



**AEU BRIEFING PAPER:
UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
CHILDREN**

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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Objective

To achieve priority access to two years of free, high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Context

- AEU decisions to make this policy objective a priority
- Examination by MCEETYA of a plan for two years high quality preschool education for all Indigenous children by 2012
- COAG consideration of early childhood education and also Indigenous outcomes through the National Reform Agenda

Access

- Indigenous children – or 49.2% of Indigenous three and four year olds – were not enrolled in preschool education in 2006.
- Diverse state and territory policies in relation to the provision of preschool education for Indigenous children
- Children in metropolitan areas are missing out as well as children in regional or remote areas
- A higher proportion of Indigenous children are enrolled in government preschool education.

Indigenous employment in preschool education

- Indigenous employment is important but currently at low levels.
- Employment conditions for Indigenous staff must be addressed.
- Non-Indigenous staff must be provided with access to mandatory pre-service courses and professional development in Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Educational outcomes

The social disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous students begins early – at or before their entry into, and participation, in preschool education. This compounds educational disadvantage.

Barriers to access

- Indigenous children in Australia do not have equity of access to quality preschool education.
- Barriers include problems in basic access, lack of inclusiveness, structures, staffing, funding and resources, and information.

ACTION - The way forward

- Hold discussions between State and federal governments and relevant stakeholders, including the AEU, to further the achievement of universal access to two years of preschool education for all Indigenous children.
- Consult with communities about the achievement of this goal in ways which best meets community needs.
- Address barriers to enrolment and participation.

AEU BRIEFING PAPER: UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

1. PURPOSE OF BRIEFING PAPER

To provide background information to assist in the establishment of a collaborative process to progress the implementation of the AEU and MCEETYA goals of achieving two years of preschool education for all Indigenous children.

2. POLICY OBJECTIVE

To achieve priority access to two years of free, high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Implicit in this objective is the need not only to guarantee access but to ensure that barriers to participation are addressed.

3. AEU POLICY CONTEXT

In late 2005, Federal Executive endorsed a proposal that the AEU and Branches and Associated Bodies be requested to give priority to ensuring the achievement of this goal.

The 2006 AEU Discussion paper, [Where there's a will, it's child's play: the way forward to quality preschool education for all](#), proposed a ten year plan that guaranteed access to 20 hours of high quality, free preschool education for all three and four years olds in the two years prior to school, to be achieved by 2016. It argued for priority access for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with all three year old Indigenous children to be guaranteed access to 12 hours per week by the start of 2008.

AEU 2007 Federal Conference has endorsed a revised [Early Childhood Policy - 2007](#) which endorses the proposal for two years of universal, high quality, free preschool education for the two years prior to school, with priority to be given to providing access to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Following the joint meeting of ATSIEC and the National Early Childhood Committee in May 2007, June Federal Executive endorsed a range of decisions aimed at furthering this policy objective, including a request to AEU Branches and Associated Bodies to open discussions with State Ministers and Departments to further the achievement of:

- AEU/MCEETYA policy
- Addressing barriers to enrolment and participation
- Consultation with communities about the achievement of this goal.

4. NATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL OUTLOOK

Early childhood education generally has received increased attention at the national level, through both MCEETYA and COAG. All states and territories have provided papers to

COAG about early childhood education in the context of the national reform agenda. The Federal Office is yet to receive all of these submissions. Within this overall context, early childhood education for Indigenous children has also been addressed.

At the July 2006 meeting of MCEETYA, consideration was given to the AESOC Working Party report on *'Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008'*¹:

At that MCEETYA meeting:

The importance of early childhood education in improving Indigenous children's "school readiness" and successful participation in primary school was discussed by the Ministers and they agreed to examine the implementation of two years pre-school education for Indigenous children.

*The aim of the plan would be that by 2012 all Indigenous children would have access to two years of high quality early childhood education before their first year of formal schooling*².

