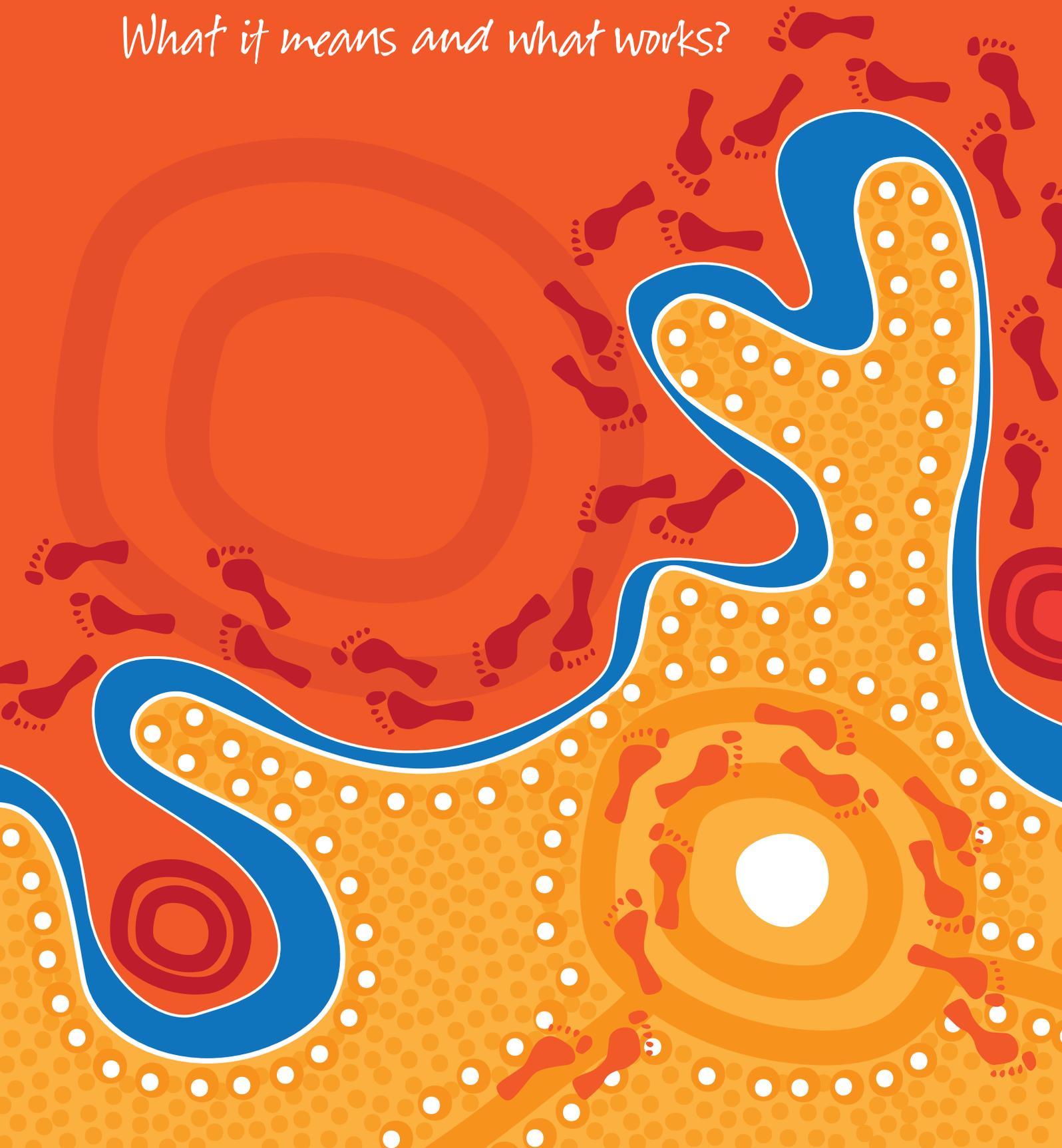




# SUPPORTING TRANSITION to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children: *What it means and what works?*





Researched and drafted by:

Holly Mason-White, Policy Officer, SNAICC

With input from SNAICC National Executive members, Sharron Williams, Dawn Wallam, Garry Matthews and Geraldine Atkinson, and SNAICC staff, Emma Sydenham and Susan Salmon.

External reviews by Sue Dockett, Charles Sturt University, and Myfanwy McDonald, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. SNAICC acknowledges their time and expertise in reviewing this paper. SNAICC greatly appreciates their support.

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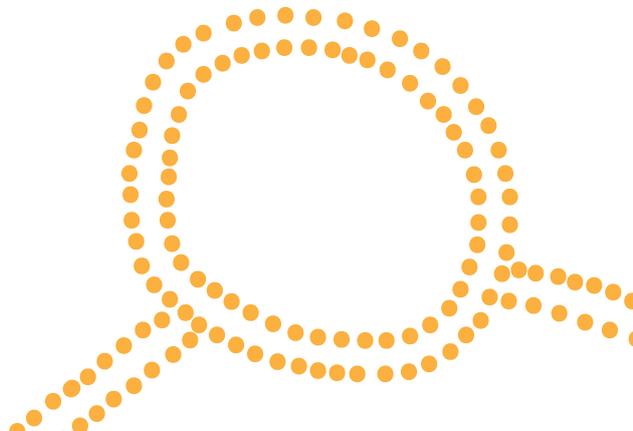
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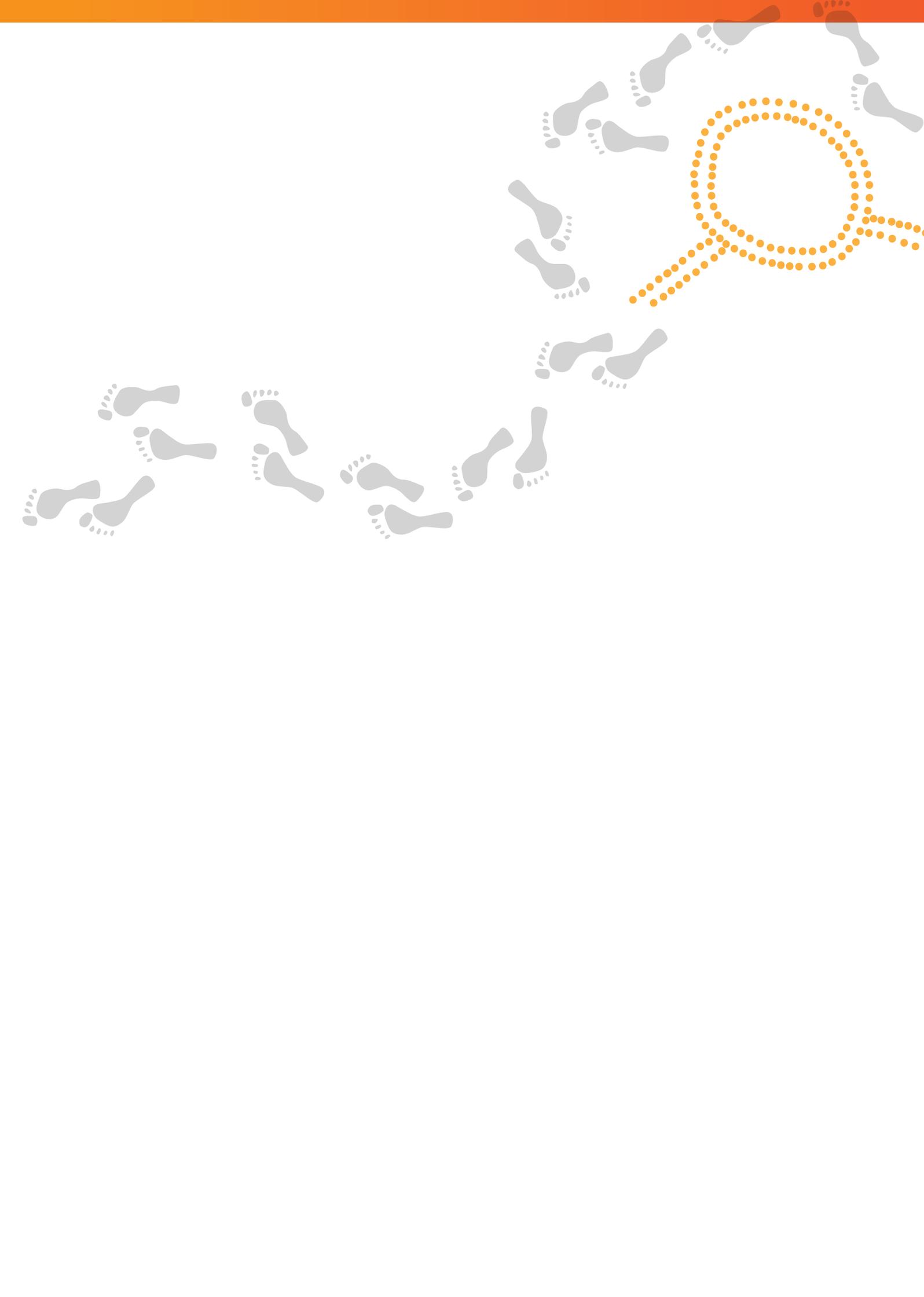
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education is a key strategy through which to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to overcome generational disadvantage. Every child begins their schooling life with a transition from home or an early childhood centre to pre- or primary school. The experience of this transition period for a child and their family is crucial in providing a foundation for future schooling life and education outcomes.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children this transition period presents significant challenges, but also opportunities. Notably, a successful transition can facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's engagement with the school community and environment, enabling them to experience a range of positive academic, developmental, physical, socio-emotional and wellbeing outcomes. It can also support and encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to engage with their children's education, and promote a sense of inclusion amongst children and families within the school environment.

For these outcomes to be achieved however, evidence indicates that particular attention is required to the holistic engagement of multiple stakeholders including children, families, communities, schools and early childhood services. Furthermore, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the importance of applying a cultural lens to all aspects of the transition process is critical.

A review of Australian literature on successful school transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children confirms that a series of key features are essential:

- 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.

In keeping with contemporary approaches to school transition, this review views five 'dimensions' as important for positive school transitions: ready

schools; ready services; ready communities; ready families; and ready children. Together these elements provide a holistic foundation for children's transition to school that utilises the range of necessary supports and stakeholders that are crucial to children's early development.

Research on these five different dimensions is of varying breadth and quality, and there remain significant research gaps. There are strong commonalities emerging, however, indicating the following:

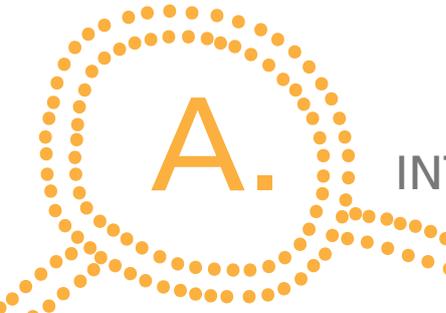
- The key features of *ready schools* are:
  - school and family relationships;
  - welcoming and inclusive school environments;
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and presence;
  - positive relationships between teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
  - cultural competence;
  - high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by all involved in transition; and
  - valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning
- Comprehensive understanding of *ready early childhood services* is a knowledge gap. It is well understood, however, that these services play a vital role in preparing children for school in terms of academic skills and adaptation to a school environment. Key to this are positive relationships between early childhood education and care professionals, and teachers.
- Current thinking proposes that *ready communities* provide safe, supportive and nurturing environments for children to transition. Little research has examined this however within the Australian - and specifically within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander - context. Some preliminary findings indicate that community leadership and ownership of early childhood services is important.
- In regards to *ready families*, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families possess qualities that can support their children's transition to school, but they may also experience a range of barriers in engaging with schools during the

early years and the transition process. Transition programs need to address these barriers and ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are able to engage both in the process of preparing their children for school, and also with the school environment and educational process.

