

Aboriginal Early Childhood Education: Why attendance and true engagement are equally important

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Introduction

The Australian government has increasingly recognised the importance of quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as noted in a variety of policy documents such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap targets of the Rudd government in 2008, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*, and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* (Tye, 2014; Dreise & Thomson, 2014; Education Council, 2015). However, the focus in Aboriginal ECE is still on improving access to, and attendance at ECE centres in Australia rather than highlighting the reasons for reduced Indigenous engagement in ECE. This paper goes beyond the rhetoric of framing Aboriginal ECE from a ‘deficit’ perspective to focusing on why the mainstream school system needs to *adapt to* and *accommodate* Aboriginal learners. It is argued that a shift in policy thought is necessary in order to improve Aboriginal ECE in Australia, from one that attempts to ‘prepare’ Aboriginal children for school to one that prepares schools and educators *for* Aboriginal children. Only in acknowledging the cultural mismatch between home and school environments for Aboriginal children will successful ECE outcomes be achieved.

Aboriginal Early Childhood Education: A 'deficits' based approach

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience an educational trajectory that often differs from that of non-Aboriginal Australians. Frequently, the educational experiences of Aboriginal Australians are framed from a ‘deficit’ perspective, whereby the failures of Aboriginal people to engage with the mainstream educational system are seen as the ‘problem’. For example, this is evident in government discourse whereby lower preschool attendance rates of Aboriginal children compared to non-Aboriginal children are viewed as a policy ‘priority’ if the gap is to be closed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood education outcomes. An alternative approach to the ‘deficits’ perspective would be to acknowledge the strengths of Aboriginal children and Aboriginal culture in the education sphere.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are frequently described as being "less ready" for their first year of primary school in comparison to non-Aboriginal children. For example,

Dockett, Perry and Kearney (2011) state that Aboriginal children perform lower in cognitive and language tasks upon school entry compared to non-Aboriginal children. The ‘gap’ in ‘school readiness’ for Aboriginal children compared to non-Aboriginal children has been attributed to lower socioeconomic status of Aboriginal families, lower preschool participation rates for Aboriginal children, and the presence of risk factors in home and community environments (Dockett et al, 2011). Numerous risk factors that impede high quality early childhood education have been identified, such as low birth weight, parental substance use or mental health issues, cultural obligations such as ‘sorry’ business (i.e. funerals), child abuse and neglect, lack of stable employment, as well as family and community transience (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson & Carapetis, 2008). Predominately, risk factors can be placed into one or more of the following categories: individual, parental, health, cultural, socioeconomic and community. However, despite the extensive research available on the range of diverse risk factors that interfere with Aboriginal engagement with ECE and school, improving school attendance is still a significant government priority for Aboriginal education. Conversely, school attendance issues need to be considered in conjunction with a focus on true engagement in the Aboriginal ECE space.

The continued policy focus on Aboriginal school attendance

The Rudd government initially focused on improving Aboriginal ECE attendance in the Closing the Gap initiative of 2008 that aimed to ensure improved access and attendance at an ECE centre for all 4-year-old remote living Aboriginal children (Tye, 2014; Dreise & Thomson, 2014). This Closing the Gap initiative was endorsed by COAG and aimed to halve the gap in Aboriginal preschool or ECE attendance rates compared to non-Aboriginal ECE attendance within 5 years (i.e. by 2013). This target, as well as others, are still being pursued by COAG (in some cases, with altered timeframes and an expanded focus, as is the case in the ECE target for 4-year-old Aboriginal children) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). Unfortunately, in the latest *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2016*, it is evident that many targets are not on track to be met by their original deadlines (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). Certainly, the ECE target was not met by 2013, as evident by the continued policy push towards improving access and attendance at ECE institutions.

Subsequent governments, including the Gillard and Abbott governments, have continued with the trend to focus on Aboriginal attendance issues as the primary influencing factor for improved Aboriginal educational outcomes. In 2010, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* was released by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA). This plan aimed to improve school readiness by "ensur[ing] all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)" and subsequently, attend ECE institutions or schools at the same rate as non-Aboriginal children (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 3). In 2011, COAG released their *National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Closing the gap* which aimed to address early childhood education and Aboriginal school attendance, as well as other socioeconomic areas (COAG, 2012). The most recent government report, released by the COAG-endorsed Education Council, is the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* which includes the COAG priority of school attendance as a main focus area (Education

Council, 2015). While school attendance is important, it needs to be considered in conjunction with other factors that hinder Aboriginal ECE outcomes.

