

World Vision Australia Submission: Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

October 2015

World Vision Australia (WVA) first worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Australians in 1974 and our involvement has continued to grow. As a child-focused agency, World Vision works for the best interests of children. We do this by supporting families and communities to gain the knowledge, skills and access to services they need to achieve their goals and overcome disadvantages. WVA works through strong partnerships, strong community voices and local solutions for local needs, empowering people to run the programs that they want to see, to create a brighter future for their children.

WVA also contributes its experience and expertise from administering development programs and systems through a global network. We do this to help foster conditions that enable positive and sustainable change in the lives of children and families, not only economically, but also more broadly in terms of capability and social participation.

This submission, made by WVA, draws from this collective knowledge, experience and expertise. It expresses the views of WVA only.

World Vision Australia acknowledges the commitment the Australian Government has made to the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy and is working closely with those responsible for implementing the strategy in several remote areas. The following recommendations reflect our commitment to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and our experience working with them in remote and metropolitan areas.

To discuss this submission or any issues raised within please contact:

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WVA Recommendations

- 1. Commit to reform of the current formal education system to an ‘educated for life’ approach where children and young people can build upon their cultural strengths in order to achieve the competence and confidence required to take control and exert influence in all areas of their lives. This requires an education system that supports children and young people to value both Indigenous and non- Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of learning and achieving.**
- 2. Commit to and realise the right for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access to quality early childhood care and development (ECCD) from birth to five years that supports positive identify formation by acknowledging the cultural and language contexts in which they live, including but not exclusive to preschool, with a focused and intentional outcome of supporting families to optimise their children’s development so that they are ready for lifelong learning.**
- 3. Adopt and commit to meaningful and achievable targets for increasing Australia’s percentage of the GDP allocated to early childhood care and development programs and services for birth to five years.**
- 4. Support bilingual education from early childhood and throughout their school life in line with evidenced based bilingual approaches to education, best practice, the aspirations of Indigenous parents and; the human rights set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.**
- 5. Collaboratively develop, establish and commit to a long term, strategic and co-ordinated approach to Indigenous learning and education that is:**
 - a) owned, driven, managed and governed by Aboriginal controlled organisations.**
 - b) flexible in service delivery and programs, within an integrated approach aligned to the priorities and aspirations articulated by communities for their children and families.**
 - c) committed to holistic child and family development.**

WVA rationale and evidence to support each recommendation

1. Commit to reform of the current formal education system to an ‘educated for life’ approach where children and young people can build upon their cultural strengths in order to achieve the competence and confidence required to take control and exert influence in all areas of their lives. This requires an education system that supports children and young people to value both Indigenous and non- Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of learning and achieving.

The current formal education system is failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Across any measure of education, health and well-being, a consistent and persistent gap remains between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people leading Indigenous Australians to not reach their full potential within the broader Australian society. Evidence exists that a new paradigm of learning and education – educated for life, being a holistic lifelong pathway that builds for the individual and the collective the competence, confidence and opportunities to exert influence on and realise a full and abundant life in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds – is one enabling factor to change these outcomes and close the gap for Indigenous peoples in Australia. While Australia continues its focus on education as a tool only for employment and economic participation, this gap will remain. Evidence illustrates in order to reduce vulnerability or symptoms of disadvantage, developing life skills, cultivating positive-identity and supporting service-learning and community contribution has greater long-term impact than education, employment and training interventions alone¹.

In the 2011 report, *Closing the Gap – Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, the Australia Institute of Health and Welfare notes the numerous and confounding barriers in the current education system for Indigenous students;

- lack of access to secondary education in remote areas
- English as a second plus language
- few incentives to continue education – lack of jobs to aspire to, lack of role models in community completed secondary education
- discrimination
- lack of supportive school culture and leadership
- lack of foundational educational skills acquired through early childhood to build on during their educational journey.