- The meaning of the term *ready children* reflects a broad holistic capacity, encompassing a range of developmental, academic, socio-emotional and physical skills and qualities that can enable children to smoothly transition to school. Current assessment measures are criticised for being too narrow in their assessment criteria, and for being culturally inappropriate. A strengths-based approach to evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's readiness for school is needed, to appreciate and acknowledge the qualities and skills (including language skills) that they bring to school.

In summary, the paper proposes that to be effective, current approaches to school transition must recognise that transition requires a multidimensional focus, with a strengths-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's development and learning, applying a cultural lens, and targeting the five dimensions of 'readiness'.





# A.

## 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>

Myriad challenges exist within the transition process, not least being the cultural competence of the 'receiving' school and how it facilitates relationships with the child, their family and community. Countering this, however, we also know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children begin school equipped with a wealth of strengths, knowledge and experiences.<sup>5</sup> With careful nurturing, these can be critical building blocks from which to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the transition process and build a positive foundation for their future education.

Key to this is understanding that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must make a significant shift in cultural contexts when moving into mainstream schools.<sup>6</sup> For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, school is an "unfamiliar place" and one that is socially, culturally and physically very different to their home environments.<sup>7</sup> Even for those children attending early childhood services, school can still represent a new environment with potentially different structural and programmatic approaches.<sup>8</sup> It is imperative that schools apply a strengths-based approach to take into account the significant knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children already have, and support them to "learn

'both ways' and confidently participate in and contribute to two worlds."<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's experiences of the transition to school therefore poses both unique challenges and opportunities, and requires the application of a culturally competent approach.

This literature review seeks to identify and explore what we know about supporting successful transitions to school for Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander children.

A successful transition is defined in this context 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.

Current thinking frames the transition to school within the ecological theory of child development, where a child's development is contextualised within a series of relationships that form the child's environment. These relationships are structured within layers, from the child's immediate family outwards through the community, school, wider society and to global structures<sup>10</sup>. Framed within this model, the transition to school is therefore conceptualised as the confluence of a system of interconnected contexts and relationships<sup>11</sup>.

Successful transitions are therefore supported by the application of a multidimensional approach to transition that takes into account these relationships and influences. Within this ecological model of transition five corresponding dimensions of 'readiness' - ready schools, communities, families, early childhood services, and children - are all fostered and supported. Such a holistic perspective views transition as a dynamic, multi-stakeholder, long-term process, moving away from traditional notions of 'school readiness' as a quality that largely rests with the child.



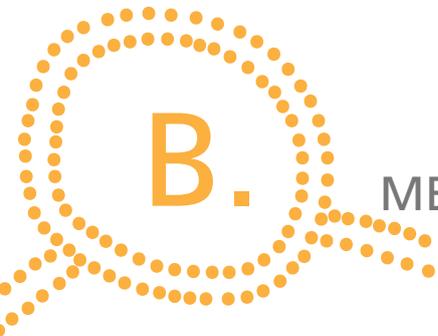
This review will examine the implications of each of these dimensions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's transition to school. Of these five dimensions, recent research has focused most heavily on 'ready children' and 'ready schools', so these dimensions will be discussed in the most detail. Drawing on findings from the five dimensions of readiness, the paper will then describe the main features of effective transition programs.

Finally, the paper will examine significant research gaps relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's transition to school and propose recommendations to ensure that future practice and policy rests on a solid evidence base in order to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The transition to school is an area of critical importance for future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A successful transition to school creates a pathway to positive academic, social and wellbeing outcomes. However the transition process is complex and requires a targeted, carefully considered and culturally appropriate approach.

This paper proposes that to be truly effective, approaches to transition must expand their focus with: a strengths-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's development and learning; application of a cultural lens; and a multidimensional approach that targets the five dimensions of 'readiness'.





# B.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this literature review is to explore current evidence regarding:

- The meaning of a successful transition to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as well as the causes of unsuccessful transition;
- Examples of good practice supports for quality transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; and
- The hopes and fears Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have regarding the transition process, and how they feel their children can be supported through this process.

It is acknowledged that the transition process is generally considered to begin at birth and continue on into a child's early primary years, because development is cumulative.<sup>12</sup> However for the purpose of clarity, this paper will consider the programs that support children at the following times:

- The transition from an early childhood centre or their home to preschool/prep/kindergarten; and
- The transition from preschool/prep/kindergarten to grade 1 (primary school).

This accounts for the difference in school systems across Australian states and territories.

Relevant literature was identified using 'Scopus', 'Google Scholar', 'Indigenous Education Research Database', and the 'Closing the Gap Clearinghouse' databases. A variety of key search terms were used, including: 'Indigenous AND transition to school'; 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander AND transition to school'; 'Indigenous AND Australia AND transition to school'; 'Indigenous AND transition to school'; and 'transition to school' (this latter phrase was only used within the two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific databases).

Recognising that much data on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector is unpublished and usually not peer reviewed, a Google search was also undertaken to identify additional reports, papers and evaluations. Generally only research from 2000 onwards was considered.

Of the approximately 40 documents identified, roughly a quarter were particularly relevant for this literature review. These largely fell into two categories, in that they:

- provided a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's transition to school generally, examining the five dimensions of readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; and
- described more targeted research, typically highlighting particular insights into certain features of transition (e.g. assessing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's school readiness, engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families around transition).

The majority of reports drew their evidence from available literature, or from the authors' personal experience as practitioners within the early childhood space. These reports tended to draw upon a range of sources and to critique the available literature in an informative way. A small number of reports drew on findings from current or past projects, which tended to highlight qualitative data.

This review uncovered limited evidence regarding the success or otherwise of transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The exception is a large body of research on current or past transition projects from New South Wales (NSW).





...transition is something that is experienced, rather than something that happens to the child and family.



## KEY THEMES

This section will consider the key themes that have emerged from the literature. Definitions of school transition are briefly considered, followed by an examination of the importance of a successful transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This section will then explore available literature on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families hope for out of the early childhood years, and out of transition. Despite their role as the primary influence on their child's development and transition, the voices of families have largely been overlooked in discussions of transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The section will then turn to examine how the five main dimensions of readiness have been conceptualised within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander transitions to school. Finally, this section will draw together the available evidence into a transition table summarising the main features of successful transition programs.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL TRANSITION

Historically, a successful transition to school has been seen as dependent upon children's academic and organisational skills and behaviours<sup>13</sup>. A child's 'readiness' for school, is therefore usually evaluated by measuring these attributes. This approach has been criticised as being too narrow and based upon flawed testing procedures that are often culturally inappropriate, lacking the ability to accurately predict children's future school-based achievements, not relevant for all groups of children, and based on children's weaknesses rather than strengths<sup>14</sup>. (The limitations of these testing procedures are discussed below in Section 8.1).

This approach has now been superseded by research over the last decade that has focused on the broader factors that influence a successful school transition. The definition of school readiness has expanded to now incorporate "all aspects of a child's life that contributes directly to that child's ability to learn."<sup>15</sup> The group of stakeholders considered critical to this process has expanded accordingly to include services, schools, communities and families<sup>16</sup>, in addition to children. Children's readiness is therefore seen as one

element or goal within the transition process, rather than the single, defining feature<sup>17</sup>.

This current understanding of school transition reflects the ecological theory of child development, where a successful transition is viewed as "a multifaceted process that involves many stakeholders over an extended period of time."<sup>18</sup> This understanding of school transition suggests that rather than being a static, time-limited event, the transition period commences at birth and continues on into the primary school years.<sup>19</sup> Positive, respectful relationships are a central feature of effective transitions. As Dockett et al highlight, the entire process is actually one of relationship building,

...supported by a range of activities or experiences. In this sense, transition is something that is experienced, rather than something that happens to the child and family.<sup>20</sup>

This more contemporary, holistic understanding of school transition is most often described in terms of the 'Ready Child Equation'.<sup>21</sup> According to this equation, the transition process encompasses four dimensions of 'readiness':

*Ready services* deliver quality and affordable proven school readiness programs, *ready schools* foster relationships with families and communities and are geared and resourced for child development, *ready communities* provide appropriate support and resources to families and *ready families* create facilitative home environments.<sup>22</sup>

In their 2010 Closing the Gap Issues Paper, Dockett, Perry and Kearney draw upon a large body of work, most notably the US National Education Goals Panel (1997), and further refine this definition into a readiness 'triangle', encompassing schools' readiness for children; children's readiness for school; and community and family readiness.<sup>23</sup>

Community and family readiness is described as "the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children's development and learning."<sup>24</sup> This category therefore represents an amalgamation of families' readiness to support

their children, and the services or supports available within a community that assist children and families to be ready.<sup>25</sup>

The critical message emerging from research is that only when all stakeholders are actively engaged can transition be successful. This approach, described as a holistic conception of the transition to school,<sup>26</sup> is viewed as being particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This is because the multidimensional focus “ostensibly accords well with many traditional Indigenous cultural models of learning as well as conceptions of family and oneness with environment.”<sup>27</sup>

Whilst theoretical understandings of transition have evolved to reflect this multi-faceted approach, some literature suggests that transition programs commonly still focus on the child’s readiness.<sup>28</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

- Past understandings defined transition to school solely as children’s readiness, largely focusing on their academic skills.
- Current interpretations now define transition as a dynamic process which requires the active engagement and participation of children, schools, families, communities and early childhood services.
- Genuine, respectful and trusting relationships between all stakeholders are a foundational element.
- Despite advances in our theoretical understanding of school transition, in practice narrowly defined evaluations of children’s readiness still prevail.

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

The majority of literature examines what works to promote a successful transition, rather than what a successful transition actually means for children and families, and the positive outcomes it can produce. Whilst examining what works within transition provides insights into how to define a successful transition, it still leaves much unanswered about the impacts of positive transitions.

In the following discussion, we summarise four key themes regarding the importance of successful school transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

### *Inclusion and belonging*

Educational institutions can create a child’s framework of exclusion from their society or inclusion as a unique and special part. Social inclusion is identified as a critical aspect of long-term wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and is constructed with a person’s “full participation in the social and economic life of the nation.”<sup>29</sup> Taylor notes that “Like academic success and failure, once patterns of inclusion and exclusion, favour and disfavour, popularity and isolation become entrenched they are likely to continue for a long time.”<sup>30</sup>

Large-scale research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families across NSW indicates that transition programs can effect how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and schools engage with each other, and can lay the foundation for children and families’ sense of belonging or not at the school.<sup>31</sup> The same research indicates that transition programs can enable children, families and communities “to feel comfortable, valued and successful in school and to assist educators as they develop positive learning environments for children starting school.”<sup>32</sup>

This is an important outcome given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children are more likely than non Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families to feel alienated and disconnected from the school community. This can be caused by a variety of reasons, including the negative associations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have with educational institutions (this is discussed below under Section 6); differences between home and school cultures and expectations,<sup>33</sup> and the unique values, practices and approaches to learning that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have.<sup>34</sup>

### *Educational and social wellbeing outcomes*

A number of authors discuss the immediate impacts for children of a successful transition, including that:



- “Children have good feelings about their school, teachers, parents and peers
- Children show good progress in terms of their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development” .<sup>35</sup>

Drawing on earlier work, Dockett et al discuss how successful transition programs can “build on children’s competencies, extend their social supports and relationships, and promote ongoing school success” .<sup>36</sup> Transition programs can also have profound impacts on children’s emotional wellbeing. Lessening children’s anxiety during transition may improve their wellbeing and thus their subsequent willingness to attend school.