It cannot be contested that Aboriginal children attend pre-school education at a lower rates compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Dockett et al, 2011). However, the amount of literature concerning Aboriginal school attendance and the reasons for the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attendance is extensive (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011; Boulden, 2006; Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; Gray & Partington, 2003; Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk, 2003; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). The literature clearly outlines a range of factors that impede Aboriginal attendance and engagement with ECE and school, and certainly provide the basis for future policy directions (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). For example, Armstrong and Buckley (2011) argue that the reasons for non-attendance at school by some Aboriginal students are complex and contested, ranging from a mixture of home, school and individual factors that are often intertwined. It has also been noted that parents and students have different perspectives concerning attendance at school compared to teachers, with teachers believing that the home environment and parent's attitudes have a significant influence on a child's rate of attendance at an ECE or school (Gray & Partington, 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003). In contrast, parents and students will often attribute attendance issues to school-related factors, such as relationships with teachers or the school environment (Gray & Partington, 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003).

Despite the range of research that identifies complex, contested reasons for lower Aboriginal attendance at ECE centres or school, Aboriginal education policy in Australia still seeks to ensure that Aboriginal children attend ECE without necessarily ensuring that ECE centres and schools are culturally-appropriate places of learning for Aboriginal children. It has been argued that early childhood education centres and schools place a set of expectations on Aboriginal children that they do not experience in their home environments (Ball, 2012; Adams, 1998; Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Taylor, 2011). Dockett, Mason and Perry (2006, p. 144) state that there is a cultural mismatch between home and school expectations and that “Aboriginal learners ... need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands and expectations relating to their cultural, language and social skills” when commencing school. For many Aboriginal children, commencing school within the mainstream educational system marks a difficult adjustment period as these children adapt to expectations that inevitably vary from those of their home contexts. Consequently, any dialogue concerning Aboriginal ECE must take into account that Aboriginal children are expected to enter a colonial system – an educational system that is premised on dominant, Western values.

It is certainly possible to focus on the ‘deficits’ of Aboriginal children and their lack of knowledge concerning Western schooling processes, and then subsequently, initiate policy priorities that aim to ‘prepare’ Aboriginal children for the task of ‘fitting in’ within a foreign school environment. However, this policy approach has yielded few positive results for Aboriginal children in the last 6 years (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). Despite the lack of significant outcomes for Aboriginal children and families, Aboriginal ECE policy continues to take the same approach. Policy discourse is still focused on attendance and access to ECE for Aboriginal children, families and communities. This approach frames Aboriginal children, families and culture as the ‘problem’ – their inability to fit in with the mainstream educational system can be viewed as the reason why the gap remains between Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal educational outcomes. Rather, an approach that acknowledges the complex reasons behind reduced attendance rates needs to be taken. This approach needs to ensure that attendance and engagement issues are given equal priority status within Aboriginal ECE policy.

Australia's mainstream education system - Does the system need to adapt to the needs of Aboriginal students?

The issue regarding Aboriginal ECE and Aboriginal educational outcomes in general is indeed a 'wicked' problem. It is a problem that results in many different solutions, perspectives and ideas from a variety of stakeholders with no clear answer, solution or consensus on how to 'fix' the 'problem' itself (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). However, the failures of the dominant educational system to adapt to the needs of Aboriginal children commencing school need to be acknowledged if Aboriginal children and families are to experience a successful transition to school and be willing to engage in ECE. In fact, it has been found that poor quality ECE actually has a detrimental impact on children, leading to paucity in language and cognitive functions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2015; Productivity Commission, 2014). Certainly, for Aboriginal children accessing mainstream ECE settings, where their cultural needs may neither be met nor understood, poorer educational outcomes may result from the inability of early childhood educators to respond, teach and care for children in a culturally-appropriate manner. Furthermore, the experience of racism at school can also negatively influence Aboriginal school attendance rates (Biddle & Priest, 2014). Indeed, any attempts at improving Aboriginal attendance at ECE need to be culturally-appropriate to ensure that successful outcomes can be obtained from engagement with ECE centres, whilst combating racism that may be embedded in the dominant educational system (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe & Moore, 2012; Mann, Knight & Thompson, 2011).