The AESOC report also recognised the need for:

- a national collaborative approach with cross-portfolio responses at national, state and territory level;
- the development of educational programs for Indigenous children that respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts, explicitly teach standard Australian English and prepare children for schooling;
- opportunities for Indigenous parents and caregivers to develop skills to support their children's literacy acquisition and enhance their capacity to become active participants in their children's education.

The AESOC report recognised that access/participation as an issue, but also that many Indigenous children enrolled in preschool do not achieve the same levels of literacy and numeracy skills as non-Indigenous children –and that the disparity appears to be widening.

At the April 2007 meeting, COAG agreed to develop by 2008 an intergovernmental agreement on a national approach to quality assurance and regulations for early childhood education and care.

In addition, COAG:

reaffirmed its commitment to closing the outcomes gap between Indigenous people and other Australians over a generation and resolved that the initial priority for joint action should be on ensuring that young Indigenous children get a good start in life.

*COAG requested that the Indigenous Generational Reform Working Group prepare a detailed set of specific, practical proposals for the first stage of cumulative generational reform for consideration by COAG as soon as practicable in December 2007*³.

¹ http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/Australian_Directions_in_Indigenous_Education_2005-2008.pdf

² <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/default.asp?id=15190>

³ <http://www.coag.gov.au/meetings/130407/index.htm#mental>

The key focus for discussion at the state and territory level in relation to government intentions is thus – at this stage – the implementation and further development of the recent MCEETYA decisions. However the work of COAG on early childhood education, being undertaken within the human capital focus of the National Reform Agenda, will continue and is likely to have increased significance over time.

The current declared ‘national emergency’ is also relevant since access to and participation in education – as the Little Children are Sacred report notes – is a matter of the highest priority. The recommendations of that Report include ensuring that ‘every child aged three years by 1 February 2008 should attend, on or about that date and continuously thereafter, a pre-school program’⁴. The reality is that this will require a substantial investment if all children in the Northern Territory are to be provided with access to a preschool education.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

There is now almost universal recognition of the critical role of the early years in children’s development and life chances, and the role that quality early childhood education can play in providing children with the best possible start.

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.

It is often essential in the detection of impediments to learning which, if not attended, could affect a child’s potential for the rest of their life. Given the health issues associated with poverty and inadequate housing, this is an important issue for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (detection of Otitis Media for example) – although resultant treatment must be seen as an essential result of initial detection.

The benefits of preschool education are long lasting, through school and into adult life. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to benefit from quality early childhood education and intervention.

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’.⁵

The 2007 AEU early childhood policy recognizes the need to move towards universal access to an expanded preschool education, to break down the current divide between education and care and to develop a national plan for early childhood education and care. This is perhaps of particular relevance in Indigenous communities, both because existing models based on the paradigm of ‘joined up services’, for example the Multi-functional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS) centres, are proven to work and because in regional and remote communities ‘joined up’ services may well be a necessity in order to provide access.

⁴ ‘Little Children are Sacred’, Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007, http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquiry/saac/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf

⁵ AESOC 2006, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, MCEETYA

6. ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

6.1 Access policies in the states and territories

The states and territories have diverse policies in relation to the provision of preschool education for Indigenous children. Some systems currently offer two years of preschool education to all Indigenous children or to those in particular locations, while others provide little or no access for younger children. The age of entry to school and the structures of early childhood education provision in each system are also relevant to issues of access.⁶

Information from departmental websites (where this is available) and from the AEU's National Early Childhood and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committees suggest the following access policies are currently in place. (The lack of information on a number of departmental web pages about Indigenous children's access rights is perhaps an issue in itself.)

New South Wales

Children can attend preschool at 3-5 years old. The majority of preschool and childcare services (which operate under the same regulations and require a teacher where the centre has more than 29 children) operate under the Department of Community Services. Services are subsidised but parents are charged often substantial fees. There are 100 preschools attached to government schools which provide free preschool education, including in remote areas and targeting Indigenous children.

