



Canberra Institute  
of Technology

YURAUNA CENTRE

SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION  
Artwork '**Spirited Place**' by John Johnson



# Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

## Submission to Senate Inquiry

November 2016



## Introduction

*In striving for both equity and excellence, there are several areas in which Australian school education needs to make significant improvement. First, Australia has failed to improve educational outcomes for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and addressing this issue must be a key priority over the next decade.*

*Australian governments must support all young Australians to achieve not only equality of opportunity but also more equitable outcomes. (Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2009)*

In Australia, it is now clear that the life trajectories and outcomes for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are stagnating, and by many measures have become worse over the last decade. By a number of key accepted national evidence bases, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children start behind their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers in a range of developmental, social and wellbeing outcomes, and then stay behind.

The Yurauna Centre and Northside Community Service welcomes the opportunity to submit to this important inquiry against a number of the Terms of Reference.

## Summary

The issues and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families are complex, varied and long-term. Despite goals in a number of areas in the Closing the Gap targets, the statistics point to significant entrenched issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children throughout their lives.

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 7 times as likely to be receiving child protection services, compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children<sup>1</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 9.5 times more likely to be in out-of-home care<sup>2</sup> - this percentage has been steadily rising since then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2007. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged between 1 and 4, this increases to 11 times more likely<sup>3</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are in detention at 24 times the rate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people<sup>4</sup>.

Australia's story for learning and development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is also poor. Across the five developmental domains tracked by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 2 times as likely as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be "developmentally vulnerable" on 1 or more (42.1% and 20.8%) domains, as well as 2.5 times as likely in 2 or more domains (26.2% and 10.2%)<sup>5</sup>.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were at least 2 times more likely to be vulnerable across each of the five individual developmental domains, with particularly poor results for language and cognitive skills – almost four times as likely as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (20.2% and 5.7%)<sup>6</sup>. In summary, according to 2015 data in early skills for life and

learning 59-64% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are classified as 'on track' compared to 76-86% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children<sup>7</sup>.

The facts above identify the uncomfortable but unavoidable fact that to be born as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child in this country, you are significantly more likely to start behind your non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers – and that you may never catch up. This is a legacy of two centuries of policies and programs that systematically disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people. While attempts have been, and are being made, to address this legacy the most recent Closing the Gap report highlights that while some things are improving, many are not or are getting worse<sup>8</sup>.

A growing body of research, evidence and longitudinal studies have pointed to the need for greater investment in, and implementation of, targeted early intervention programs in the first 5 – and ideally 3 – years of a child's life to address entrenched disadvantage and vulnerability<sup>9 10 11</sup>. The development of a child's brain is such that by the time they arrive at school, the period of greatest opportunity to change the trajectory of their life is essentially over<sup>12</sup>. While this does not mean that children and families cannot still be supported after the age of 5, it does become exponentially harder, more intensive and more expensive. Positive experiences in the first 5 years set the foundation for positive outcomes later in life.

Conversely, adversity, toxic stress and vulnerable circumstances in the first 5 years can impair development, with lifelong consequences<sup>13</sup>. Given this, it is no surprise that the developmental vulnerability evidenced in the AEDC leads directly into the outcomes seen in out-of-home care and protection services involvement. It is critical to look at new ways of targeting early intervention to support lifelong positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Quality, culturally-competent early childhood education (ECE) environments, available for all children from Birth-5, for greater periods of time can provide an antidote to adversity and vulnerability<sup>14</sup>. A recent Australian National University analysis of the impact of ECE and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children pointed to evidence that ECE has a "positive effect on developmental outcomes in the longer term"<sup>15</sup> and makes a recommendation to policy-makers that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific ECEC programs should be trialled and invested in.

Despite the evidence that early childhood education is a strong preventative factor for future disadvantage, only 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend a preschool program in the year before school, compared for 93% for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children<sup>16</sup>. It is now clear that significant policy changes are needed to address this gap, and that current planned reforms will only entrench and worsen it.