In addition, Dockett et al cite earlier work by Viadero (1999), highlighting how successful transitions also have positive impacts for families and parents, who through the process are supported to “express positive attitudes toward school and promote children’s learning” .<sup>37</sup>

### **Reconciling home and school cultures**

Effective transitions play a key role in enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to move between home/community and school cultures without losing their own culture.<sup>38</sup>

Beginning school can mark what Carbines et al describe as a period of ‘discontinuities’ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.<sup>39</sup> Such changes can include shifts in the cultural and social environments, the expectations placed on children by adults, and the level of support, connection and interaction children experience with teachers as significant adults.<sup>40</sup>

This period can also be characterised as one in which children must strive to integrate what are often significantly different environments (i.e. home and school). A 2008 ARACY report suggests that this is particularly difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, given the potential differences with mainstream language, culture, social behaviours and life experiences.<sup>41</sup> These are illustrated in the quote above.

*School life and camp life are often like two different worlds. The differences are related to the way we bring our children up, our different child rearing practices.*<sup>42</sup>

(statement from the Waltja Tujtangu Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation)

Transition programs therefore play an important role at this critical time of change in supporting children to reconcile notions of ‘home’ and ‘school’, and to prepare schools to be ready for children so that the levels of discontinuity children may experience are reduced.<sup>43</sup>

### **Forming positive relationships**

Effective transition programs also lay the foundation for a number of fundamental relationships that are critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s engagement with and success at school – including those between their teachers, families, and service providers and communities.<sup>44</sup> Dockett, Mason and Perry stress that these relationships are essential, potentially providing “the key to children’s (as well as the family’s and community’s) sense of

engagement at school and to building resilience to a range of risk factors.”<sup>45</sup> Carbines et al indicate that positive relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and teachers can help families to feel comfortable and valued within the school environment.<sup>46</sup>

The transition period is especially important for

families whose members have had negative experiences with schools or educational institutions. As ARACY highlights, transition programs provide an opportunity for families and schools to build trustful relationships, thereby helping families to overcome prior negative associations.<sup>47</sup>

In summary, a child and family’s first experiences with school often set the tone for later achievement. These experiences also lay the foundations for children and family relationships to education and their attitudes towards school participation and performance.<sup>48</sup> Negative experiences during the transition to school can limit a child’s options post school, and impact upon their employment prospects, socioeconomic wellbeing and health.<sup>49</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

- Schools play a significant role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families experience of exclusion or inclusion within society.
- A child and family's initial experiences with a school lay the foundation for their engagement with the school during the child's school years.
- Negative experiences during the transition to school can have far-reaching adverse results, including lower school attendance, poorer school, wellbeing and health outcomes, and lowered employment prospects and participation.
- Beginning school can bring particular challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as they strive to reconcile different home and school environments and cultures. Transition programs must recognise and appropriately respond to this.
- Effective transition programs can help to build a foundation of strong relationships between children, families, communities, early childhood services and schools.

### 3. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FAMILIES' EXPECTATIONS AND HOPES OF THE EARLY YEARS AND THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

There is limited information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' views on the school transition process and their hopes for their children's educational experiences. Turning first to the latter, Dockett, Mason and Perry highlight that a significant finding from their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in NSW is that,

...there is no one "Aboriginal view" about transition to school...What is common...is the desire for their children to have a positive start to school and to succeed at school.<sup>50</sup>

Carbines et al indicate that,

...as a general but not universal rule, Indigenous people value early childhood education for similar reasons non-Indigenous

people do, that is, as providing children with a good start to schooling.<sup>51</sup>

The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) presents some useful insights about the aspirations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have for their children. LSIC is a nationally representative study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Data from the 2012 LSIC demonstrates that the most common aspirations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary carers have for their children are that they,

...have a good education, have a good career or job, be good at sports, do well at school, have lots of friends, be successful, have a better life and have kids, have time to play, be happy, healthy, confident, strong, have respect for others, learn about culture and support the family.<sup>52</sup>

The main aspiration listed by primary carers was for their children to receive a good education, with over half of all parents or carers citing this as an aspiration.<sup>53</sup> They defined a good education as:

- access to an affordable, high quality and well resourced school;
- a supportive, non-racist school environment;
- one that relies upon a mainstream curriculum;
- high quality teachers;
- one where children are supported to develop a range of competencies (including academic, social and life skills);
- one where children finish school; and
- schooling that provides children with a good future – in particular, that it leads to employment.<sup>54</sup>

Drawing on this research, one study finds that whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers view education as a significant contributor to their child's success in mainstream culture, they also "have a sense that growing up strong requires a balance between this and cultural learning, understanding and identity."<sup>55</sup> Dockett, Mason and Perry affirm this. They highlight that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents strongly value mainstream education, viewing it as a critical way to overcome the disadvantage that many communities face. However, they also place

value on the skills and identities that their children have developed in their early years, and want schools and teachers to recognise and incorporate these as assets into transition to school programs.<sup>56</sup>

We know that in both remote and urban Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children demonstrate excellent visual-spatial and motor skills,<sup>57</sup> and that “Indigenous parenting styles tend to promote independence, curiosity, a willingness to explore and to learn by modeling.”<sup>58</sup> However little is known about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families want to see these competencies and developmental outcomes valued and nurtured within mainstream early childhood programs and schools.

There is also limited evidence on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers actually want in terms of the transition to school process itself. A significant body of research has been undertaken in NSW, but this appears to be the only state in which comprehensive studies have taken place.

Based on their study of Aboriginal families in NSW, Dockett, Mason and Perry identified a list of factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel helps to support a smooth transition to school:

- Aboriginal people and materials within the school;
- children are supported to express and maintain their culture;
- valuing and supporting family and community involvement;
- flexibility in family-school relationships;
- respect for Aboriginal families and their strengths;
- high expectations of Aboriginal children;
- flexibility within group structures to ensure that Aboriginal children don't feel isolated;
- access to health services; and
- focusing on children's strengths and knowledge, and enabling them to view school as a positive place to be.<sup>59</sup>

Small-scale studies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Western Australia and Queensland identified that:

- The current preparation for school in Queensland was not sufficient. Parents and

carers reported that “the model of transition to school provided by a single year of kindergarten education from 3.5 to 5 years was too simplistic and not adequate to optimise the learning, development and well-being of Queensland's children.”<sup>60</sup> There was however little discussion of what ‘simplistic’ meant in this context, or how the transition process could be improved.

- Parents require sufficient information and support in the year prior to school to help their children prepare for starting school. The research did not however provide evidence of what types of unique information or support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families require.<sup>61</sup>
- An important factor for Aboriginal families in a remote community in Western Australia was the effort that teachers put into the transition process, particularly in ensuring that all children were valued as part of the school community, and that early intervention was provided to address any problems children encountered.<sup>62</sup>
- The importance of viewing transition as an ongoing process, with no right or wrong approach for each child, was highlighted by families in Victoria. These families “believed transition can occur at different times for different children. One participant in the Indigenous focus group stated, “Some children may fit right in; others may take a year to settle.”<sup>63</sup>

Aside from NSW, existing studies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expectations and hopes for school transition have small and geographically limited sample sizes, and largely focus on examining what support families need during the transition period, rather than the aspirations and fears they may have about this process. The evidence from some states, such as the Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Tasmania, is especially limited.

This lack of research has serious implications for the design and implementation of transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are the primary influences and supports for children throughout the early years and transition period, and are critical stakeholders within the ecological framework of school readiness. Without their input



vital knowledge is lacking about the challenges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children face in transitioning to school, and how they can be best supported to begin school.

#### KEY FINDINGS

- According to the 2012 LSIC, a good education is the main aspiration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers for their children.
- Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value early childhood and primary school education for similar reasons as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they also want their children to develop a strong cultural identity, and to grow up strong by learning about and understanding their own culture.
- Further research is needed to better understand how particular competencies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may demonstrate can be better reflected in early childhood and transition to school programs.
- Evidence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' fears and aspirations for the transition process is sparse. Some studies have suggested that:
  - Parents/carers require more information in the year before their children commence school;
  - The effort teachers are seen to put into facilitating the transition process is vitally important;
  - The transition experience is unique for each child and family, and therefore requires a tailored approach; and
  - The school's incorporation of culture, building positive and respectful relationships, high expectations of children, and strengths-based approaches are key.

The following sections now focus on the dimensions of readiness, exploring the breadth of these dimensions and what they mean in practice.

#### 4. READY SCHOOLS

A focus on 'ready' schools addresses the limitations inherent in the traditional view that readiness rests upon the child. It recognises that a lack of readiness is,

...a mismatch between the attributes of individual children and families, and the ability and resources of the school to engage and respond appropriately.<sup>64</sup>

There are several features identified across the literature as significant in creating a 'ready' school:

- Positive school and family relationships
- welcoming and inclusive school environment
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and presence
- positive relationships between teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- cultural competence of all school staff and staff involved in the transition process
- high expectations of children
- valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning

##### 4.1 School & family relationships

The most critical relationship throughout the transition period and early schooling years is that between the school and a child's family.<sup>65</sup> Fundamental to this is that school staff understand that relationships need to be built with the broader family, not just a child's parents,<sup>66</sup> reflecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures.

Studies have shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family involvement, trust and confidence in a school and its teachers has a direct impact on the educational attainment of their children.<sup>67</sup> For example, the former Department of Education, Science and Training (now the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy found that when parents have confidence in the principal and teachers at their child's school, their children's educational prospects are enhanced, although the Inquiry did not examine why this is the case.<sup>68</sup>

The negative experiences with educational institutions suffered by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families presents, however, a significant barrier to such involvement and trust. Evidence from the 2004 Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey indicates that the generational legacy of such experiences reportedly affects the educational engagement and outcomes of Aboriginal children.<sup>69</sup>

Longitudinal research of children transitioning to school in a remote Queensland community confirms the findings of these studies. Although the study had a limited sample size, it indicated that when parents do not feel confident to attend the school or engage with teachers, the educational, home-based supports they are able to offer their child are limited.<sup>70</sup>

A study highlighting research in Canadian Indigenous communities unpacks a number of barriers that affect the relationship between Canadian Indigenous parents and schools. These include:

- families' negative associations with educational institutions;
- language/communication barriers;
- lack of understanding by schools of barriers/challenges faced by Aboriginal families;
- lack of cultural awareness;
- poverty and illness within families;
- lack of genuine engagement or consultation;
- families feeling intimidated by the school/teachers;
- contact between families/schools limited to when something has gone wrong' and
- 'segregation' of Aboriginal students in support/special classes.<sup>71</sup>

Discussing this research, Dockett et al indicate that whilst Canada obviously presents a different cultural and political context, these factors "resonate with issues identified in discussions of parent-school collaboration and communication within Australia."<sup>72</sup> The authors also indicate several approaches shown to be successful in overcoming these issues, including:

- Schools and teachers "engaging parents in the decision-making process –viewing parents as genuine partners in school activities and decision-making, particularly – but not only – in relation to Aboriginal curriculum.
- Communicating – using processes that built trust between schools and parents; used multiple channels of communication; and provided opportunities for parents to meet in a social setting."<sup>73</sup>

Throughout the literature three main points are raised that discuss how schools can facilitate positive family relationships. These are discussed below.

### ***Supporting family capacity and understanding***

Shepherd and Walker discuss the importance of transition to school programs that facilitate the development of family capacity to prepare children for school. They highlight the Parents and Learning (PaL) program in the Aboriginal community of Napranum, Queensland, which has actively applied this approach by providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents with practical support and engaging activities to overcome some of the mystery that surrounds schooling for parents and children.<sup>74</sup> The authors discuss how it is important that families are supported to understand "the processes and requirements of the education system so that they can be actively involved in preparing their children for school...While many parents know that school is important they are unsure how to translate that [into] practical [strategies] within the home environment."<sup>75</sup>

### ***Trusting relationships***

Dockett et al highlight that "Families who feel involved with, supported by and connected with the school are likely to support their children in ways that promote their engagement with school."<sup>76</sup> Trusting, respectful relationships between families and teachers are crucial to this. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in Queensland reported that crucial for them was feeling that teachers respected them, and that they were approachable – "provid[ing] an open door."<sup>77</sup>

Fleer confirms that trust is critical to the school/family relationship. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have a different understanding of what it means for a teacher or school to take a child into their care – especially in regards to a teacher’s ‘obligation’ and ‘commitment’ to the child/family.<sup>78</sup> The quote below by an Aboriginal family member consulted by Fleer illustrates.