The Indigenous education context cannot be explored in ignorance to these ongoing effects of current and historical policies and practices and see the systematic exclusion of Indigenous people to mainstream society. As noted in the WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey report;

“the denial of Aboriginal people from access to land, culture, language, citizenship, employment and school (and forced removal of children from their families) over the past two centuries are crippling legacies for Aboriginal communities and critical determinants of the poor state of Aboriginal people in the schooling system.” (chapter2, p.38)

The evidence is clear that education is a clear predictor of later life opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous Australians. But equally strong is the evidence that resilience and life outcomes are supported by strong cultural connections and identity, numerous studies suggest that cultural affinity– identity,

¹ McNeil, B, Reeder, N, Rich, J. (2012) A framework of outcomes for young people, The Young Foundation, London, UK

engagement and belonging can lead to positive outcomes across a range of health and social scales; education, child protection, youth justice, neglect, abuse and suicide and can act as a protective factor against suicide and suicide ideation, alcohol and substance abuse and other consequences of trauma². An Educated for Life construct allows for the equitable inclusion of both world knowledge systems to be interdependent in ensuring optimum life outcomes and provides a tool for government to remove barriers to education and close the gap.

Our work with Indigenous communities and with Indigenous organisations has demonstrated to us that in order for community and family aspirations to be realised there must be many more opportunities for organisations, communities, families and children to engage in both formal and informal educational activities/programs that build upon the strength of their Indigenous identity while providing opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills necessarily to negotiate the non-Indigenous world successfully. Education for Life initiatives are focused on developing 'both ways' understanding and both 'ways' competency at all stages of the lifecycle, from early childhood, middle childhood and youth through to early and middle adulthood.

The current Australia educational system rests on the assumptions that the educational system provides the skills and learning required for the future, being a future of employment and economic contribution to society. While Australia frames its education system to meet the changing needs of a knowledge-based economy it will fail to ensure learning for the purposes other than vocational³.

A further critical policy challenge for Australia is the assumption that the current education system is meeting its intended outcomes, the evidence suggests not:

- international benchmarking confirms Australians to have such low functional literacy skills they are likely to be struggling with life aside from work (Golding & Foley 2011)
- low literacy excludes large proportions of the population from engaging and successfully completing many forms of higher education
- Indigenous education outcomes are appalling on any measure
- dichotomy between education aim to have students "work ready" versus low employment rates for Indigenous peoples, the intent of school outcomes in direct opposition to the lived experiences.

Evidence and a growing understanding of the casual link between the social determinates of health and education adds enormous weight to the need for reform. The links between infant mortality rates and their mother's education is indisputable, the higher a mother's education the greater child development outcomes attained for her children. (WHO 2008)

"Australia would do well to look at Europe to develop policies that include agency around the discourses of equity, inclusion, health and wellbeing, and not just a de facto education systems that is valued only for vocational outcomes and competencies"

(Golding and Foley 2011, p.67)

In reviewing the evidence the failure of Australia to acknowledge, incorporate, celebrate and nurture a holistic strategic framework across a broader educated for life paradigm is at its detriment and arguably will ensure for Indigenous Australians an ongoing legacy of intergenerational disadvantage into the future.

² Colquhoun and Dockery, *The link between Indigenous culture and wellbeing: Qualitative evidence for Australian Aboriginal peoples*. The Centre for Labour Market Research, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, 2012.

³ Golding, B. & Foley, A. (2011) 'All over red rover? The neglect and potential of Australian adult education in the community', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 51, Special Edition, December, pp.53-71

2. Commit to and realise the right for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access to quality early childhood care and development (ECCD) from birth to five years that supports positive identify formation by acknowledging the cultural and language contexts in which they live, including but not exclusive to preschool, with a focused and intentional outcome of supporting families to optimise their children’s development so that they are ready for lifelong learning.

Early childhood programs must intentionally focus on holistic development of children including physical, cognitive, social, cultural, spiritual and emotional development from prenatal to age five. Focusing narrowly on preschool in isolation goes against compelling evidence of the critical importance of holistic, integrated interventions early in life, beginning at pregnancy, to improve later developmental outcomes, educational readiness, health, economic and life success.

The early years are universally recognised as the critical period where the foundations are laid for a child’s future social emotional educational and health outcomes.⁴ Investment in the early years is now understood to be one of the most effective strategies available for reducing intergenerational disadvantage, building human capacity and creating a fairer society.

Investments of time and money in the early years have shown to be far more cost effective than investments made at any other time

(Heckman & Masterov 2004; Keatsdale Pty Ltd 2003)²

It is now understood that human brain development begins in the weeks following conception with around one-quarter of brain development occurring before birth. From birth to the age of three the child’s brain grows to two-thirds the size of an adult’s brain. It is the experiences a child has that physically wires and grows the brain. As a child is provided with opportunities to interact with people and their environment, brain cells make the connections that wire the brain.