The Yurauna Centre and Northside Community Service submit that the Committee's report recommends:

- The development and immediate implementation of a **new wide-ranging early childhood education and care reform package** to replace the currently proposed Jobs for Families legislation;
- The continuation, and expansion, of funding and support to **Aboriginal Child and Family Centres**;
- The development and implementation of **targeted, wrap-around support, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families** identified early as being at risk of experiencing vulnerability.

## **A new early childhood education reform package**

Research has consistently shown the positive lifelong impact access to ECE can have on children<sup>17</sup>, particularly those experiencing vulnerable circumstances<sup>18</sup>. The Federal Government proposed Jobs For Families (JFF) reforms<sup>19</sup> have come under sustained criticism<sup>20</sup> for threatening to ability of those most in need of accessing early childhood education to access services.

Northside strongly views ECE as every child's human right, and advocates for the circumstances of a child's family to have no impact whatsoever on their ability to access ECE. Access based on simplistic notions of "participation" in the workforce and economy will deepen existing inequalities in Australia.

Internationally<sup>21</sup>, the case for investing in ECE is leading to significant policy focus and programs targeted at improving access and affordability, with a particular focus on children at risk of vulnerability. It is disappointing to see Australia moving in the opposite direction.

We refer to the Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), who have stated that:

*"We are concerned that the Australian Government – through fewer subsidised hours, less funding flexibility and no stable, long term funding under the Child Care Assistance Package – may deny many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the benefits of integrated early childhood development services."*

The JFF reforms are currently stalled in the Senate, and seem unlikely to be passed in their current form. The Government should use this opportunity to completely redesign a new package that prioritises the needs of children experiencing or at risk of vulnerability, rather than the working schedule of their families.

## Aboriginal Child and Family Centres

The Government's stated aim of eliminating the Budget Based Funding (BBF) model and expecting Aboriginal Child and Family services to transition to the same funding model as mainstream ECE services is short-sighted and ignores the clear contextual requirements of these services. SNAICC state that this will inevitably see the closure of many of these centres, with the result that:

*"By excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from adequate access to services, the Government will diminish their potential to make a smooth transition to school, compounding the likelihood of intergenerational disempowerment and unemployment. Children will fall behind before they have even started school and suffer greater risks of removal into out-of-home care."*

Child and Family Centres are true integrated models of support for children and families, providing not just ECE but allied health services, parenting support and a range of other services that their specific community requires.

The JFF reforms operate from the assumption that these services can operate successfully in the proposed "mainstream" ECE system. This is manifestly untrue. Not only do these services need to have their funding secured, the BBF model should be expanded and built upon.

## Targeted, wrap-around support for children and families

The well-regarded Closing the Gap Clearinghouse articulates the importance of integrated early childhood service delivery<sup>22</sup>, with 'wrap-around' delivery as a key principle of success in successful programs. In order to ensure that those children and families who most benefit from receiving support can access it, Government policy in this area must come from the "any barrier is a barrier" approach, and work to provide holistic and contextual support that is designed to fit around a family's context – not force a family to meet the requirements of a program or service.

As discussed above, part of the solution to ensuring the current story for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is not set in stone is the continuation and expansion of the Aboriginal Child and Family Centres. In addition, the Government must support and fund community-based-and-run programs and services that provide holistic, wrap-around support for children and families identified as being at risk.

There are a number of examples internationally that can be investigated for their applicability in the Australian context. One particularly strong example in practice is the Pen Green Centre<sup>23</sup>, which provides a range of different services accessible to the community that support both children and families experiencing vulnerability.

## About the CIT Yurauna Centre

The CIT Yurauna Centre is Canberra Institute of Technology's dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centre of excellence in Vocational Education. CIT Yurauna Centre can help students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander grow in knowledge, abilities and confidence by providing skills training, advice and cultural support within a culturally safe environment.

Yurauna supports students with fees, career planning, negotiated places into a program, changing programs, study support and navigating their studies at CIT.

We help students develop skills from basic reading, writing and cultural art to community services to help tell their own stories and express their own culture.