*An important thing in Aboriginal families, in any family, is trust. If you send your child to some other place that isn't your usual place, or part of where your family usually goes – who is going to be taking care of them? Are they going to be responsible for them? Are they going to care for them in the same way as your family would? Can they do that? ...Often teachers are strangers to Aboriginal people; you don't know anything about them.... how can you entrust the most valued and important person to you to a stranger? That is who your teacher often is, unless they are someone from the local community.<sup>79</sup>*

### **Family partnerships and involvement**

To facilitate positive relationships with families, schools must first recognise the need to move beyond a model of ‘parent participation’ to that of ‘family partnerships’.<sup>80</sup> Schools must reflect on and redress power differentials - whether perceived or real - that may exist between school staff and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.<sup>81</sup> Fleer relates how one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent she interviewed stated that many parents “are afraid of going to the school, the teacher is still someone they don’t feel comfortable with, having personal relationships with.”<sup>82</sup> Adding to this, Dockett et al stress that;

Family and community members will avoid interactions where they expect to be blamed, shamed, judged negatively, or their expertise and knowledge ignored. They are much more likely to engage in interactions that acknowledge their strengths, respond to their challenges and respect their knowledge.<sup>83</sup>

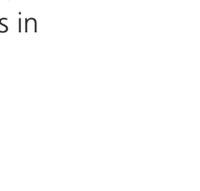
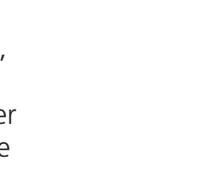
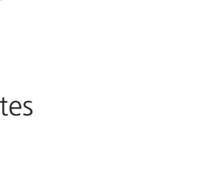
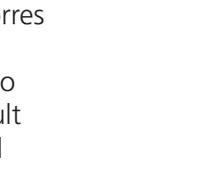
In a 2006 study with Aboriginal parents, Dockett et al outlined the difficulties Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families can experience with communicating with the school, quoting one Aboriginal parent who stated that “Teachers always talk down to you. I don’t think it matters who you are – they don’t listen to what you are saying about your child.”<sup>84</sup>

Fleer’s research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families indicates that an important step towards rebalancing power relations is therefore to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to firstly have a voice, and have this respected in the family-school relationship.<sup>85</sup> The families in her study described how attending and talking to the school teachers, and passing on their knowledge about their children, gave them a sense of power.<sup>86</sup> However Fleer describes how this power can be lost when families feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values are only acknowledged when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are physically present at the school.<sup>87</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family participation must not however become too bureaucratic or formalised “to the point of being ritualised” as this prioritises a universal approach to family involvement that can be unsupportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family involvement.<sup>88</sup>

Lastly, Fleer notes that a common scenario is that “families are physically [present at the school], but... cannot see [themselves reflected] within [the] environment.”<sup>89</sup> This constrains families’ involvement in the school.

### **4.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and presence**

As with any social service, the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is a significant determinant in the success or otherwise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s engagement with that service. Numerous studies have espoused the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff presence in enabling a positive transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children into schools,<sup>90</sup> and their value as positive adult role models within the school environment.<sup>91</sup>



As well as providing tangible reassurance that students 'belong' at the school, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are more likely to "understand the culture and language and ...can provide a link for Indigenous children between home, community and school (Sarra, 2005)."<sup>92</sup> Dockett et al note that when teachers and children share common background features such as language or culture, teachers are more likely to view children in a positive light.<sup>93</sup> The literature strongly confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, aides, general staff and members of committees/councils also facilitate "the trust and active engagement of parents (Frigo et al., 2004)" in both the school and in their child's education.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff help to provide a familiar face for children, as illustrated by an educator from a NSW preschool, "we've always tried to employ people from the community so that there is always someone here, a familiar face that the children will recognise, or somebody else that the children might know."<sup>95</sup>

However, the issue is more complex than merely the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. These staff must be appropriately supported, particularly as they are often themselves expected to straddle different worlds.

### 4.3 Relationships with teachers

The development of a strong relationship between teacher and student is integral in the transition process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>96</sup> Positive relationships with teachers help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to feel connected with school, which in turn means that "they are more likely to engage with the life of school, including the educational curriculum."<sup>97</sup> Dockett and Perry state that teachers act as,

...important social resources for children, impacting on their willingness to engage in learning experiences at school... In particular, strong emotional support from teachers is linked to enhanced engagement and academic performance...and school policies and programs that promote positive teacher-child interactions are reported to facilitate children's school readiness...<sup>98</sup>

The importance of trust and respect between teacher and child during and subsequent to the transition process was highlighted as a common theme in a study of NSW-based transition programs. The study authors describe that,

Having children who trust the teacher, who are keen to be with the teacher and who respect and respond positively to the teacher, provides a solid base for children starting school. This needs to be matched by teachers who have a similar trust and respect for the children, their knowledge and understandings and their ability to become successful school students. This requires a conscious effort on the part of the teacher to engage in interactions that build such trust and respect.<sup>99</sup>

One potential barrier to these relationships, however, is the different approach to adult-child relationships in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and teacher-child relationships in Western culture. Hudsmith describes the challenge this creates as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are generally raised to experience and expect equitable relationships with adults, which is often very much at odds with the mainstream construct of the teacher-child relationship.<sup>100</sup> Taylor asserts that this privileges non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within the classroom, as these children are more likely to be socialised into the childhood dependency and deference to adult roles privileged by the system."<sup>101</sup> Carbines et al add to this that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, a teacher's title or position was less important than being able to place that person within a structure of relationships.<sup>102</sup>

Evidence from a Western Australian study indicates that the nature of the child/teacher relationship is also highly important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers. The study found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families want teachers who are 'looking after' their child, as opposed to just teaching them. This suggests that for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the role of the teacher is different to the typical Western understanding of that role.<sup>103</sup> These highlight some of the differences that need to be acknowledged and understood by teachers in

their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

#### 4.4 Cultural competence

Almost all evidence regarding successful school transitions points to the underlying need for schools and teachers to be culturally competent. However, despite the abundance of references to cultural inclusivity or competence, there is little consensus within the literature on what this means in practical terms within transition processes.<sup>104</sup> Carbines et al propose that one reason for this is that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not have a homogenous culture; it can be location and even family specific [and therefore] [w]hat people mean by cultural inclusion can vary considerably.”<sup>105</sup> It could also indicate the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors writing on the topic and limited general understanding of cultural competence.

The lack of a clear definition within the literature reflects the confusion surrounding practical applications of cultural competence. This is likely to be caused by underlying limited understandings of cultural competence within many mainstream schools.<sup>106</sup>

For the purpose of clarity, this section sets out a definition of cultural competence within the early childhood sphere. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency’s (VACCA) definition is widely

recognised within the child and family support services sector as the most up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive. Contextualising international notions of continuity and cultural safety within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, the VACCA Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework proposes that cultural safety is a right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Key cultural competencies outlined in the Framework are detailed in Table A below.

The paper will use this framework to examine how each element of cultural competence is addressed within the literature. Cultural awareness and respect will be grouped together as the literature tends to consider them as overlapping concepts.

#### Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respectful partnerships

The literature speaks of the need to engage families and communities within transition programs, but is largely silent on how to enable family and community agency within this process, beyond parent attendance at the school.

As mentioned in Section 4.1, there is some discussion of the need for schools to move beyond *participation* to *partnerships* with parents and families,<sup>107</sup> without overtly defining what this may mean.<sup>108</sup>

Table A: VACCA Cultural Competence Framework

Competency	Key features
Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respectful partnerships	Enhancing the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and services Demonstrating a commitment to partnerships
Cultural awareness	Understanding cultural difference and diversity, and that approaches must be targeted to take these into account
Cultural respect	Valuing and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures
Cultural responsiveness	Having the ability and skills to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
Cultural safety	Creating a service environment that is safe and welcoming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
Cross-cultural practice and care	Being able to use the lens of culture to promote the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

VACCA (2008). *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria

Discussions on partnerships between schools and early childhood services largely focus on information-sharing and staff exchange, rather than building long-term, deeper partnerships that affirm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service agency.

### **Cultural awareness (knowledge and understanding) and Cultural respect (attitudes and values)**

In order to be “ready” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children schools need to understand how the values and beliefs embedded within the school culture and environment can be adapted to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity, mirroring “Indigenous family values and community beliefs and practices.”<sup>109</sup> This is discussed in more detail below.

*Understanding cultural diversity, identity and ways of learning and applying this within the curriculum and approaches to teaching*

Teachers’ understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community knowledge and cultures, the way they value cultural diversity and identity, and their ability to bring these into the curriculum is highly influential in facilitating successful transitions to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>110</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring a wealth of different experiences, beliefs and knowledge to school. Flier highlights this, quoting an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent in the box above right.

Ready schools, therefore need to respond to this by employing culturally appropriate approaches to teaching, learning and school structures.<sup>112</sup> Effective transition programs can be key in encouraging and preparing teachers to provide programs that are targeted at each child’s individual development, and their cultural or linguistic background.<sup>113</sup>

How teachers respond to differences in learning styles is also crucial. Whilst acknowledging that

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are diverse and do not have one distinct ‘learning style’, teachers do need to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may learn differently from non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and adopt their teaching approach accordingly.<sup>114</sup> This involves engaging with each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child as a unique student and connecting teaching methods with their particular learning style.<sup>115</sup> A critical aspect of this is recognising, valuing and building off a child’s knowledge, experiences and abilities.<sup>116</sup>

How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people view the world, their knowledge and ways of learning can often be highly contrasted to those

catered for within the mainstream educational system.<sup>117</sup> A failure by teachers and school systems to appreciate and value this has been identified as one of the causes of apparent “failure to learn” by Indigenous children.”<sup>118</sup>

Valuing and integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s home language is a significant aspect of valuing Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander knowledge, and supporting improved school performance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>119</sup> The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health survey identified that for some Aboriginal children English is their second or third language, and this presents particular challenges upon entering school.<sup>120</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including Aboriginal English, reflect the culture and identity of those who speak them, and teachers therefore need to create a bridge for students between their home languages and Standard Australian English.<sup>121</sup> Taylor highlights that this will entail enabling the “necessary supports that work to lessen the linguistic...constraints considered to create anxiety and difficulties for many young children entering the system.”<sup>122</sup>

Deficit-focused approaches neglect to value and build off the knowledge, skills and linguistic abilities

*When [our]...children go to school they take their family with them. They take their skills, their knowledge, their beliefs... You don't just leave all of that at the door. You take it in with you, so you can't change and be something else as you enter the classroom.<sup>111</sup>*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may have developed through their home, community, early childhood service, or 'bush' learning experiences.<sup>123</sup> Taylor highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are particularly concerned that their child's strengths won't be valued within school.<sup>124</sup> Ready schools therefore employ a strengths-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's learning, which is generally described within the literature as encompassing a number of distinct elements:

- recognising and valuing protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including family support and shared activities, and strong cultural and self-identities;<sup>125</sup>
- cultural competence training for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers;<sup>126</sup>
- incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into the school curriculum,<sup>127</sup> and building teaching resources and activities from children's strengths;
- recognising and valuing existing skills in the community to support children;
- establishing the school as welcoming and culturally safe for family members and community;<sup>128</sup>
- developing appropriate strengths based assessments;
- holding high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and viewing their strengths as dynamic and developing qualities;<sup>129</sup>
- fostering and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in schools and communities; and
- employing innovative and dynamic school/ staffing models.<sup>130</sup>