After birth, each new stage of brain growth and skill development is underpinned by the quality of the connections established in earlier stages. It is important that parents, families and communities are encouraged and supported to provide responsive care and stimulation to help their children establish a solid foundation for their long-term health, learning and wellbeing. It is also understood that risk factors to optimal child development have a cumulative effect on development.⁵

The outcomes in the early years need to embrace a holistic framework of child and family development if Australia really wants to make a difference and close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. The notion of holistic child and family development, as opposed to a focus on English literacy and school readiness, provides a framework that highlights the importance of the many aspects of children’s development including physical, cognitive, social, cultural, spiritual and emotional development. Evidence also shows that readiness for school is a relational concept and that the child’s family, community and school must also be ‘ready’ if the child is to make a positive transition into the school environment.⁶ School transition programs need to have both an emphasis on the readiness of the children for school and equally the readiness of the schools to engage with the children and their families and be willing to develop mutual understandings of the families’ needs and aspirations for their children.

⁴ AG Closing the gap – Early learning programs that promote children’s developmental and educational outcomes Resource Sheet 15 Aug. 2012 L Harrison, S. Goldfield, E. Metcalfe, T. Moore.

⁵ Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen and Sroufe, 2005).

⁶ See Dockett, Sue and Bob Perry. "Readiness for School: A Relational Construct." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 34, no. 1 (2009): 20–26.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also provides a useful framework for focusing efforts on children's immediate wellbeing. In particular the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No 7 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'⁷ emphasises the importance of building the capacity of individuals and institutions to better advocate and protect children's interests, the need for multi-sectoral intervention programs and the professional development of practitioners charged with ensuring children have access to an appropriate standard of health care, living and social security. The General Comment also pays particular attention to the lack of provisions for children under three years of age and calls for all signatories to the Convention to ensure that infants and toddlers have access to high quality care and adopt an education policy that begins at birth.

Signatories to the Convention are also advised to ensure strategies for improving the well-being of very young children are developed in conjunction with their families and communities rather than imposing a standard one-size-fits-all approach. This is a critical component working with communities their aspirations knowledge and skills to develop from the ground up program and interventions that are contextually based and best fit for that community.

Working from an ecological model of human development, WVA acknowledges the interrelationship of factors in children's wellbeing and the systems that impact this, including the family, community, social and political, and the need these factors and systems to all be aligned so that efforts to closing the gap of disadvantage are effective. UNICEF in its recording of child poverty in rich countries also highlights the need for policies and programs that address the issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination.

⁷ UNICEF. "General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child." Florence, Italy: Innocenti Research Centre, 2006.
<http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/crcgencommen.pdf>

3. Adopt and commit to meaningful and achievable targets for increasing Australia's percentage of the GDP allocated to early childhood care and development programs and services for birth to five years.

Overall, Indigenous children measured in their first year of full-time school are not doing as well as their non-Indigenous counterparts⁸. The proportion of Indigenous children with development vulnerabilities increases with the community's remoteness. In 2012, 22 percent of Australian children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) and 11 percent of children were developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains. Vulnerability was particularly marked with Indigenous children.⁹

Australia ranks in the bottom three of OECD countries in benchmark standards relating to early childhood education and care; and is near the bottom (30/34) of OECD countries for the percentage of 3–5 year-olds in early learning or preschool.¹⁰ This is in contrast to New Zealand for example, which has 95 percent of all children being reached by early childhood education before starting primary school.¹¹ International evidence suggests globally that 15 year-old students who attended ECCD programs tend to perform better educationally than those who did not, even after accounting for their socio-economic backgrounds. Research emphasises that the benefits from early interventions are conditional on the level of "quality" of ECCD that children experience.¹² The average expenditure on early childhood care and education averages in OECD countries is around 0.5 percent of overall GDP, while Australia expends zero percent.¹³

As children account for more than one third of the Indigenous population the long term impact of the disadvantage they experience during childhood will have an exponential impact on future adult populations. Recent breakthroughs in neurobiological research together with cost benefit analysis of the development of human capital have demonstrated the importance of investing well in the early years. At no other time in a person's life is the brain more plastic and able to grow and develop in response to warm nurturing relationships and stimulating environments.

