barker, Western Australia

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Wanslea Family Services (Wanslea) runs a Pre-Kindy Program that focuses on preparing children with the skills and knowledge they will need to begin kindergarten, and fostering their parents knowledge about child development and learning so that they can support their child's development at home. The three weekly sessions are run on-site at the local school, in a classroom adjacent to the kindergarten room.

There are several key features behind the program's success in preparing children and families for school.

### 2. OWNERSHIP

That the program is largely driven by the Aboriginal staff and parents is a key element in its strength within the community, and success in attracting families who wouldn't ordinarily access early childhood services. The Coordinator describes that,

It doesn't matter how much cultural awareness you have or how many workshops you attend, it doesn't always work that way. The Aboriginal staff know their community; they know what works and what doesn't work. And that is very valuable.

The Aboriginal staff occupy genuine, as opposed to tokenistic, roles that utilise their experience and knowledge. Their connection to the community is highly valued as a significant skill and experience. Parents are also strongly encouraged to feel that they own and drive the group – and are meaningfully consulted on decisions such as new members and program direction. Many parents have been attending the group for some time, and for most it has become an extremely important aspect of their lives. The Coordinator explains that,

The parents become the strength that binds and drives the program.

### 3. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

The program focuses on actively engaging parents in their child's education by building their capacity to support their child's development. Through role-modelling activities and the use of resources staff teach parents skills that they can use to reinforce children's learning at home.

The program philosophy is to provide non-judgmental support that views parents as the child's first teacher,

appreciates and builds off their knowledge, and supports them to feel less anxious about and more prepared for their child starting school.

Because many families don't have their own transport, the program provides a pick-up/drop-off service to enable them to attend the group.

Each family is given a pack of basic activities like playdough, crafts and books to carry out at home. These resources are all used in the program, so the parents already have experience of how to use them to support their child's development. These resources and activities are particularly useful for families who leave the community and group for periods of time as it gives them activities to work on with their children whilst they are away.

The group has become a valuable source of peer support for both the children and the parents. This is outlined by the Coordinator,

One of the fantastic things about the group is the connection women build with other people's kids... so the kids are not just getting support and learning from their mum but also from their aunties in the group. This means that if one mum is not feeling well, or is struggling and needs a break, she can still come to the group and be supported – not just by the staff but by the other women - who will pick up for each other. This is a strong protective factor. It's also a strength for the kids that they have this group of peers that they know who they will be starting school with.

The personal approach is key to building and maintaining rapport with families. Staff make home visits to check-in with families or to provide extra support, and actively show families that they care about how their children are going and what's happening in their lives. If a family travels away the workers will visit them on their return to see if they want to re-join the group, which is found to be a more effective way to engage with families than a phone call.

Where a parent or child is still feeling anxious about beginning kindergarten, a program worker will often accompany them for the first few days of term. This helps to settle the child and support their positive behaviour in class. It also provides the parent with support, as the worker is someone they know and trust. The worker can then gradually pull back from being with the child/parent in the classroom, to waiting in the carpark, to just meeting with them at the beginning and end of the day.

One of the participating parents describes the impact of the group,

It's great, I wish there had of been an Aboriginal program that I could have gone to like this when I was a kid. It's great to see the kids growing and developing within the group, and to see the mums coming out of their shells. Some start and are very quiet, and then when they're comfortable with us you see their confidence growing – they will be talking and laughing with us. It helps the mums to

feel that their kids are starting school from a strong position with lots of knowledge. (Parent)

#### 4. CHILDREN'S READINESS

The program is based on the assumption that the school environment and activities are very foreign to most children, and that this unfamiliarity will hinder them positively commencing school.

It therefore focuses on children's school readiness across a number of different areas:

- Familiarisation with school routines and activities such as meal times, hygiene, daily schedules, understanding mat time and sitting still, following instructions, completing tasks, outdoor/indoor time and reading.
- Fostering children's development across the five main domains of fine and gross motor skills; social emotional; language and cognitive development.
- Building confidence with peers, adults and the school environment.
- Supporting children with additional needs through facilitating health assessments and linking parents with ongoing support.
- A particular focus on literacy, as this was identified as a major challenge for Aboriginal children starting school, and something not frequently engaged in at home. The literacy program works in partnership with the local library, and includes outreach visits to families' homes to support them in reading to their child. The program also works with the local Aboriginal Men's Shed to build bookshelves that are then decorated by the children and families and used to house their books at home. Through this approach staff have seen positive results in children's literacy and the amount of time parents spend reading with their child.