A 2001 Government taskforce found that in order to facilitate a strengths-based approach, educators must have "a better understanding of how to build on and encourage Indigenous children to move fluently amongst and between cultures in a way which allows them to reposition their cultures, languages, histories, beliefs and lifestyles and affirm identity".<sup>131</sup>

Dockett, Mason and Perry describe the concept of the 'fire stick period', where transition is not viewed

simply as a "one-way journey towards something better",<sup>132</sup> but instead a journey back and forth between two different worlds. In this sense teachers and families all have roles to play in reinforcing to children that it is safe to move between cultures, and that the transition to formal education doesn't require them to leave their culture behind.<sup>133</sup>

This is affirmed by Colquhoun and Dockery's research that explores primary carer responses in the 2012 LSIC data. Their research indicates that "central to the healthy and successful development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is learning about their culture and understanding that this culture and its connections can sit within a mainstream, western cultural context."<sup>134</sup>

#### *Understanding and perception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and home life*

A further aspect of cultural awareness is seen within the way schools view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and families. Flear identified in consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in 2004 that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be seen as "a composite of an extended family, community and set of cultural beliefs", and that teachers need to acknowledge that these may be different to those of the school.<sup>135</sup> In the same article she proposed that a shift in understanding needs to take place that recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not come to school as individual units, but should instead be seen,

...as part of a complex family and community system...The teacher is not only expected to think of the child as 'the family', but to recognise and maintain the obligation associated with the concept of family. In having an Indigenous child in an early childhood centre [or school], staff are accepting the family unit (not an individual child) and the cultural obligations associated with this responsibility.

To be culturally competent, schools therefore need to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are individuals who develop within a web of interconnected relationships and responsibilities, and that they bring these with them into the school environment.



Further evidence demonstrates the importance of increasing teacher understanding of a child's home and cultural life through "outreach and the building of positive home-school relationships."<sup>136</sup> This will assist teachers in better understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early socialisation, and their "culturally specific entry-level capacities and dispositions."<sup>137</sup>

### **Cultural responsiveness (ability and skills)**

Multiple authors note that a first step in working towards a culturally competent transition process is cultural competence training and/or mentoring for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.<sup>138</sup> ACER notes that such training particularly needs to focus on the strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring with them to school.<sup>139</sup>

Aside from cultural competence training, the literature does not discuss the ability and skills that staff need, nor does it go into detail as to what cultural competence training should entail. The section prior however does detail a number of important areas that could be considered.

### **Cultural safety (environment and experience)**

How a school looks and feels – whether it supports children and families to feel culturally safe - is a key feature in assisting the transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Taylor indicates that Indigenous students rarely see images of themselves in school resources and, coupled with a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, this can result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feeling that there is little point in engaging with the school environment.<sup>140</sup> In their 2008 report Dockett et al identified that many Aboriginal families felt that schools viewed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as homogenous, and that their resources and

curriculum often portrayed outdated or stereotyped forms of local culture, or were missing these altogether.<sup>141</sup>

Extensive sources point to the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feeling welcomed, included and that they belong – through visible and non-stereotypical displays of their culture within the school environment.<sup>142</sup> This has also emerged as a theme in consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, who have stressed that when schools visibly display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, such as flags and artwork, families are more likely to engage with the school.<sup>143</sup>

### **Cross-cultural practice and care (applying the lens of culture effectively)**

This criterion refers to the ability of schools to evaluate how they apply cultural understandings and respect, or the 'lens of culture' within the school curriculum, processes, policies, and environment. Whilst the literature does contain comprehensive discussions on how schools can be culturally competent or inclusive, it does not reflect on how schools do or could evaluate their transition programs through a cultural 'lens'.

Taking these elements as reference points, the following table provides a summary of the key ways cultural competence within schools and transition programs is addressed within the available literature.

Whilst there is little consensus in the literature on the meaning of cultural competence, there are major commonalities in the approach. There are also significant gaps however, which the VACCA cultural competence framework helps to identify. Such a framework could be a useful tool for application in developing transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.



Competency area	Meaning of competency area	Key issues identified as important in the literature
Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respectful partnerships	Enhancing the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and services Demonstrating a commitment to partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and services</li> <li>• Recognition of importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency within the transition process</li> </ul>
Cultural awareness	Understanding cultural difference and diversity, and that approaches must be targeted to take these into account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are diverse</li> <li>• Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture</li> <li>• Understanding children's home and community life, and how this may differ from the school environment</li> <li>• Understanding the role of children's home language and ensuring assessment systems don't discriminate against this</li> <li>• Incorporating these understandings into program content and teaching methods</li> </ul>
Cultural respect	Valuing and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respecting and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, languages and experiences</li> <li>• Respecting and valuing the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities</li> <li>• Demonstrating this within the curriculum and school programs, policies and processes</li> <li>• Supporting children to move between cultures</li> </ul>
Cultural responsiveness	Having the ability and skills to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally competent training and mentoring for all school staff</li> </ul>
Cultural safety	Creating a service environment that is safe and welcoming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A school environment that visibly represents and reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture</li> <li>• Presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff</li> </ul>
Cross-cultural practice and care	Being able to use the lens of culture to promote the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporation of culture within school systems, policies, processes and practices</li> </ul>



## 4.5 High expectations

Much of the literature identifies the importance of teachers and school staff having high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, both to facilitate and sustain a positive transition.<sup>144</sup> Having high expectations of students is a key aspect of a strengths-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's education.<sup>145</sup>

Starting school is an important time in which "children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school."<sup>146</sup>

The development of such identities is directly influenced by the expectations teachers place upon children. McTurk et al highlight findings from a large Victorian study examining the factors that underpin learning difficulties in early primary school. They summarise that "Indigenous children develop a more positive concept of themselves as students when teachers focus on encouraging their academic achievement early on in their schooling."<sup>147</sup>

In conclusion, the literature reviewed for this project has comprehensively investigated what constitutes 'ready' schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. More research exploring how positive relationships between teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can be formed and maintained – such as the research conducted through the national *Dare to Lead* project - would also be beneficial, whilst acknowledging that there will be no specific recipe for this beyond building trust and familiarity between teachers and students. An exploration of the challenges that might arise due to the different cultural approaches to adult-child interactions would be particularly useful.

The crucial role of cultural competence within the transition process is likewise an area that needs significantly more attention, firstly to address the definitional issue, and secondly to examine how cultural competence can be embedded within all facets of transition processes.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The development and maintenance of strong family-school relationships is key during the transition process. Building these relationships requires schools to take an active leadership role in order to tackle barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may face in engaging with schools, including overcoming power inequalities between families and school staff.
- Schools need to present genuine and non-stereotypical visual representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the school environment and provide resources to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to feel that they belong at the school, and can provide a link between school and children's home/community environment.
- Strong and caring relationships between teachers and children enhance children's academic achievement and school engagement.
- The cultural competence of a school, and a school's transition program, plays a fundamental role in its ability to positively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. While there is significant discussion within the literature concerning how schools can better understand, respect and reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, there are still gaps in how schools can partner with families and communities in ways which enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency.
- High yet realistic staff expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enables children to develop positive images of themselves as competent learners, and is a critical aspect of a strengths-based approach.



## 5. READY COMMUNITIES

It is well established that what happens within the communities where children grow up is critically important for their school readiness and educational outcomes.<sup>148</sup> The ready schools equation discussed earlier in the paper discusses the role of the community as being to provide a range of services, such as health or family support services, to facilitate children's school readiness. A comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a 'ready community' is still however needed,<sup>149</sup> and, in particular, what constitutes a 'ready' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.<sup>150</sup>

Dockett, Perry and Kearney draw on findings from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) to highlight the positive correlation between "neighbourhood culture, stability and heterogeneity" and children's school readiness.<sup>151</sup> Aside from this, however, Australian evidence seems to be rare, with many authors relying on evidence coming out of the United States. The most cited work is that of Kagan and Rigby,<sup>152</sup> which indicates that ready communities provide a safe, supportive and nurturing environment,<sup>153</sup> and have accessible community-based health services so that children can be physically prepared for school.<sup>154</sup>

Dockett, Perry and Kearney highlight research coming out of the US on the 'readiness equation', which considers that,

School readiness is an outcome of the resources (including knowledge and skills), attitudes (including priorities) and relationships of a community. School readiness, conceptualised as the community's readiness for the child, will vary from one community to another, and over time within the same community. Assessing a community's level of preparedness for children is therefore required.<sup>155</sup>

There is little further consideration of what this might mean, with discussion focused on community safety/stability and the provision of supports. A number of authors conclude that many Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander children do not experience safe or stable communities,<sup>156</sup> causing them to experience stress which then impacts negatively upon their school readiness.<sup>157</sup>

Within the literature, community support is interpreted as the services available within a community. Dockett et al refer to the need for health support in preparing children for school, particularly speech therapists, and support for children suffering from otitis media.<sup>158</sup> ARACY's literature review briefly mentions parenting classes and/or home visits, but does not discuss these in any detail, dwelling more on the role of early childhood services and preschools.

Early childhood education and care programs are also considered a key community support in preparing children for school. Whilst these are discussed in more detail below under Section 7: Ready Services, it is worth drawing out here how discussions of ready communities have touched upon the role of ECEC services. McTurk et al indicated that community leadership within early childhood services has been identified as "potentially important for the capacity of communities to improve children's school readiness."<sup>159</sup> There is however again little discussion of what this entails in practice. Findings from the Northern Territory Integrated Early Childhood Project demonstrate that community ownership of early childhood programs is an essential element in the success or otherwise of enabling children's school readiness.<sup>160</sup>

Dockett, Perry and Kearney discuss how readiness can't be viewed as merely a 'systems issue', and that the nature of a community's engagement with early childhood services makes a key difference in supporting children to be school ready. They suggest that the critical factor is engagement, highlighting that children's participation in early childhood services – a significant element of readiness for school – is enhanced when communities are actively engaged in training and the provision of early childhood services.<sup>161</sup>

In summary, although considered to be one of the main tenets of school readiness, it is clear that what constitutes a school-ready Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community keenly requires further exploration. There is a need 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.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Whilst we know that communities have an important role to play in transition processes, there is little understanding of what this entails.
- 'Ready communities' are safe, supportive and nurturing. What this means in an Australian context is not clear.
- One identified element of support is that communities are actively involved in and leading the provision of early childhood services.

## 6. READY FAMILIES

'Ready families' are vital in preparing children for school and supporting them through school transition. Research from the Federal *What Works* program suggests that "Families who actively support their children during transition to school, and build positive relationships with staff, are likely to continue their positive engagement with school."<sup>162</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family involvement, trust and confidence in the school and its teachers has a direct impact on the educational attainment of their children. This in turn supports children's longer-term positive engagement with school.

Most of the literature reviewed for this project recognises the negative associations many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have with mainstream education and the need to overcome this, as well as the effect these associations can have on families' capacity to support their children through transition. Significant gaps do however remain in our understanding

of the role of the extended family in children's school readiness,<sup>163</sup> and more generally about the supports needed to enable ready Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families possess significant strengths in supporting their children to transition to school.<sup>164</sup> For example, McTurk et al, drawing on evidence from the LSIC, indicates that children in the Torres Strait region have "a number of people watching over their growth and development who help to teach them life skills, and endeavour to keep them on track."<sup>165</sup>

For a multitude of reasons, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families also, however, face significant barriers in supporting their children's school readiness. Research indicates the importance of families promoting a positive view of school to their children,<sup>166</sup> but a parent's capacity or willingness to do this can be affected by their own personal experiences of school.