Victoria

Preschool education operates under the Department of Human Services and there have been no programs for three year olds in Victoria. As of July 2007, preschool education for four year olds will generally be free for concession card holders; and over four years, there will be access to 10 hours free preschool for three year old Aboriginal children whose parents are concession card holders.

Queensland

With the introduction of Prep there appear to be few preschool programs for Indigenous children – a few Creche & Kindergarten Centres offer Indigenous programs in Indigenous communities.

Western Australia

Aboriginal children can attend from three years of age. Aboriginal kindergartens operate in 29 schools for three and four year old Aboriginal children. There are 42 remote preschool

⁶ see *The Structures of Preschool Education in Australia*, AEU Electoral Fact Sheet no 4, June 2007 for structures and age of entry in each state and territory, at <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/E07/Factsheets/FS4.pdf>

South Australia

Aboriginal children can start preschool at three; play centres are established in rural areas where the number of four year children is too small to operate a viable preschool.

Tasmania

No preschool programs are provided for children under 4 years old. Some schools have child-parent sessions and play groups and Launching into Learning seeks to establish networks and relations with families before school.

Australian Capital Territory

The preschool focus for Koorie children is 0-5 years; five sites offer children 8 hours in total (accessed with parents by the 0-3 year olds) and in addition, children access preschool from 3 years old – children can thus access 20 hours per week.

Northern Territory

3 year old Indigenous children can access preschool in non-metropolitan communities if they are accompanied by an adult. However 12 children are needed to provide a formal preschool.

6.2 Indigenous children's participation in preschool education

The AEU analysis of data from the *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2004*⁷ indicates that an estimated 56.4% of 4-5 year old Indigenous children attend preschool, compared to the general preschool participation rate of 83.4%.⁸

This is in line with the *National Report to Parliament's* own estimate, that approximately half of the eligible Indigenous four year olds are not attending preschool.

The participation rate of three year old Indigenous children was only around 18.7% across Australia.⁹

The *National Report* noted that between 2001 and 2004, Indigenous preschool enrolments increased by 21.8%, although some of this was due to changes in the age of entry and structures in Western Australia. Excluding Western Australia, enrolments grew by 12.3%.

There were 9,055 Indigenous children enrolled in preschool in 2004 across Australia. Of this total, 5,533, or 61.1%, were four years old; 1,276, or 14.1%, were aged 5 years or older: and 2,246, or 24.8%, were aged three years or younger.¹⁰

⁷http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_report_indigenous_education_and_training_2004.htm

⁸ Participation rates are calculated using the 4 year old population as the base. Given differing ages of entry this is not entirely accurate but seems to be the best available method of estimating the participation rate.

⁹ Kronemann M., *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, at <http://www.aefederal.org.au/Publications/ECEdu2007.pdf>

¹⁰ A breakdown by state and territory is included as Table 1 in the Appendix.

Of about 24,100 three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Australia in 2003-4, around 15,000 were missing out on this vital educational experience.¹¹

It should be noted however that the *National Report* data is limited by the failure to include data from Queensland government preschools, which have provided the prime access point for Queensland children in the year before entering school (now replaced by the universal fulltime preparatory year). The continued failure to provide reliable and consistent national data on access to preschool education is of considerable concern, given the extent to which it impedes the capacity to develop national strategies.

Data is now available from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.¹² It shows that across Australia, 11,365 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in preschool education. There were 22,388 Indigenous children aged three and four in Australia identified in the Census. (Indigenous status was not stated for 5.8% of 3-4 year olds across Australia and no age breakdown of enrolments is provided.)¹³

The Census data indicates that 11,023 Indigenous children – or 49.2% of Indigenous three and four year olds – were not enrolled in preschool education in 2006.