WVA supports and reiterates Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC's) recent call for:

"a COAG target for early intervention investment to address the under representation of our children in the early childhood education and care system and their over representation in the child protection system"

and

"the Australian Government to quarantine a proportion of the Child Care Assistance Package for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children."

as part of a new framework for systemic change, being called for as an outcome from their recent 2015 Conference held in Perth.¹⁴

⁸ Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research 2009. A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia – AEDI National Report 2009, Australian Government, Canberra.

⁹ AMA (2013) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Report Card 2012–2013, The Healthy Early Years – Getting the Right Start in Life

¹⁰ ARACY (2013) The Nest Agenda A National Plan for Child and Youth Wellbeing September 2013

¹¹ OECD (2013), Education indicators in Focus 2013/02 (February), OECD Publishing, Paris.

¹² Taguma M., Litjens I., Makowiecki, K., (2012) Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care, Sweden, OECD Publishing.

¹³ OECD 2013 Education Indicators in Focus – 2013/02 (February), OECD Publishing, Paris

¹⁴ http://www.snaicc.org.au/uploads/rsfil/003578_aeec.pdf

4. Support bilingual education from early childhood and throughout their school life in line with evidenced based bilingual approaches to education, best practice, the aspirations of Indigenous parents and; the human rights set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Support bilingual education approaches from early childhood and throughout school; this is based on best practice evidence of education and development effectiveness, our experience in development practice and listening to Indigenous people, and the human rights set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Joe Lo Bianco, cites over 1200 international studies:

"that provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of bilingual education for students who do not speak the dominant language when they start school".

(Indigenous Languages in Education: What the Research Actually Shows).

Australian National University adjunct professor, Charles Grimes, cites 691 of them and concludes that:

"It's easy to think that if you teach more English, students will learn more English. But that's not how it really works. ...," Professor Grimes says. Study after study shows that children learn best in the language they understand best. That should be obvious. Study after study also shows that where the primary language spoken in the home is not English, teaching them in both their own language plus English will improve their English far better than just teaching them in English alone".

(Source: Lisa Waller 2011: Learning in both worlds, <http://austcolled.com.au/article/ongoing-saga-bilingual-education-nt>)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is sourced from existing international human rights law obligations and was the result of a democratic and open process of negotiation involving Indigenous peoples and governments. On 3 April 2009, it was formally supported by the Australian Government.

Article 14 of the UNDRIP relevantly states:

"1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages...";

"2. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language."

The Australian Human Rights Commission noted with concern:

"The integration of Aboriginal languages into the formal education system through bilingual programs is consistent with international human rights standards. It makes schooling more accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and it recognises cultural difference in a manner that is non-discriminatory in international law. Bilingual education programs value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and knowledge. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities state that the success of the education of their

children should be measured both by standards of English literacy, and also by respect for their rights to education, language, culture and land.”¹⁵

Cultural protective factors such as language can mitigate risk factors that undermine the resilient and prosperous process of development for Indigenous children and youth. Hence an effective education system ought to consider such factors as critical for a successful and productive transition of Indigenous children into adulthood.

¹⁵ See https://www.humanrights.gov.au/information-concerning-australia-and-convention-rights-child-0#s8_1

- 5. Collaboratively develop, establish and commit to a long term, strategic and co-ordinated approach to Indigenous learning and education that is:**
- a) owned, driven, managed and governed by Aboriginal controlled organisations.**
 - b) flexible in service delivery and programs, within an integrated approach aligned to the priorities and aspirations articulated by communities for their children and families.**
 - c) committed to holistic child and family development.**

a) owned, driven, managed and governed by Aboriginal controlled organisations

International and local evidence shows that optimal outcomes in programs and services are achieved when they are driven by the people they are intended to benefit.¹⁶ This approach enables people to devise and implement their own programs, with government and others in supporting roles. The World Bank, for example, has invested more than \$10 billion into community-driven development in the last decade in response to the effectiveness of the approach.¹⁷ This approach is consistent with what Indigenous people and organisations continue to say. A range of successful initiatives and partnerships driven by Indigenous people and organisations take this approach in Australia and these strengths can be built upon and learned from.