Carrington and Walker suggest that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families struggle to engage with their children's educational progress due to "their own poor experiences at school – experiences marred by racism and a lack of respect for Indigenous people and culture. As a result, many Indigenous families do not have the capacity to support their children's learning nor sufficient trust in, or understanding of, educational systems."<sup>167</sup>

Canadian research indicates that additional barriers faced by Indigenous families in engaging with schools can include:

- language or communication barriers;
- lack of understanding by schools of the barriers and challenges faced by Aboriginal families, and lack of cultural awareness, genuine engagement or consultation with families;
- personal disadvantage within families;
- families feeling intimidated by the school and/or teachers;
- contact between families and schools limited to when something has gone wrong; and;
- the segregation of Aboriginal students into support or special classes.

As would be expected, these barriers can result in families struggling to see the value of institutional education, and limited engagement with their child's school and their child's educational progress. Shepherd and Walker add that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may also have different world views that make it hard for them to share a sense of the importance of schooling for their child and community's futures.<sup>168</sup>

Whilst we have some understanding of these barriers and their impact, we are less informed about strategies and approaches to overcome them. The literature reviewed for this project largely focused on supporting families to interact with their children in ways that promote school readiness, and less so on the provision of appropriate support mechanisms and programs to assist this.

Although the evidence is limited, some issues highlighted in the literature that are considered key in overcoming these barriers and assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to support their child's transition include:

- ensuring that families are able to enjoy positive, respectful relationships with early childhood services and schools (discussed extensively under Section 4.1);
- incorporating a focus on parent/carer-child relationships in early childhood programs;<sup>169</sup>
- ensuring that educational institutions are ready for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children – including being culturally competent (see Section 4.4); and
- supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' active and meaningful engagement within these institutions and their role in the in the planning, decision-making and delivery of early childhood programs.<sup>170</sup>

It is also important to note that despite the negative experiences they may have suffered during school, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents strongly believe in the importance of schooling and education for their own children,<sup>171</sup> and display resolve and strengths in engaging with schools.<sup>172</sup>

In summary there remains a need for further detailed research on what constitutes ready Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families,

and the strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families possess that support their children to be school ready. Whilst the Canadian research highlighted above provides an evidence base from which we can draw conclusions about the barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may also face, specific research is needed within an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context on both the barriers families face, and strategies for overcoming these.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families play a vital role in preparing their children for school, and in conveying positive messages about school and education to their children.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families possess significant strengths in preparing their children for school and the transition. Further research is required in this area.
- They also face a number of barriers in engaging with their children's schools and educational experience, including:
  - negative views of school because of their own negative school experiences
  - lack of cultural awareness and understanding within schools
  - communication barriers
  - contact with their child's school being generally limited to negative experiences.
- Little is known about approaches to overcome these barriers. However, some existing strategies include:
  - developing positive school-family relationships;
  - carer/parent-child relationships in early childhood programs;
  - developing schools cultural competence; and
  - supporting the active and genuine participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in schools



## 7. READY SERVICES

Less has been written about the requirements of 'ready' services,<sup>173</sup> than about 'ready' schools. Whilst the literature on the mainstream ready schools equation suggests that a range of services are needed to help support children to make a positive start to school (for example health or family support), these are generally described as being within the dimension of 'ready communities'. The role of ready services is instead largely focused on providing school readiness or transition programs.<sup>174</sup> The provision of more general service has therefore been discussed above under Section 5: Ready Communities.

Accordingly, this section will focus on what has been said about the role of ready early childhood services. The literature frequently refers to the role of early childhood services in preparing children for school through their curriculum and daily activities. Also stressed throughout the literature is the significant role these services play in building relationships with schools.<sup>175</sup> Such relationships are particularly important to ensure a mutual understanding of each other's roles and context, and to enable the communication of information about particular children from the early childhood service to the school.<sup>176</sup>

The literature suggests that early childhood services play an important role in preparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for the school environment and academic demands - particularly when they increase the educational content of their programs and support children's language and cognitive development.<sup>177</sup>

The national Early Years Learning Framework provides direction for early childhood centres on their role in transitions, highlighting as a key practice the importance of 'continuity of learning and transitions'.<sup>178</sup> It explains that educators support children to understand "the traditions, routines and practices of the settings to which they are moving" and to help children to "negotiate changes in their status or identities" as they transition.<sup>179</sup> The Framework further sets out that early childhood educators and schools must,

...commit to sharing information about each child's knowledge and skills so learning can build on foundations of earlier learning. Educators work collaboratively with each child's new educator and other professionals to ensure a successful transition.<sup>180</sup>

The incongruence between play-based learning in early childhood services and the academically oriented school environment has been identified as a source of tension in the transition to school journey - particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>181</sup> Whilst there is not an extensive discussion within the literature of why this is the case, it appears to be in part because play-based learning accords with the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children generally learn, including through learning situations that are informal, participatory and not conducted within an adult-child hierarchy.<sup>182</sup>

Other factors relating to the role of services in the transition process include: the alignment between early childhood centre's programs and school curriculums, which helps to ensure continuity of learning,<sup>183</sup> and the capacity and strategies used by early childhood centres to support children to understand 'school culture'.<sup>184</sup>

A number of sources point to the significance of the quality of relationships between early childhood educators and teachers in effective and positive transitions.<sup>185</sup> 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>186</sup>

Early childhood educators and teachers often hold differing views of what constitutes school readiness, necessitating the need for "a common agreement about what the outcomes from preschool experiences will be, including all stakeholders, in local settings." This can only come



about through effective communication between all stakeholders.<sup>187</sup> Several practical ways that these relationships can be fostered and maintained include:

- recognition of and respect for each other as professionals;<sup>188</sup>
- information-sharing and regular meetings between early childhood educators and school teachers, and visits to each other's classes to help both groups understand each other's beliefs and programs; and<sup>189</sup>
- planning, implementing and evaluating collaborative projects, including transition to school processes.<sup>190</sup>

Evidence from NSW indicates that an additional benefit of these relationships is that they support families to trust teachers. Reporting on findings from their NSW study Dockett et al explain that,

When educators in prior-to-school [institutions] and schools were seen to work well together, families were likely to transfer some of the trust they had built up with the prior-to- school educator to school educators, on the basis that someone they already trusted (the prior-to-school educator) also trusted the other (school educator).<sup>191</sup>

In summary, although there is some discussion of the process elements of early childhood services collaboration with schools, there is little deeper exploration of the different roles such services play in the transition process. Further research is needed to better understand how they can provide support to children and families prior to and during the transition process, as well as their function in forming a crucial bridge between the child, family and school.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Ready services play an active role in preparing children for school in terms of academic skills, and also in terms of readiness for the school environment, rules and routines.

- Ready services also form relationships with schools to enable communication on transition initiatives happening within the service and school, individual children's experiences and strengths, and for planning joint transition programs.
- These relationships between services and schools help families to develop trust in the school.
- More in-depth research is needed to explore the distinct role of services, particularly in their provision of support to children and families throughout the transition process.

## 8. READY CHILDREN

Formerly considered to be the main focus of transition to school, children's readiness for school is now acknowledged to be only one (albeit important) dimension of the transition process. Children's readiness is a key facilitator of a smooth transition to school, and is therefore a critical factor to explore.

The concept was frequently misunderstood as encompassing a child's ability to learn, but is now understood as a child's ability to transition to school based learning, comply with school requirements, engage with curriculum, and demonstrate additional skills such as social capacities and learning the rules and procedures of the school context.<sup>192</sup>

There is growing support for the view that children should not be required to demonstrate 'readiness' prior to starting school, but instead that their readiness,

...develops within environments where adults and peers support children's learning and development through participation in meaningful and relevant experiences.<sup>193</sup>

The literature reviewed for this project focuses on a number of factors relating to children's readiness, including:

- physical and social/emotional development;

- emotional wellbeing and the existence of trauma;
- health; and
- cognitive and intellectual development.<sup>194</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children generally perform lower on standardised cognitive and language measures, with this gap largely being attributed to factors such as poverty, lower participation in early childhood services, different home/school environments, and the prevalence of risk factors with the home and community.<sup>195</sup> A further significant factor in this gap is the inappropriateness of the testing measures themselves – including only testing all children in English, which may not be their first language. This latter aspect will be discussed in more detail below, as will the issues of the protective factors Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may experience that can support them to make positive transitions to school, and the impact of their attendance at an early childhood centre.

### 8.1 Current assessment measures

A discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s readiness for school is incomplete without reference to current assessment measures used to determine readiness within schools. Whilst children’s readiness is only one aspect of the transition process, how children are assessed as being ready for school carries important consequences for their initial experiences of school. Assessment results help teachers understand what children know and can do, providing an evidence base to inform curriculum design and specific educational programs that build on a child’s experience and knowledge.<sup>196</sup> The accuracy of these evaluations is therefore critical to how teacher’s view children, and how they design curriculum that responds to children’s knowledge, experience and skills.

There is much discussion within the literature about the capacity of current assessment measures to adequately capture and evaluate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s knowledge and skills. Common criticisms assert that assessment tools are not designed to take into account complex factors such as poverty, welfare involvement, parent education, ethnic background, health, and home and community environments.<sup>197</sup>

Docket, Perry and Kearney highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children generally don’t score as well on standardised evaluations as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>198</sup> This is due to a range of factors that are not necessarily related to a child’s inherent ability.

Taylor, for example, asserts that the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) (a population measure used to report on community-wide early childhood development) is an inappropriate measure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s development because it does not take into account cultural factors, possesses an innate contextual bias, and relies on the child being proficient in Standard Australian English (SAE). In particular, Taylor criticises the AEDI for disregarding the bilingual skills that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children possess which, instead of being valued, count “for nothing if they still do not display, on teacher request, the delineated SAE competency indicators selected as the ‘readiness’ benchmark.”<sup>199</sup>

The AEDI is drawn from primary school teachers’ reports on children’s development across five domains, including literacy, language and communication. This underlies the importance of teachers having good relationships with children so as to make the best-informed judgments about their knowledge and skills. Carbines et al discuss how when viewed through the ecological lens, the importance of relationships in evaluation measures becomes all-important. Summarising this view, they highlight that,

...because relationships are reciprocal, and take time to develop, readiness cannot be assessed by considering the child alone, or by a one-off test before a relationship is established. Rather, interactions need to be assessed over time, through strategies that involve children, parents and teachers making judgements about learning.<sup>200</sup>

A further limitation of the AEDI is that it is only conducted in English. Several authors note that non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers often consider student’s Aboriginal English as “bad or poor English”,<sup>201</sup> which would no doubt contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ low scores on these domain evaluations

and accordingly their assessed readiness for school.<sup>202</sup> This has led many authors, such as McTurk et al, to highlight the need for assessment methods that are not culturally biased and that value bilingualism.<sup>203</sup>

Culture is also neglected within assessment measures, even though it is a significant factor in children's development. Taylor indicates that current assessment measures do not reflect,

...the diversity of lived experience of the taken-for-granted everyday reality of Indigenous children. Such an understanding that sees beyond poverty, deficit and divergence from a so-called norm cannot be generated by mass standardised surveying and assessment.<sup>204</sup>

Such an approach lacks a strengths basis, where evaluations build on and recognise the existing skills of children. Dockett, Perry and Kearney assert that,

Assessment of Indigenous children through tests based in non-Indigenous culture can reinforce 'gaps' in knowledge and skills, rather than building positive images of Indigenous children as learners.<sup>205</sup>

Similarly, Taylor indicates that the skills which young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children demonstrate, such as independence, autonomy, sibling/peer solidarity, visual-spatial and motor skills, capacity to self-judge and assess risks are rarely measured or recognised as strengths in early childhood or school assessments.<sup>206</sup>