Preschool enrolments and estimated participation rate, 2006					
	3 year olds	4 year olds	Total 3 & 4 year old Indigenous population	Preschool enrolments	Estimated participation rate %
NSW	3,323	3,425	6,748	3,994	59.2
VIC	705	741	1,446	761	52.6
QLD	3,260	3,291	6,551	3,300	50.4
WA	1,389	1,441	2,830	1,387	49.0
SA	631	615	1,246	638	51.2
TAS	350	375	725	236	32.6
ACT	95	84	179	108	60.3
NT	1,313	1,338	2,651	943	35.6
AUST	11,073	11,315	22,388	11,365	50.8

Note: Current access policies for younger children (3 year olds) differ between systems: see summary in section 6.1 and 6.3 for details.

Source: 2006 Census of Population and Housing, ABS

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/Home/census>

6.3 Children missing out

Across Australia, somewhere around 40,000 children miss out on a preschool education every year and it could be as high as nearly 60,000. The limited data available tells us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities and children who

¹¹ Kronemann M., op cit

¹² <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/Home/census>

¹³ A breakdown by state and territory is included in Table 2 in the Appendix.

live in regional and remote areas are more likely to be missing out on preschool education. However, the national data is inconsistent and unreliable and states and territories need to develop – and are, if slowly - more accurate measures of participation.¹⁴

For example, the *Report on Government Services 2007* informs us that children from regional areas and from remote areas attend preschools at a level greater than their representation in the community. While the 2006 Census published data does not appear (at this stage at least) to provide relevant data by degree of remoteness, the *2001 Census* did provide this information. It showed, for example, the following participation rates for three and four year old Indigenous children in 2001.

Preschool participation of 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children, 2001:

Northern Territory:

Very remote 30.6%; Remote, 31.4%; and Outer Regional, 48.7%.

Western Australia:

Very remote 35.3%; Remote, 57.5%; and Outer Regional, 53.7%.

Queensland:

Very remote 52.3%; Remote, 44.8%; and Outer Regional, 47.9%.

NSW:

Very remote 53.8%; Remote, 51.2%; and Outer Regional, 51.0%.

The 2001 data indicated that while participation rates for Indigenous children in very remote locations were lower than in outer regional areas in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, the reverse was true in NSW and Queensland.

The 2006 Census does however provide relevant data by Indigenous region. The following examples show those Indigenous regions with the highest and lowest participation rates in each system, as well as the rate for the relevant capital city. They show both the degree of variation within and across systems and that – with the exception of Victoria – metropolitan areas have participation rates which are above the state/territory average, even if they are not the highest of all regions within the system. In other words, while the actual proportion might vary, the reality is that children in both metropolitan and regional or remote areas are missing out on preschool education. Strategies to address this reality must be system wide and, in addition, focus on the particular barriers that might apply in each region or area, noting that these appear to be greater in some than in others. In the first instance, all states and territories where they have not yet done so must make the commitment to provide access to two years of preschool education to all Indigenous children.

Overall participation in preschool education by 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children was lower in the Northern Territory than in any other system with the exception of Tasmania. In Tasmania 3 year olds are not able to enrol so the real participation rate in the NT is lower. Full details are provided in the appendix.

¹⁴ See Kronemann M., *Early Childhood Education 2007 Update* at <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/ECEdu2007.pdf>

**Preschool participation of 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children,
by selected Indigenous Region, 2006 census data:**

	Estimated participation rate (%)	Missing out
NSW		
Coffs Harbour	66.3	659
Queanbeyan	49.8	212
Sydney	60.2	776
NSW total	59.2	2749
VICTORIA	(a)	
Melbourne	50.5	321
Non-metro Vic	54.9	358
Vic total	52.9	679
QUEENSLAND	(b)	
Brisbane	58.0	854
Cape York	36.9	212
Mt Isa	62.3	77
Qld total	51.9	3046
WA		
Derby	31.4	144
Narrogin	59.3	169
Perth	52.3	507
WA total	48.9	1443
SA		
Adelaide	54.7	379
Ceduna	42.2	52
Port Augusta	45.4	171
SA total	51.4	602
TASMANIA (c)	33.0	486
ACT	61.2	69
NT	(d)	
Alice Springs	43.5	117
Darwin	46.5	266
Jabiru	28.3	363
NT total	35.8	1699