By ensuring that ECE settings are culturally-safe spaces for Aboriginal children, access to and attendance at ECE by Aboriginal children will improve as a result. For example, the Mungullah community in Carnarvon, Western Australia, has experienced early success with increased attendance at their ECE setting by Aboriginal children because it provides a culturally-safe learning environment (Lee & Thompson, 2007). Developed in conjunction with the local Aboriginal community, the Mungullah "Best Start Playgroup" engages Aboriginal parents as their children's first educators through the provision of training to Aboriginal parents as early childhood professionals. Once trained, Aboriginal parents then take on the role as ECE professionals at the playgroup, thus ensuring that local Aboriginal knowledge is utilised, jobs are created and children feel culturally-safe knowing that a local Aboriginal person is their ECE teacher. While many Aboriginal children feel that they have to sacrifice their Aboriginality in order to fit in at Western schools or ECE settings (Lee & Thompson, 2007), children who attend an ECE setting staffed by Aboriginal people do not need to conform to Western schooling expectations. Furthermore, Aboriginal children reap the benefit of seeing other Aboriginal community members engaged in the education system when they attend an ECE setting that is staffed by Aboriginal people. Certainly, this enhances a child's willingness to engage in school, as noted by Secretariat of National Aboriginal and

Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2014) who found that the transition to school for Aboriginal children is improved when Aboriginal staff are involved in the ECE process.

Other examples of adapting the ECE system to fit the needs of Aboriginal children include the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) which was initially run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Fitzroy, Victoria. This program is available to all disadvantaged and marginalised groups. It informally engages parents as their children's first educators by involving parents in literacy and reading in the home environment. While only one evaluation of its initial effectiveness with Aboriginal families has been conducted thus far (Liddell, Barnett, Roost & McEachran, 2011), the HIPPY program is proving to be effective for Aboriginal communities, as demonstrated through the expansion of the program to various Aboriginal communities - urban, rural and remote - throughout Australia. This evaluation utilised a range of qualitative and quantitative measures, including interviews, surveys and tests (Liddell et al, 2011). It noted initial positive outcomes for Aboriginal people across the five evaluation sites in New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory, including improved parenting skills, parents feeling more confident in teaching their children, increased insight regarding school expectations, and children feeling more confident with completing homework (Liddell et al, 2011).

However, while there are many examples of ECE programs that successfully engage Aboriginal children and families in the education system, the difficulty in the Australian context is that schools and ECE institutions are often left with the task of engaging Aboriginal families and communities without appropriate support. While the ECE literature recognises the influence of families and communities on a child's readiness for school, education policy does not effectively support schools in ensuring a culturally-safe environment for Aboriginal children. Rather, education policy in Australia is focused on the role of schools in increasing attendance without due consideration to issues of engagement. For example, the provision of attendance officers in schools has been included in Aboriginal education policy in order to ensure improved attendance rates for Aboriginal students (Western Australia Office of the Auditor General, 2009). Arguably, a shift in policy thought is necessary for success in Aboriginal ECE. Aboriginal ECE policy needs to focus on issues of attendance and access in conjunction with engagement issues. Questions need to be asked about how ECE institutions can ensure that ECE education is culturally-safe, enjoyable and appropriate for Aboriginal children who are not necessarily raised according to Western child-rearing values. Furthermore, policy approaches need to ensure the cultural-safety of Aboriginal children in mainstream ECE systems. In doing so, Aboriginal education policy in Australia may be able to successfully engage Aboriginal children and families in ECE, thus enabling Aboriginal children to learn and develop capital that will improve school readiness.

Conclusion

It has been argued that continued policy attempts at improving Aboriginal attendance and access to ECE have not been successful because the importance of ensuring cultural safety in ECE has largely been ignored in policy approaches to Aboriginal ECE. Aboriginal children entering school for the first time have to adapt to a foreign environment, one where a different set of cultural expectations are thrust upon them compared to their home

environments. Policy approaches that aim to improve the quality of ECE for Aboriginal children need to acknowledge the cultural mismatch between home and schooling environments. Cultural safety needs to be assured for Aboriginal children entering school environments because without it, ECE is not sufficiently catering to the needs of young Aboriginal learners. Australia needs to move away from past and current policy approaches that prioritise attendance above all other facets of a complex educational trajectory for Aboriginal children. Rather, attendance issues and true engagement issues need to be prioritised together in an approach that may be able to systematically improve Aboriginal ECE outcomes. Academic and grey literature regarding improving attendance at school for Aboriginal children attest to the complex nature of Aboriginal schooling and the multifaceted reasons for reduced attendance. The first policy priority for Aboriginal ECE needs to recognise the strengths of Aboriginal children in living across two worlds – their culturally mismatched home and school environments – and seek to ensure that ECE centres and schools are culturally safe places for Aboriginal children wanting to learn in a Western world.

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