We urge the Government to consider in this inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students the critical importance of having Indigenous specific services that are governed and managed by local Indigenous leaders and workers. WVA realises that the aspiration of Indigenous driven, owned, managed and governed educational services and programs in all locations requires system change, strengthening of capability and transfer of responsibility and authority, that will take time, expertise and investment. The investment of time and resources in capacity strengthening will vary from place to place and in some places a phased transfer of responsibility and authority will be required.

Local governance and respect for local decision making is critical. Throughout the last five years World Vision Australia has witnessed many instances where the communities have been consulted and then policy makers have gone away and done their best to achieve the services that they believe the community has asked for. But there good intentions have often confused community members who are puzzled either by the lack of action or the result of the consultations which is often something quite different from what the community expected. It is imperative that decisions and program models are not the result of one off consultations but are co-designed in an ongoing partnership with communities through continual dialogue about what is possible and not possible and why. Communities often have their own solutions to blockages but can't enact these solutions if they are not informed about what is holding things up. This is critical both in development and then implementation phases.

b. Flexible in delivery and service modelling promoting an integrated approach to the delivery of a community visions and aspirations for their children and families.

International and local evidence also shows that effective change in early childhood care, educational and other social and economic outcomes is achieved and measured not through independent programs and projects but through the sustained success of integrated programs, projects and services over time. Experiences elsewhere have shown that greater collaboration, service coordination, a shared vision and

¹⁶ Stanley F 2013. On the Ground: Key to Successful Policy Outcomes. *Griffith Review*, Volume 41, pp 200-210

¹⁷ The World Bank, "Community-Driven Development Overview", (Washington D.C: The World Bank Group, 2013).
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/communitydrivendevelopment/overview>

leadership can lead to an integrated service system and, over time, to improved lives for all Australian children.¹⁸

Practically, this means programs with a goal of improving student outcomes are part of an integrated portfolio of programs led by community members that includes programs and services connected with, for example, employment programs, health programs, school participation programs and safety, land and cultural programs.

World Vision Australia calls on the government to adopt the advice provided by many leading researchers and policy analysts with regard to 'partnering' or 'engaging' Indigenous people in their own programs and services¹⁹. We have found through our work in remote communities that there is an absence of this approach in early childhood and schooling systems which tend to be supply rather than demand driven. This means almost without exception that the service model utilised is decided somewhere remote from the community and based upon a theoretical understanding of community needs rather than an examination of what is really required by the community. This often results in an under utilisation of services and community frustration that their needs are not being addressed.

We urge the government therefore to adopt a demand driven, flexible and integrated approach that will result better utilisation of early childhood and educational services, community engagement and outcomes for all students.

c. Committed to holistic child, student and family development.

We congratulate the government on its recognition that child care and early learning plays an important role in helping Indigenous children, especially those in remote locations, develop skills that will assist them with a smooth transition to school and can set them up well for success at school. WVA acknowledges that school readiness is only part of a child's development. Holistic child and family development acknowledges the range of areas including physical, cognitive, social, cultural, spiritual and emotional that are essential to establish the strong foundations for life including formal schooling. Working from an ecological model of human development, WVA acknowledges the interrelationship of children's wellbeing and the systems that impact including the family, community, social and political and the need for all these levels to supplement and complement each other in closing the gap. UNICEF in its recording of child poverty in rich countries highlights the need for policies and programs that address the issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination.

As an example of this interrelationship we urge the government, not to lose sight of the need for remote schools in particular to adapt their curriculum, pedagogy and community engagement policies and practices so that they are well positioned to receive children into formal schooling. In our own school transition programs, partner schools have been astounded at the increase in children's attendance and in their ability to increasing engage families in their children's education when the schools themselves participate in early childhood activities led and managed by the families themselves. School transition programs need to have both an emphasis on the readiness of the children for school and equally the readiness of the schools to engage with the children and their families and be willing to develop mutual understandings of the families' needs and aspirations for their children.

¹⁸ 2010, June: Pritchard, P: Purdon, S: Chaplyn, J. Moving Forward Together – A guide to support the integration of service delivery for children and families.

¹⁹ Hunt, 2013, Engagement with Indigenous Communities and Key Sectors. Resource sheet no 3 Closing the Gap Clearing House