



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR ALL INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

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Why does Preschool Education Matter?

A quality preschool education sets the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. While preschool education is an important experience in itself, it also provides children with an invaluable foundation for their entry into formal schooling and is often essential in the detection of impediments to learning. The benefits of preschool education are long lasting, through school and into adult life.

Access to high quality early childhood education is inequitable across Australia. Government research has shown that the ‘absence of equitable access means that Indigenous children are less “school ready” and start formal education at a disadvantage’.¹

Children Missing Out

Despite an increase in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing preschool education in recent years, around half of eligible 4 year old Indigenous children are not enrolled. An estimated 56.4% of 4 year old Indigenous children attend preschool, compared to the general preschool participation rate of 83.4% across Australia in 2005.

Younger Indigenous children are also entitled to participate in some but not all systems and locations, providing access to two years of preschool education. However, the participation rate of three year old Indigenous children is only around 18.7% across Australia.²

Of about 24,100 three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Australia, around 15,000 children are missing out on this vital educational experience.³

Barriers to Participation

The 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education⁴ identified a range of barriers to access to high quality preschool education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

These included:

- Minimal or no access in some rural and remote areas;
- Lack of cultural sensitivity and language awareness and support;
- Insufficient funding and resources to ensure full access and participation;
- Structures and times which do not meet the specific needs of local Indigenous communities;
- Few Indigenous teachers and staff;
- Lack of early childhood education qualified teachers in many small schools;
- Lack of preparation and support for teachers, especially in isolated communities;
- Inadequate or inappropriate space, resources and equipment;
- Lack of transport.
- Lack of links between services;
- Cost, at least in some states.

There are also wider community barriers, including poor health, housing and poverty.

Government research has also noted with concern that many Indigenous children who are enrolled in preschool ‘do not acquire the same levels of literacy and numeracy skills as non-Indigenous children’.⁵

Changes to Commonwealth Indigenous funding programs have made it harder for schools to access necessary funding for Indigenous students and national benchmarks have shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are falling behind at all year levels.

The under-resourcing of early childhood education means that essential resources and supports are not available to ensure access and successful participation.

Moving Forward

Across Australia, Education Ministers through MCEETYA have recognized the importance of early childhood education to improving Indigenous children's 'school readiness' and successful participation in primary school.

They have agreed to examine implementation of a plan to provide, by 2012, all Indigenous children with access to two years of high quality early childhood education before their first year of formal schooling.

This is part of a series of recommendations for Indigenous education, which include the development of school-community partnerships in schools with significant Indigenous student populations, professional learning programs for teachers and strategies 'to retain and attract quality principals and teachers to schools in Indigenous communities'.

This is a beginning but there is much to be done.

A National Priority

The AEU strongly supports priority access to two years of high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as a key national goal.

All governments must work cooperatively to develop strategies and provide resources to achieve this goal. This includes specific attention to provision of early childhood education for Indigenous children in remote localities and addressing of the barriers to access and participation.

Such strategies will include the following:

- Give priority to appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled;
- Adopt measures to include and appropriately remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander community members delivering cultural programs;

- Provide professional development activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness and counter racism for all staff;
- Appropriate and sensitive cultural orientation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a prerequisite for all workers in children's services;
- Adopt teaching practices which recognise, value and utilise the student's first languages; and Aboriginal English/Kriol and Torres Strait Islander Kriol;
- Develop and implement programs which increase the proficiency of Indigenous peoples in the use of Standard Australian English, recognising this as essential to full participation in broader Australian society;
- Provide environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents feel welcome and encouraged to be involved in the education program;
- Adopt practices which maximise the co-ordination of early childhood education programs with health services and nutrition education programs; and
- Ensure that the delivery of care and education must be culturally inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies.
- Ensure that preservice teacher education programs include significant and mandatory units in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies;
- Provide professional development in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

¹ AESOC 2006, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, MCEETYA

² Kronemann 2007, *Early Childhood Education 2007 Update, Analysis of Data from the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision Report on Government Services 2007*, AEU.

³ Kronemann op cit

⁴ Walker K., 2004, *'For all our children': National preschool education inquiry report*, AEU.

⁵ AESOC op cit