#### 5. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SCHOOL

Having the program located at the school means that the Pre-Kindy group and the Kindergarten class and teacher are able to frequently interact. The two groups sometimes join together at morning tea or playtime, which helps the younger children to meet and socialise with the older school children. One of the kindergarten teachers also regularly visits the group, which helps her get to know the children and their families.

As well as facilitating visits with the children, the Program Coordinator and the Kindergarten teacher have regular discussions about the skills children need to have at school, so that the program can focus on these.

## J. Warmun Early Learning Centre Warmun, Western Australia

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Warmun Early Learning Centre (Warmun ELC) is located in the remote Aboriginal community of Warmun, East Kimberley, WA. Warmun ELC's transition to school program ran from 2006 – 2011, but ceased when the Director left the centre. The program comprised a series of regular, supported visits to the school with ELC staff, parents and children, as well as a focus on children's school readiness through a structured program of play-based learning.

### 2. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCHOOL

To initiate the transition program, ELC Director Cherrelle Clare began visiting the school to develop relationships with the Principal and teachers. Given the differences between the early childhood centre and school, it was considered very important that the school staff appreciated what child care looked like. She therefore invited the school staff over to see the centre and program. The ELC staff then drove this, demonstrating to the Kindergarten teachers how they programmed, the activities they did, and talking with them about each child. These visits then became a regular part of the annual transition process. This helped the teachers to understand that the work of the ELC is critically important for children's development, but that the purpose is not to provide a 'finished product' for the school.

In addition to the visits, staff also completed and gave to the school a developmental record for each child. They felt that school teachers would better engage with these than with early childhood portfolios, as the records utilised school terminology and concepts. This helped to ensure that teachers had high expectations of what children could do – as it conveyed the breadth and depth of work that the children had been involved in at the ELC, and helped the teachers better understand each child as an individual.

### 3. SCHOOL VISITS

School visits were facilitated twice weekly throughout the year, for one hour at a time. Both the parent/s and child attended these to ensure that they all felt familiar with and comfortable in the school and with the teachers the following year.

Initially staff found that a significant challenge was to build up parents' confidence that they had skills and knowledge to offer the school, and could play a role there. Believing this needed to be encouraged and facilitated by teachers, they talked to the school about how they could do this. Warmun staff found that whilst the teachers were very welcoming to

the parents and children, many were unsure of what to do with them during the school visits. Using their experience of involving families at the ELC, Warmun staff worked with teachers to include parents in the morning classes, finding that the key to parents feeling included and relaxed in the classroom was giving them something to do – for example encouraging them to help with a particular activity. This helped the parents to feel that their help and knowledge were valued.

Building relationships between teachers, parents and children was also critical to the program's success. By providing a bridge between the school and parents, Warmun staff focused on making every contact between parents and the school meaningful, worthwhile and positive – with each contact building upon the last.

Weekly visits to the school began in the last term, with a group of about 5-6 children, their parents and Warmun staff. Starting off with a shared morning tea with all of the school staff, the group then joined in with school activities such as classroom work and assemblies. These visits helped parents and children feel comfortable within the school, and enabled children to become accustomed to the different routines – such as sitting for long periods of time. The kindergarten teacher was particularly supportive, organising reading sessions or craft activities that involved the parents and children. This enabled parents and children to feel that they were contributing and joining in. The Warmun Director describes that the basis of this was very simple, parents and children were “in the room, they're feeling comfortable and have a role to play.”

Attendance at school visits was consistent, with at least half of the children in the transition program regularly attending. This was felt to be an exceptionally good number by staff and teachers and an indicator that the children and families were enjoying the program.

#### 4. STAFF ATTITUDES

The Warmun Director largely attributes the strength of the program to the attitudes of the school and Early Learning Centre staff. The school, led by the Principal, displayed an open-minded and encouraging approach to working with the ELC to support children and families. The ELC Educators also were strongly motivated in implementing the program and making it a success. The ELC staff also focused on slowly building up relationships of trust with the ELC families and children, which was crucial in then supporting them to build a relationship and engage with the school. The fact that most of the staff were community members themselves aided in this.

## K. Yarrabah Child Care Centre and Primary School Yarrabah, Queensland

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Yarrabah Child Care Centre is a Long Day Care Centre located in Yarrabah, Queensland. The service supports children to transition to formal schooling through a pre-prep transition program delivered in collaboration with Yarrabah Primary School.

The program has several key elements, including an intentional transition program; a focus on relationships between educators, teachers and families; a focus on child development and confidence; a community school attendance strategy; and engagement with the local community. These are discussed below.

### 2. INTENTIONAL TRANSITION PROGRAM

Children from the service attend the pre-prep program at Yarrabah School. The long day care centre, preschool and local primary school work together to provide holistic support to the children and families through open communication - including regular information exchange about the children, their development and participation in the pre-prep sessions. Discussions also take place with the families about the school environment to lessen any anxiety families might feel about school.