Therefore the literature proposes that what is needed is a specific assessment tool to measure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's school readiness, developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers,<sup>207</sup> and that takes into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's bilingual skills.<sup>208</sup>

Dockett, Mason and Perry highlight that a strengths-based assessment tool would recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's strengths and capacities, in particular in terms of life skills and maturity.<sup>209</sup> This would enable children to,

...experience success, show what they can do, learn from what they cannot yet do,

grow in confidence and look forward to the next challenge that is presented.<sup>210</sup>

Such assessments of readiness could then be "the start of an appropriate learning and teaching program, rather than a prediction about how performance levels are linked to future school success."<sup>211</sup> Dockett, Perry and Kearney assert that this proposition,

...supports a view of readiness as a relative construct, where teachers in different schools will have different definitions of what is required to engage effectively in their classroom environments. Parents and caregivers are likely to have different views of readiness from educators...It also supports children's knowledge and skills being considered relative to the opportunities they have experienced...<sup>212</sup>

Some limited research has been conducted on assessment tools that evaluate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children independently. One of these is the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 'Longitudinal English Literacy and Numeracy Survey' (LLANS), which according to McTurk et al could potentially be an example of a culturally appropriate assessment tool.<sup>213</sup> McTurk et al claim that the LLANS assessment tasks are considered to be "consistent with good assessment practice for Indigenous students",<sup>214</sup> although the authors do not elaborate on what this means. A positive finding, however, is that children whose first language is not English have been amongst the tests 'high achievers'.<sup>215</sup>

One further study, the '100 Children go to School' program, measured literacy development using materials familiar to children – such as objects that could be found around their homes.<sup>216</sup> The study only contained a small cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with the designers suggesting that future research focus on,

'...how children live in homes and communities. We don't know enough about the complexity of networks which support families with minimal economic resources, their sophisticated multilingual and multi-modal language use and production'.<sup>217</sup>



## 8.2 Protective factors

The literature discusses particular protective factors that can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make positive transitions to school. One such factor providing particular support for children through transition is a strong sense of their own identity and culture.<sup>218</sup>

Analysing the 2012 LSIC, the Australian Council for Education Research indicates that “shared activities, family support, strong cultural identity... and positive self identity” are significant protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>219</sup> The authors highlight that a strengths-based transition process therefore entails “recognising and building on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have learned and can do when they begin formal learning.”<sup>220</sup>

Dockett et al confirm ACER’s conclusions, highlighting findings from their own consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families which stressed the importance for a smooth transition that children are strong in and proud of their identity.<sup>221</sup> Drawing on findings from the 2012 LSIC, Colquhoun and Dockery suggest that,

...knowing and understanding culture and understanding the importance of cultural and community connections will make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children strong and able to survive in the mainstream culture through education.<sup>222</sup>

## 8.3 Attendance at an early childhood education and care centre

Attendance at a high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) centre makes a large difference in children’s transition and engagement with school.<sup>223</sup>

The MCEETYA Taskforce identified that teachers feel that children who have attended ECEC services are more likely to be developmentally ready for school, and able to more rapidly adjust to school practices, including

...predicting teachers’ questions, anticipating right answers or offering helpful reminders which mark them as ‘good’ students from the beginning of school.<sup>224</sup>

Conversely, children who have not attended an ECEC service are less likely to be familiar with the daily routines of a school setting, and more likely to be “disoriented by this strange new context for learning and being”.<sup>225</sup> The same report identified that unfamiliarity with school routines and environments is often an issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>226</sup>

In conclusion, whilst current interpretations of ‘ready’ children have evolved to understand the relational nature of children’s readiness for school, this understanding is often not reflected in practice, nor in current assessment measures.

Unless assessment measures that take into account and value the strengths and knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to school are designed and implemented, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will continue to suffer from a deficit-driven model that defines their school readiness according to gaps in their knowledge and skills. This works against “positive images of Indigenous children as learners.”<sup>227</sup> The evaluation methods used in these assessment measures need to be culturally relevant and take a dual language approach.<sup>228</sup> Importantly, they need to draw upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers in their design and implementation.<sup>229</sup>

Dockett, Perry and Kearney highlight that children’s ‘lack of readiness’ does not indicate insufficient skills, but instead reflects “a mismatch between the attributes of individual children and families, and the abilities and resources of the school and/or system to engage and respond appropriately.”<sup>230</sup>

### KEY FINDINGS

- Contemporary understandings of children’s readiness have moved away from a child’s ability to learn, to a focus more holistically on a child’s readiness for school based learning and the school environment, and their physical, socio-emotional, health and cognitive development.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children generally underperform on standardised school readiness assessments, largely due to factors such as disadvantage and the inappropriateness of assessment tools.



- Current assessment measures focus too narrowly on literacy and numeracy, and are inappropriate to measure the experiences, skills, strengths and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to school.
- Some alternative tools have been developed, but they have not been widely used or evaluated.
- Particular protective factors known to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through the transition are family support and strong cultural identity. Strengths-based approaches need to build on these protective factors to enhance transition experiences and outcomes.
- Attendance at an early childhood education and care centre has a positive impact upon children's readiness for school.
- Further research is needed to expand understandings and practice around culturally appropriate, strengths-based assessment measures and processes to support the readiness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## 9. FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION PROGRAMS FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

The next section will consider how the elements of readiness outlined above are drawn together to create successful transition programs. Few sources consider the practical elements of transition programs or processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and even fewer provide evidence of successful programs implemented in Australia. It is clear however that successful transition programs do not arise unsupported, but are the result of collaboration between stakeholders and comprehensive planning, design, evaluation and modification.<sup>231</sup> They also involve stakeholders collaborating to define clear and tangible objectives against which the program can then be assessed and held accountable.<sup>232</sup> It is important therefore to look at how the elements of readiness translate into more concrete programs.

It is also important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not belong to a distinct, homogenous group, and therefore experience differing connections to their traditional cultures, languages and beliefs.<sup>233</sup> Given this, transition to school programs must be localised and context specific. Nevertheless, our review of the literature suggests that certain important features of transition to school programs or processes arise across many different contexts. It is therefore proposed that these elements, with appropriate adaptation for the local context, can be considered important aspects of an effective transition to school program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Existing evidence on the key characteristics of transition programs comes largely from two reports. The first is a large study by Dockett et al with services and families across NSW.<sup>234</sup> This report identified five key elements of successful transition to school programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

- high quality programs and experiences;
- active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation;
- specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders;
- recognition of strengths that exist within the community; and
- recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways.<sup>235</sup>

The second is a national study exploring the qualities and characteristics of successful school readiness programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with a focus on the replicability of such initiatives in other settings.<sup>236</sup> The study, by Carbines et al, sets out 10 key dimensions of early childhood education that can potentially promote an effective transition process. These are:

- staffing
- cultural inclusiveness
- preschool organisation
- teaching and learning (pedagogy)
- curriculum





Features	Summary
High quality transition to school programs and experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs concentrate on academic and school organisational skills, and preparation for the school environment, but also address the social, emotional and educational (including ensuring continuity of learning) dimensions of the transition process.</li> <li>• Allow sufficient time for the transition process.</li> <li>• Provide support to families to assist their child as they engage with school.</li> <li>• Multidimensional approach that considers different aspects of transition – critically including the five sections addressed below.</li> </ul>
Relationship building across and between different stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on building and maintaining relationships between: families and school; children and school; communities and school; educators in different settings; children; educators and families; other stakeholders as appropriate.</li> <li>• Understand that in forming relationships with children and families ECEC services and schools will need to be aware of local cultural sensitivities, protocols to be observed, and community dynamics.</li> <li>• Recognition that the transition to school is also a time of family transition – and provide appropriate support to families to enable them to smoothly transition.</li> <li>• Recognition of the complex barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may face in engaging with school and school staff and incorporate active strategies to overcome these.</li> <li>• Celebrating the positive stories and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and education.</li> <li>• Focus on forming relationships of mutual trust, care and respect between educators/teachers and children.</li> <li>• Appreciation of the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prior-to-school and school staff in forming relationships with children, families and communities.</li> <li>• Ongoing and appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prior-to-school and school staff, recognizing the roles they play in connecting educational and community contexts.</li> </ul>
Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to genuine and meaningful participation of children, parents/carers, families, schools and services across all program/process stages. This involves a move beyond ‘family participation’ to ‘family partnerships’ – not mere physical attendance but meaningful engagement</li> <li>• Engagement between educators and teachers focuses on:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appropriate information about children’s strengths, interests, areas for development, achievements and any other relevant information (whilst still meeting children and family’s privacy and confidentiality requirements). This provides teachers with a foundation from which to connect with each child individually, and build school educational programs and approaches accordingly. It requires more than teachers merely receiving a child’s file, but active discussions with the early childhood educator to explore each child’s background information.</li> <li>- Valuing each other’s knowledge, including parent/family knowledge</li> <li>- Role-swapping to “better understand from their own observations the practices, expectations and outcomes for children in the other setting.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



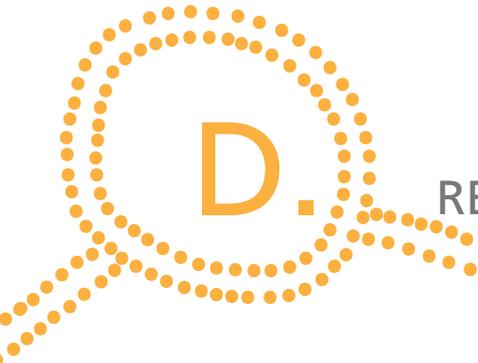
Features	Summary
Recognition of strengths that exist within the local community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School readiness assessments incorporate a focus on the unique strengths, experiences, language skills and knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children possess</li> <li>• Programs recognise and value the unique strengths, experiences, language skills and knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to school, and use these as building blocks for transition programs and school learning</li> <li>• Programs integrate family and community strengths, including connecting in with existing programs within the community</li> <li>• Programs utilise the connections Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators have with their local community</li> </ul>
Recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children are not homogenous and therefore require localised responses to transition</li> <li>• Programs consult widely with stakeholders across all stages (eg in the design, implementation and evaluation stages) and respond to input</li> </ul>
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members involved in the transition process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs employ and actively support (where possible local) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and school support staff in meaningful roles (eg Aboriginal Education Workers)</li> </ul>
Cultural competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applies a cultural competence framework that takes into account:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and partnerships</li> <li>- Cultural awareness</li> <li>- Cultural respect</li> <li>- Cultural responsiveness</li> <li>- Cultural safety</li> <li>- Cross-cultural practice and care</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- links with other agencies (eg health)
- assessment, monitoring and evaluation
- links to schools
- underpinning values
- parent/family/community involvement<sup>237</sup>

Some of these dimensions relate more to preschool programs themselves, and are focused more on children’s readiness. Others however are equally relevant for transition processes – such as cultural inclusiveness. Drawing upon these two studies, and evidence on the dimensions of ‘readiness’, this literature review proposes the following framework for effective school transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The purpose of this framework is to provide a research-based guide of the key elements that appear in effective transition programs/processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The framework is not designed to encompass every aspect of transition programs, or to provide an exhaustive list of practical examples, but instead to be used by policy makers and services alike as a reference guide in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs. The framework is thus far based solely on evidence from the literature, and would benefit from development through service consultations.





# D.

## RESEARCH GAPS

From this review of the literature it is apparent that there are a number of critical gaps in our understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's transition to school.

Whilst the research indicates that the ecological, multidimensional approach to transition accords well with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures,<sup>238</sup> current research gaps centre around the need for more complex exploration and comprehension of how the current framework for transition to school – ready children, schools, communities, families and services – accords with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings, values and needs.<sup>239</sup> Specific elements of this, as well as broader knowledge gaps, are outlined below.