- (a) *3 year olds are not yet generally funded in Victoria. On the basis of current entitlements, the participation rate for 4 year olds is 103.7%.*
- (b) *The impact of the introduction of fulltime prep on pre-prep programs for Indigenous children in Queensland requires clarification.*
- (c) *Three year old children are not enrolled in Tasmania. On the current basis of entitlement, the participation rate for 4 year olds is 63.9%.*
- (d) *Three year old Indigenous children are only able to enrol in non-urban areas in the Northern Territory. On the basis of current entitlement, the participation rate for 4 year olds in Alice Springs is 81.8% and for Darwin, 96.7%.*

6.4 Preschool providers

The 2004 *National Report to Parliament* reports that, across Australia, 52.2% of Indigenous students attended government preschools, compared to 22.9% of non-Indigenous students in 2004. In reality this data is skewed by the failure to include government school based preschool education in Queensland.

However, the available data does indicate that a higher proportion of Indigenous children are enrolled in government preschools. Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 9.1% of all enrolments in government preschools and 2.7% of non-government preschool enrolments.

Of the 5,209 preschools for which data is available, 1,512 were government preschools and 3,697 were non-government preschools. Of these, 1,689 centres, or 32.4%, had Indigenous children enrolled. The proportion of centres reporting identified Indigenous children enrolled varied from 16.1% in Victoria to 92.9% in the Northern Territory. The reality is that all centres must have the capacity to provide inclusive and culturally appropriate preschool education for Indigenous children – and for the diverse Australian community overall.

7. INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

AEU policy recognises the vital importance of ensuring that priority is given to the employment of appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (particularly) where Indigenous children are enrolled. This is one key way of ensuring that preschool education provides for the intellectual, cultural, social and emotional development of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and that delivery is culturally inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies.¹⁵

The 2004 *National Report* indicates that in 2004, Indigenous staff made up 12.7% of the total staff in all IESIP funded preschools – the lowest proportion for four years. There were 242 Indigenous staff employed in Indigenous controlled preschools, or 72.7% of the total staff in these centres. There were 149 Indigenous staff, or 5.4% of all staff, employed in non-Indigenous controlled preschools.

Of the total Indigenous staff employed in the IESIP funded preschools in 2004:
 53 were 3-4 year degree qualified teachers;
 55 were non-degree qualified teachers holding a certificate or diploma;
 179 were AIEWS and equivalent; and
 113 were 'other' staff.

¹⁵ see [Early Childhood Policy - 2007](#)

The 2004 *National Report* commented that:

*Many IESIP providers noted that outcomes in literacy and numeracy were strongly influenced by the employment and retention of Indigenous teachers and assistants.*¹⁶

The states and territories provide a range of programs to expand Indigenous teachers and staff in schools and the development of targets for training and employment of Indigenous teachers is part of the MCEETYA framework established in *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*. The Commonwealth Government funds some scholarships to assist students from low socio-economic backgrounds, including Indigenous students who wish to qualify as teachers. More detailed information is not available at this time.

In addition to the expanded employment of Indigenous teachers, AIEWs and other staff, employment conditions need to be addressed including the high level of casual employment amongst Indigenous education workers. There has been an over-reliance on CDEP funding to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in some public schools and participants have the right to full employment and full award wages and entitlements.¹⁷

The issues involved in the use of CDEP to provide employment and services are complex. The Federal Government has now announced that as part of the Emergency Response in the Northern Territory, CDEP programs will be 'progressively replaced by real jobs, training and mainstream employment programs, complementing the work already in train to lift remote area exemptions.'¹⁸ The NT Government has opposed wholesale changes and argued that the changes will lead to 'a massive 18 percent pay cut for people on the CDEP program': CDEP, the NT has said, 'has ensured important jobs such as night patrol, aged care and early childhood care are filled in remote areas'.¹⁹