The program runs throughout the year and involves the pre-prep children attending school five days a week, where they learn a modified curriculum. The curriculum incorporates components of both the national school and early years curriculums. Each fortnight the school holds a family day, which provides an opportunity for the families to come into the school environment and participate in guided learning activities with their children. The family members assist their child with an activity, and are encouraged by teachers to share lots of yarning with their child as they do this – enhancing the learning that happens. After the activity the children, teachers and families share a meal, which is provided either by the families or school staff. Staff feel that this instils a sense of belonging and community for all involved, and provides an additional incentive for families to attend.

The early childhood educators observe that the children who have participated in the early childhood and pre-prep program are generally more confident and have less separation issues. This enables them to settle quicker on arriving at school and to generally adjust more smoothly and quickly to the new classroom and routine, aiding their learning and development. Staff observe that these early learning experiences also help children become accustomed to following a daily routine and interacting with other children and adults.

### 3. RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships between school staff, educators and families are a key element of the program. Educators observe that children generally settle in to school much better when their families have good relationships with school staff. Open and daily communication is a vital aspect of this. Educators and school teachers regularly liaise about children's learning, activities and program structure, and discuss strategies to incorporate and enhance children's learning within both learning environments. Educators don't complete formal transition statements, but deliver this information to teachers through yarns about the children.

Families are valued as children's first teachers, with educators and teachers actively seeking information from families about their child through regular communication and informal chats during pick-up and drop-off. As two centre educators describe,

There is a real community show of respect for teachers and educators and by all working together it supports the kids. (Tamara, Acting Director and Belita, Educator)

Families are warmly welcomed into the early childhood and school environments. Through the growing relationships with school staff a number of mothers and aunties have started to attend school regularly to assist with activities. Teachers observe that this helps children to feel confident at school – as they know that their family are there to support them.

Families are kept informed about children's progress through informal conversations at pick-up and drop-off times, as well as being given samples of their child's work and photos of them engaged in learning. Families are welcomed into the centre to provide cultural experiences and lessons to the children. Centre educators Tamara and Belita relate how,

The children are more settled in to prep, after completing pre-prep. The parents are open to having a yarn about the children and they feel confident at the day care centre, kindy and school. (Tamara, Acting Director and Belita, Educator)

### 4. CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CONFIDENCE

Children's development is focused on through a comprehensive curriculum that aims to equip children with foundational skills and knowledge, such as literacy, numeracy and communication skills. The educators also focus on fostering children's confidence to speak in front of peers and adults, appreciating that these are fundamental skills within the school classroom.

The pre-prep children wear a school uniform when they attend pre-prep, as this is felt to support them to feel a part of the school community.

### 5. ATTENDANCE STRATEGY

High school attendance rates are attributed in part to the community-school attendance strategy, *Every Day Counts*. The strategy's slogan 'Is your child at school today?

Every day counts' is displayed on community buses, and the local police and community members are supportive of the approach. Educators relate how community members will now stop to ask children why they aren't at school when they see them outside in school hours. Because the strategy comes from the community, there is no shame attached to it, and attendance has visibly improved. Because the community is engaged and pro-active about school attendance, and children learning the importance of regularly attending school, younger children transitioning in to school are being taught the same values and understanding

### 6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is an important part of both the school and early years service, and local Elders and community members are welcomed and included within the pre-prep program activities.

The school and community celebrate days of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as days of significance for children – such as Under 8's week. Involving the community and school together in these events is felt by staff to be important in building a community-wide focus on education.

School staff are supported to attend community events, and the community are also invited in to the school environment to celebrate with the school staff. The community observes a number of events such as National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD), NAIDOC, and White Balloon Day. The school, preschool and early years service all invite each other to their celebrations. For the younger pre-prep children, being invited in to the school to celebrate assists them to feel a sense of community within the school environment. Educators also feel that when the school children and teachers come to the child care and/or preschool to celebrate an event, it gives the pre-prep children the opportunity to shine and display their skills and knowledge in an environment familiar to them. This allows the teachers to observe the pre-prep child at play and learn about their learning styles.

## L. Yipirinya Aboriginal School Alice Springs, Northern Territory

### 1. BACKGROUND

Yipirinya School is an independent Aboriginal school in Alice Springs, Northern Territory (NT), catering to children living in the town camps and outstations of Alice Springs. These are some of the most disadvantaged students in Australia, predominantly coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds and often facing multiple levels of disadvantage including high levels of domestic violence, health issues and substance abuse.