### 1. Lack of input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Without knowing what is important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' through the early childhood and school transition periods, we lack the perspectives of those who know Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children best. We also limit our understandings of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's first teachers – their families – can be engaged as active stakeholders in the transition to school process. This constrains our capacity to design high quality transition processes that respond to the unique needs of these children.

There is, therefore, a pressing need for more research to enable us to better understand the outcomes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families want for their children in early childhood. A focus on a strengths-based approach to support these outcomes would be valuable. And, appreciating that there will be diverse interpretations and that approaches to family engagement will therefore need to be context-based, it is important to understand what successful transitions look like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the challenges families experience throughout the transition, and how these challenges can be overcome.

### 2. Understandings of cultural competence within schools and transition processes

The literature elaborates on how schools can acknowledge, value and reflect diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being and knowing within the school environment, curriculum and processes. It also explores the need for schools to understand family within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, children's home life and language. However it is clear throughout the literature that transition to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has yet to be conceptualised within a comprehensive culturally competent framework.

More research is needed into how schools can embed culturally competent practice within their policies and processes, beyond individual staff training on cultural competence practice.

### 3. Understandings the strengths Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to school

Research is required to better understand the unique strengths, experiences and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are equipped with in the early years, and that they then bring to school.

The MCEETYA Taskforce proposed that further research,

...needs to be undertaken to develop a holistic view of development and learning across transition points which shows how the mental, social, physical and emotional development of Indigenous children interacts with their learning.<sup>240</sup>

Tying in with this is the need for further research to examine the connections between risk and protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and the role that extended families play in mediating risks.<sup>241</sup>



#### 4. Lack of holistic, culturally appropriate assessment measures

The lack of culturally appropriate assessment measures that focus on a child's holistic development disadvantages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, limiting understandings of their readiness to a narrow set of skills. There is therefore an urgent need for research into, and the design and validation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific assessment measures.<sup>242</sup>

#### 5. Why some programs are successful

A further area for focus is the evaluation of factors that are important for fostering successful transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – particularly those beyond their own readiness for school. As West and Nolan assert,

Much of the literature around measuring transition to school focuses on skills-based measurements of individual children's readiness for school, rather than focusing on whether transition to school programs have been successful.<sup>243</sup>

There are, however, difficulties with identifying and evaluating important factors in fostering successful transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Certain elements that support the readiness of schools, families, communities and services may not be easily quantifiable, including for example,

...the cultural appropriateness of communication approaches, 'tone' of classroom interactions or the strengths of Indigenous children in Indigenous knowledge may be difficult to measure.<sup>244</sup>

This highlights the need for the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities in the evaluation of programs in order to provide localised knowledge from those most affected by the program.

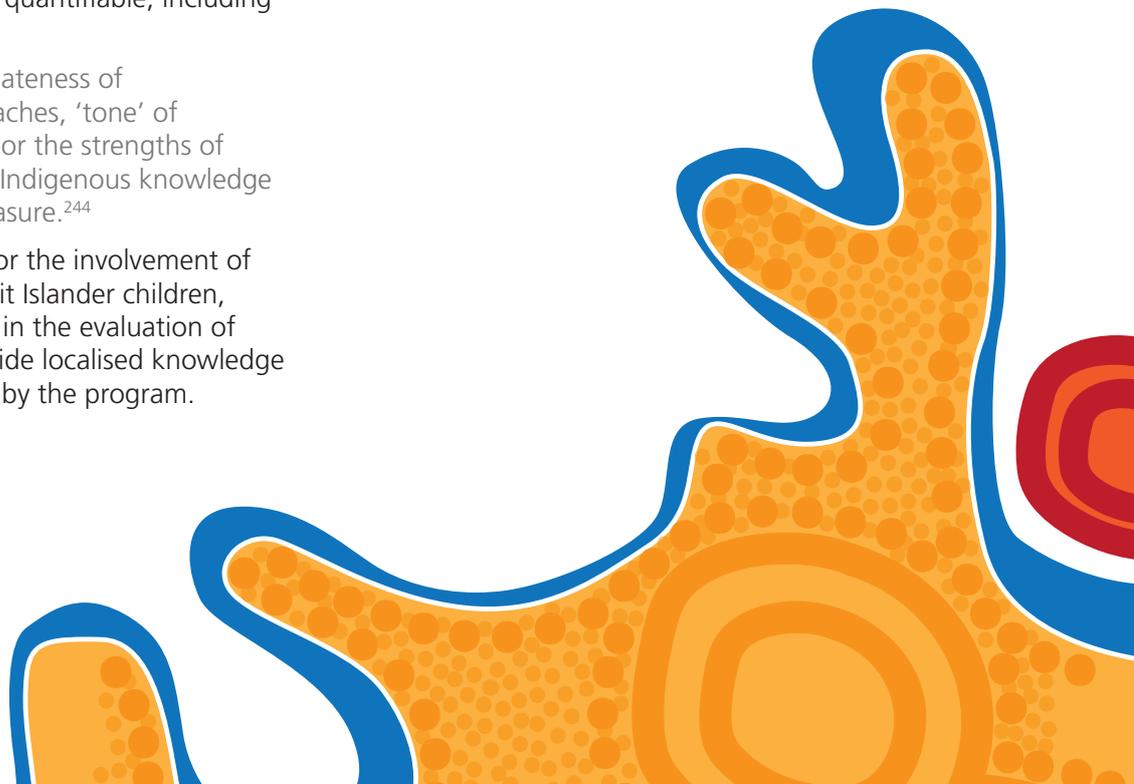
#### 6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors

The majority of authors writing about transition to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This will inherently limit the quality and breadth of knowledge. Furthermore, future research needs to better incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodologies,<sup>245</sup> which entails reflecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, needs, interests within the research, and ensuring that the research results in direct and immediate benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

#### 7. General gaps

A further gap or weakness in the literature is an over reliance on US-focused studies. Although these can have some relevance, they draw from and reflect a very different cultural, social and political context to that in Australia.<sup>246</sup>

There is also a tendency within research to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a homogenous group with homogenous needs and cultures.<sup>247</sup>





# E.

## CONCLUSION

Transition represents a significant opportunity through which to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's successful entry into formal schooling. Successful transitions have far-reaching consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including improved educational, health and future employment outcomes. The transition point also represents a critical time at which to foster the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families within both the school environment, and Australian society more broadly.

Evidence demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families can face particular challenges through the transition process, largely due to higher levels of disadvantage, lower participation in early childhood services, and a lack of cultural competence within many mainstream schools.

Current understandings of effective school transitions conceptualise the process according to five key dimensions: ready schools, communities, families, early childhood services, and children. This is a useful framework although further interrogation of these principles is needed to understand how and whether they accord with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander notions of readiness.

What we do know is that key features across effective transitions programs include: high quality programs and experiences; meaningful and respectful partnerships between and participation of all stakeholders; a strengths-based approach that draws on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities; flexibility within program approach and design; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and a culturally competent approach.

Identification of these key features provides an opportunity to evaluate the processes and outcomes of transition programs and to further determine the importance of these, or indeed additional, key features. This also provides an important opportunity to develop evidence based transition programs informed by these features, thereby strengthening transition processes and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These features could also provide a framework for

educators to reflect on their current programs and explore areas where improvements could be made.

Significant gaps still remain, however, in our understandings of what constitutes successful transitions to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These centre around the following:

- the lack of input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families;
- the need for more sophisticated understandings of cultural competence within the transition process and schools themselves;
- inappropriate, deficit-focused assessment measures; and
- a lack of knowledge regarding the reasons for the success of certain programs.

In conclusion, until we begin to address these crucial gaps, and transform our knowledge on ready schools, communities, services, families and children into practical, successful programs, we risk leaving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families vulnerable to school transitions that are poorly supported, culturally inappropriate and/or non strengths-based. In doing so we limit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's chances of educational achievement and future success.





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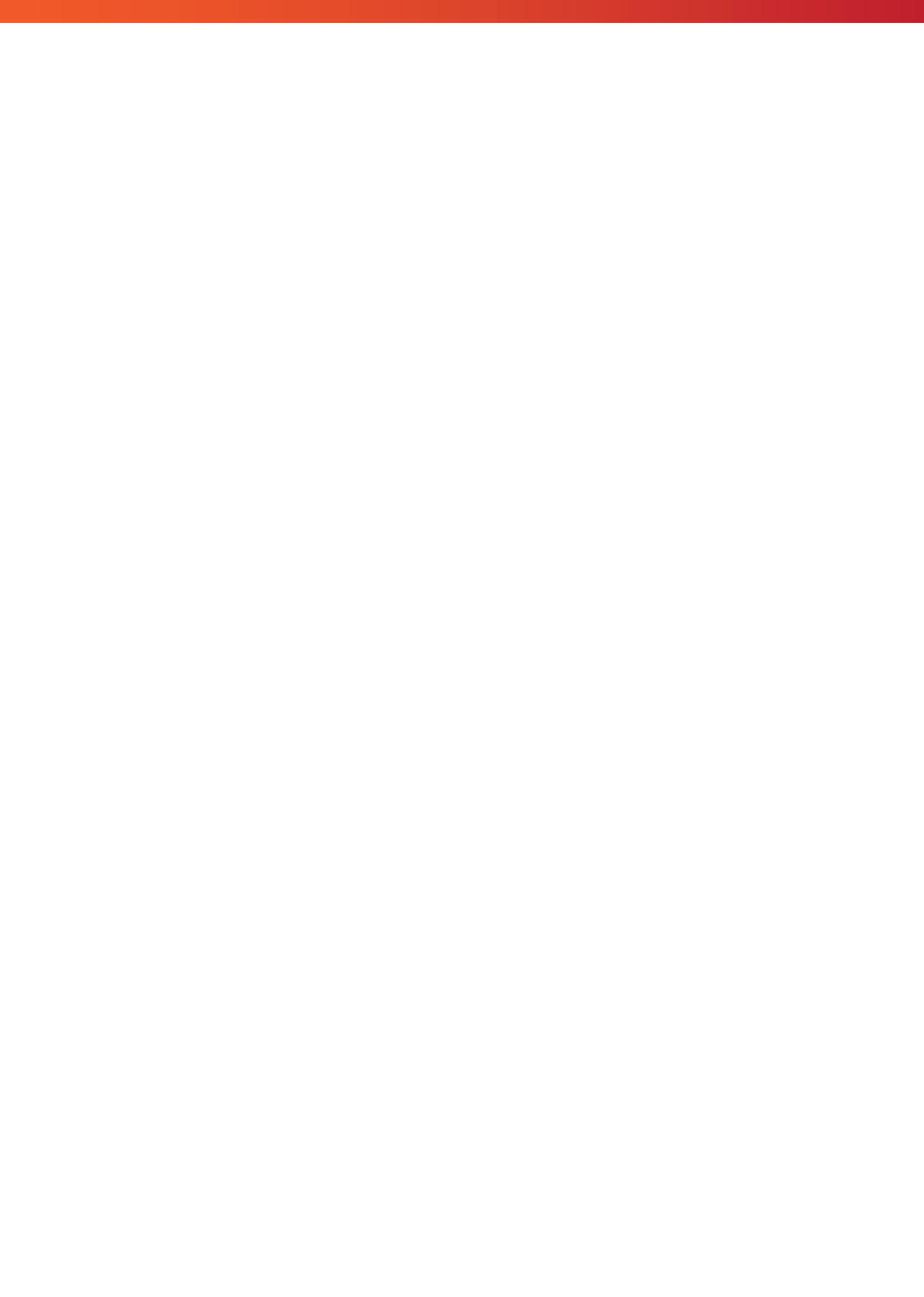
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## A strong voice for our children and families

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Level 1, 252-260 St Georges Rd, North Fitzroy Victoria 3068  
[www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au) | Phone: (03) 9489 8099