Students can also study courses across CIT and benefit from the extra support and community activities at the CIT Yurauna Centre.

Yurauna teachers are highly qualified, flexible and passionate facilitators of learning. The team have extensive experience and qualifications as well as skills across a range of disciplines. Staff continually enhance their own skills through formal education to ensure best practice.

## About Northside Community Service

We are a community-based, not for profit organisation established in 1976 through the efforts of concerned people wanting to provide and develop support and services for residents of North Canberra.

Today we employ over 150 staff, along with an active volunteer program and operate an annual budget of over \$11 million. In responding to the needs of our community we currently deliver a diverse range of services, including:

- early childhood education (ECE)
- services for older people and people with a disability
- home support, transport and social programs for seniors
- support programs for young people and families
- women's housing and support for formerly homeless people
- venue hire for community activities

## Further Reading

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- <sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Child Protection Australia 2014-15 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129554973>), p. vii
- <sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Child Protection Australia 2014-15 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129554973>), p. 54
- <sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Child Protection Australia 2014-15 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129554973>), p. 54
- <sup>4</sup> Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016 (<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016/report-documents/oid-2016-overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage-key-indicators-2016-report.pdf>), 4.13
- <sup>5</sup> Australian Early Development Census: AEDC National Report 2015 (<http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>), p. 32
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Early Development Census: AEDC National Report 2015 (<http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>), p. 26
- <sup>7</sup> Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016 (<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016/report-documents/oid-2016-overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage-key-indicators-2016-report.pdf>), 6.8
- <sup>8</sup> Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care: Report signals Australia continues to fall short in efforts to Close the Gap (<http://www.snaicc.org.au/report-signals-australia-continues-to-fall-short-in-efforts-to-close-the-gap/>)
- <sup>9</sup> NSW Family & Community Services: Barriers to participation: The experiences of disadvantaged young children, their families and professionals in engaging with early childhood services, 2011. ([http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/321583/barriers\\_to\\_participation.pdf](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/321583/barriers_to_participation.pdf))
- <sup>10</sup> Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts, 2016. (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/from-best-practices-to-breakthrough-impacts/>)
- <sup>11</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth: Better systems, better chances: A review of research and practice for prevention and early intervention, 2015 (<https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=207>)
- <sup>12</sup> Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: Key Findings from the Report. ([http://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r.wengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Key\\_Findings\\_Breakthrough\\_Impacts.pdf](http://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r.wengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Key_Findings_Breakthrough_Impacts.pdf))
- <sup>13</sup> Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child: From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: Key Findings from the Report. ([http://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r.wengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Key\\_Findings\\_Breakthrough\\_Impacts.pdf](http://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r.wengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Key_Findings_Breakthrough_Impacts.pdf))
- <sup>14</sup> The Heckman Equation: The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children (<http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/case-investing-disadvantaged-young-children>)
- <sup>15</sup> Australian National University, Centre of Aboriginal Economic Policy Research: The relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the outcomes of Indigenous children: evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) (<http://caep.r.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2015WP103.php>), p.20
- <sup>16</sup> Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016 (<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016/report-documents/oid-2016-overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage-key-indicators-2016-report.pdf>), 4.18
- <sup>17</sup> HighScope Perry Preschool Study (<http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219>)
- <sup>18</sup> The Abecedarian Project (<http://abc.fpg.unc.edu/>)
- <sup>19</sup> Jobs for Families Child Care Package (<https://www.education.gov.au/jobsforfamilies>)
- <sup>20</sup> Coalition majority again refuses to make amendments to Jobs for Families Child Care Package, recommending Bill be passed unchanged (<http://www.snaicc.org.au/coalition-majority-refuses-make-amendments-jobs-families-child-care-package-recommending-bill-passed-unchanged/>)
- <sup>21</sup> 4 Big Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Development (<http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/4-big-benefits-investing-early-childhood-development>)
- <sup>22</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse: Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school, p.6 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2011/ctgc-rs07.pdf>)
- <sup>23</sup> Pen Green Centre (<http://www.pengreen.org/>)