This case study will focus on two programs run by Yipirinya that assist children, both those attending an early learning centre (ELC) and those not, to transition into the first year of

primary school. Because Yipirinya works with families who are often facing extreme disadvantage, these programs have been particularly important in engaging families with their child's education and preparation for school.

## **2. THE HOME INTERACTION PROGRAM FOR PARENTS AND YOUNGSTERS**

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is a two-year parenting program that builds parent's confidence and skills to support their child prepare for school.

### **2.1 Recruiting families**

Families come from both inside and outside the school, and are generally recruited through the staff's connections with and knowledge of the community, which helps to ensure that the families accessing it are those most in need. As the program becomes better known families are also independently expressing interest in joining. Recruiting through the community helps provide access for children who may not be participating in early childhood education.

### **2.2 Transport and accessibility**

Because many children live in the town camps where the home environment may not be conducive to studying, the school picks up families and brings them to the school for their fortnightly tutoring sessions. This ensures a calm, supported and resourced learning environment, and because the HIPPY room is on the school site, it also helps children and their parents to build familiarity with and feel comfortable at school.

### **2.3 Including local culture**

Where it can, the school adapts the program to better suit their cultural context, knowing that this will increase parental engagement and strengthen culture. For example, knowing that connection to the land is a strong cultural tradition for the local community, one of the tutors recently took the families from her HIPPY group on an excursion to the bush.

### **2.4 Local staff**

Both of the HIPPY tutors and the Coordinator were previously enrolled as parents in the program. All of the HIPPY staff are Aboriginal, and have strong connections with the local community. This is a key factor in developing and maintaining relationships with the families. It is also very empowering for families to see that the current tutors were previously parents who also went through the program.

### **2.5 Empowering parents and families**

The emphasis within the program on valuing and empowering parents as children's first teachers is a key strength. Yipirinya's Principal, Ken Langford-Smith, describes that it empowers parents by saying to them "you can start preparing your child, you can help and work with them." It supports parents to feel welcome and valued at school, and

gives both parents and children confidence and self-esteem. Because the program supports families to educate their own children, it also encourages positive and supportive family relationships.

### **2.6 Identifying development or health needs**

Through support from tutors, HIPPY also assists in recognising any developmental or health needs amongst participating children, and can then link families to further support to address these needs prior to starting school.

### **2.7 Outcomes**

Whilst the program hasn't been formally reviewed, anecdotal evidence from teachers indicates that students who have been through the HIPPY program are better adjusted when they begin school. They are accustomed to school routines and activities such as looking at books, following instructions, and sitting down and staying in one room – which can be a huge challenge with children who are not used to being confined. The children have learnt the importance of being with a teacher, and participating in activities such as story-time. Children's social skills also benefit through regular interaction with other participants and tutors. Parents have reported positive changes in their children's development after completing the program, and improved communication between themselves and their child.<sup>1</sup>

## **3. FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER**

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an eight-week program that brings a group of families into the school each week to participate in structured, play-based learning activities with their children. Any family with a child in Kindergarten to Grade Three at Yipirinya can join the program. Families are usually recruited through a teacher recommending that a particular family would benefit from the program.

### **3.1 Creating familiarity**

The key strength of the program is that it brings families into school to complete activities in collaboration with their children and teachers. This supports parents to feel welcome in the school environment and community and want to be a part of it, helping to overcome the anxiety many parents have of the school environment. It also helps to build up families' relationships with teachers and other school staff, and enables children to form relationships with peers who may be in their future classes at Yipirinya.

### **3.2 Strength-based**

Families are encouraged to work collaboratively on activities. Each week one family will cook a meal in the school kitchen to share with the group. This helps them and their children learn about nutrition, in a participative supportive environment. The program is strength-based, with regular awards and prizes given out to celebrate family and child achievements.

### 3.3 Building relationships

The program also provides parents with an informal avenue to raise any issues or thoughts with teachers. Ken feels that they feel comfortable to do this because they have the relationship with staff, and the environment is relaxed and trusting. He describes that this helps “to build up positive contact between school and parents – there’s nothing wrong with the children, they’re not in trouble, they’re just here to enjoy the activities and to learn.”

### 3.4 Outcomes

Like HIPPI, the Yipirinya FAST program has not been formally evaluated. However, anecdotal evidence from teachers indicates that families who go through the program integrate better into the school community and indicate that they feel part of the school, as well as having increased confidence to participate in learning activities with their children. Teachers state that it also greatly improves their relationships with students and families. Ken believes this is partially because the program offers an opportunity for teachers to get to know children and their families out of school in an informal setting, and to therefore better understand where each child is coming from – their family and background.



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## A strong voice for our children and families

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