Research conducted by Craven²⁰ and Herbert²¹ indicates that a majority of teachers believe that having undertaken a course of pre and/or in-service Indigenous studies had a positive impact on their abilities to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The AEU therefore believes that all teachers and educators must be provided with access to Indigenous Studies both in pre-service courses and through professional development. The AEU view is that Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies must be a mandatory condition of employment for all teachers in Australia. States such as Queensland, Victoria and NSW have made inroads to this effect, primarily through teacher registration authorities.²²

¹⁶ http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_report_indigenous_education_and_training_2004.htm

¹⁷ AEU Policy on the Community Development and Employment (CDEP) Scheme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (2007).

¹⁸ The Hon Mal Brough media release, 'Jobs and training for Indigenous people in the NT', 23/07/2007, http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/minister3.nsf/content/cdep_23jul07.htm

¹⁹ E. McAdam, Minister Assisting the Chief Minister on Indigenous Affairs, 'NT Govt opposes CDEP changes', 23/7/2007, <http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/ocm/media/index.cfm?fuseaction=viewRelease&id=2785&d=5>

²⁰ Craven R. et al, 2005, Teaching the teachers mandatory Aboriginal Studies: volume I: recent successful strategies http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/teaching_teachers_volume_1.htm

²¹ Herbert J., 2005 Indigenous Studies for Teachers, AEU Discussion Paper

²² <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Media/MediaReleases/2003/UnionCongratsLeadIndigenousStud.pdf>

The adequacy of overall current staffing levels in early childhood education, particularly for Indigenous children, must be investigated. This includes consideration of appropriate staffing levels and groups sizes, particularly where younger children are included in classes. It also includes consideration of the levels of support of, for example, ESL resources and the availability of bi-lingual education for children participating in preschool education. In addition, it involves consideration of other necessary support, such as staffing levels for children with disabilities and access to support services such as speech pathology.

8. EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Notwithstanding some improvement in recent years, disproportionate numbers of Indigenous students do not meet national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy at years 3, 5 and 7. Results are about 20% below the national average and the gap widens from year 3 to year 7.²³ AESOC has noted that, as the focus of education shifts in year 4 to academic language proficiency, students fall behind at increasing rates without second language or dialect instruction. There are a range of factors which contribute to the educational disadvantage faced by Indigenous students in school.²⁴

AESOC has also noted that children who do not enrol in preschool education start formal school education at a disadvantage.

In addition, however, AESOC has also noted that many Indigenous children who do enrol in preschool do not acquire the same levels of literacy and numeracy skills as non-Indigenous children and that this disparity is widening.

The 2004 *National Report* indicates that a lower proportion of Indigenous preschool children were assessed as demonstrating English literacy awareness and understanding sufficient for entry into primary school. Unfortunately much of the *Report's* focus is on the difference between government and non-government preschools at a crude level and without analysis of the nature of the education, social and cultural structures of each system. The *Report* implicitly acknowledges the complexities by excluding NT and WA results from the national average because these systems have high proportions of preschool children from non-English speaking backgrounds who are at a disadvantage in English literacy assessments. When NT and WA results are excluded, the national government rate for Indigenous students achieving appropriate English literacy awareness is 74.7% compared to 79% for non-Indigenous students. This still demonstrates a gap – but also highlights the need to ensure appropriate and adequate levels of support for children who enter preschool with English as a second or fourth language. There is a gap of some 26% between Indigenous and non-Indigenous preschool students in government preschools assessed as numeracy ready- but this drops sharply when again WA and NT data is excluded. Here too, there is a considerable gap between government and non-government results at the national level without any assessment of the structural or other reasons for this disparity.

Given the problematic nature of the available data (and perhaps also the parameters of the assessment), it is nonetheless clear in general terms that the education disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous students begins early – at or before their entry into, and participation, in preschool education.

²³ http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/Australian_Directions_in_Indigenous_Education_2005-2008.pdf

²⁴ http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/Australian_Directions_in_Indigenous_Education_2005-2008.pdf

9. BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Over the years there have of course been many reports and inquiries into Indigenous education. While some progress has been made, the reality is that we are still a long way from ensuring that every child in Australia has equal access to a high quality, culturally appropriate preschool education.

As the 2004 (Walker) *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the provision of Universal Access to High Quality Preschool Education, 'For all our children'*²⁵, said:

At the current time Indigenous children in Australia do not have equity of access to quality preschool education. It is most disturbing that in a society that prides itself on giving everyone a 'fair go' such inequities continue to exist.

Investigation and redress of barriers to implementation must consider both system wide and local issues and must be undertaken with the support of all stakeholders including relevant local communities.

Barriers identified by the Walker report, the joint meeting of AEU ATSIEC and NECC and other reports include the following, but this list should not be seen as complete.

Access

- Minimal or no access in some rural and remote areas
- Differing policies on access for younger children
- Lack of places in some areas
- Lack of transport.

Inclusiveness

- Lack of cultural sensitivity and language awareness and support;
- Perceptions of being unwelcome or unrespected
- Inadequate or inappropriate space, resources and equipment
- Lack of community involvement or sense of ownership

Structures

- Structures and times which do not meet the specific needs of local Indigenous communities
- Lack of links between services, including with play groups, child care and schools
- Sometimes onerous requirements of parents before they can participate and/or lack of supports
- Lack of partnerships between stakeholders, including government services, communities, families and children

Staffing

- 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

²⁵ <http://www.aefederal.org.au/Ec/ecfullreport.pdf>

- Insufficient ESL support
- Poor and precarious employment conditions for many Indigenous staff
- Lack of community liaison staff

Funding and resources

- Insufficient funding and resources to ensure full access and participation
- Changes to Commonwealth funding programs, which have made it harder for schools to access funding for Indigenous students
- Cost to families, at least in some states.
- Lack of access to support resources including equipment (eg for children with hearing loss) and access to specialist and health services
- Insufficient language and cultural resources to support inclusive programs
- Lack of supports for outreach work

Information

- Lack of knowledge about the importance of early years education
- Lack of knowledge about the availability of preschool education and the nature of preschool programs
- Lack of support to assist indigenous parents and caregivers to support their children's literacy acquisition and to enhance their capacity to become active participants in their children's education²⁶

There are also wider community barriers, including poor health, housing and poverty. Families unable to provide adequate clothing and/or meals or required costs may feel a sense of shame that prevents them from participating.

10. THE WAY FORWARD

The 2004 *National Report* comments that:

...parental involvement and support, inclusion of Indigenous staff in preschools and providing information to families and communities through local networks, have been some of the successful strategies used to increase Indigenous enrolments.

In addition, it notes that:

*Indigenous presence, whether it is created through staff and other Indigenous involvement in the preschool, or an environment that is rich with Indigenous culture, is fundamental to providing a place where Indigenous children learn and want to keep learning. It is a vital factor in making an Indigenous child feel welcomed and valued in formal education.*²⁷

²⁶ AESOC, http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/Australian_Directions_in_Indigenous_Education_2005-2008.pdf

²⁷ http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_report_indigenous_education_and_training_2004.htm

The 2006 MCEETYA decisions, in addition to the specific attention to preschool education, noted the need for:

- School-community partnerships in schools with significant Indigenous student populations
- Development of professional learning programs for school leaders and teachers to help improve outcomes for Indigenous students
- Strategies to retain and attract quality principals and teachers to schools in Indigenous communities

This provides an opportunity for the AEU and other stakeholders to seek to work with state and territory governments to achieve the goal of universal access to high quality education for all children.

The 2007 AEU Early Childhood Education policy provides a range of broad considerations for providers of early childhood education services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These should be considered in the context of addressing barriers and improving the quality and appropriateness of early childhood services to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

There should be discussions held between State and federal governments and relevant stakeholders, including the AEU, to further the achievement of universal access to two years of preschool education for all Indigenous children. Barriers to enrolment and participation, whether systemic or local, must be addressed.

Indigenous communities must be consulted about the achievement of this goal in ways which best meet community needs.

APPENDIX

Table 1

	Indigenous preschool enrolments, 2004		
	3 years old or younger	4 years old	5 years old or older
NSW	947	1383	342
VIC	9	302	224
QLD	279	405	178
WA	231	1553	74
SA	451	653	44
TAS	0	179	162
ACT	12	59	24
NT	317	999	228
AUST	2246	5533	1276

Source: National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2004

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_report_indigenous_education_and_training_2004.htm

Table 2

Preschool participation of 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children, by Indigenous Region, 2006

Preschool participation of 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children, by Indigenous Region, 2006						
NSW	3 year olds	4 year olds	Total 3 & 4 year old Indigenous population	preschool enrolments	Estimated participation rate	Missing out
Bourke	176	195	371	218	58.8	153
Coffs Harbour	950	1006	1956	1297.0	66.3	659
Dubbo	254	217	471	247	52.4	224
Queanbeyan	215	207	422	210	49.8	212
Sydney	958	992	1950	1174	60.2	776
Tamworth	353	396	749	402	53.7	347
Wagga Wagga	410	405	815	437	53.6	378
NSW	3316	3418	6734	3985	59.2	2749

VICTORIA						
Melbourne	328	320	648	327	50.5	321
nonmetro Vic	378	415	793	435	54.9	358
	706	735	1441	762	52.9	679

3 year olds are not yet generally funded. On the basis of current entitlements, the participation rate for 4 year olds is 103.7%.

QUEENSLAND						
Brisbane	1004	1028	2032	1178	58.0	854
Cairns	450	440	890	448	50.3	442
Cape York	170	166	336	124	36.9	212
Mt Isa	103	101	204	127	62.3	77
Rockhampton	373	387	760	402	52.9	358
Roma	329	365	694	356	51.3	338
Torres Strait	226	206	432	183	42.4	249
Townsville	483	505	988	472	47.8	516
	3138	3198	6336	3290	51.9	3046

WA						
Broome	88	88	176	70	39.8	106
Derby	104	106	210	66	31.4	144
Geraldton	128	119	247	124	50.2	123
Kalgoorlie	129	127	256	122	47.7	134
Kununurra	98	112	210	74	35.2	136
Narrogin	201	214	415	246	59.3	169
Perth	528	534	1062	555	52.3	507
South Hedland	107	141	248	124	50.0	124
	1383	1441	2824	1381	48.9	1443

SA						
Adelaide	434	402	836	457	54.7	379
Ceduna	37	53	90	38	42.2	52
Port Augusta	157	156	313	142	45.4	171
	628	611.0	1239	637	51.4	602

TASMANIA						
	351	374	725	239	33.0	486

Three year old children are not enrolled. On the current basis of entitlement, the participation rate for 4 year olds is 63.9%.

ACT						
	98	80	178	109	61.2	69

NT						
Alice Springs	96	111	207	90	43.5	117
Apatula	200	202	402	118	29.4	284
Darwin	258	239	497	231	46.5	266
Jabiru	246	260	506	143	28.3	363
Katherine	198	250	448	152	33.9	296
Nhulunbuy	232	211	443	170	38.4	273
Tennant Creek	75	67	142	42	29.6	100
	1305	1340	2645	946	35.8	1699

Three year old Indigenous children are only able to enrol in non-urban areas. On the basis of current entitlement, the participation rate for 4 year olds in Alice Springs is 81.8% and for Darwin, 96.7%.

Source: Census data 2006

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/Home/census>

Very high proportions do not state the education level/sector in which they are enrolled.