
COMMUNITY-LED INTEGRATED EARLY YEARS SERVICES: A VEHICLE FOR REALISING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early childhood services as a vehicle for progressing our most vulnerable children's rights. Remedying significant gaps in the realisation of children's rights requires targeted, holistic strategies that respond to the causes of rights violations, recognise the indivisible and interrelated nature of human rights, and build on evidence of what works. Integrated approaches to the delivery of early childhood programs—that are owned by communities, respond to identified local needs and overcome service fragmentation—have significant potential to drive forward the realisation of Indigenous children's rights. This focuses on children, but necessarily supports strengthening and empowering families and communities to ensure sustainable long-term change. This is a strategy that Australia cannot afford not to support.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are among the most vulnerable in Australia. They are 10 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be removed from their families and placed into out-of-home care,¹ and face infant mortality rates nearly twice that of non-Indigenous children.² The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed deep concern at the serious and widespread discrimination Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to face in accessing health, education and other fundamental services.³ To address these gaps, the Committee recommended, amongst other things, that the Australian Government invest in prevention and intensive support services to strengthen vulnerable families; improve access to health care for remote Indigenous children; and provide free or affordable holistic early childhood care and education for children aged birth to three years.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* ('CRC') specifically mentions Indigenous children, in recognition that they not only have unique rights, but also face particular challenges in enjoying their rights. As a signatory to the CRC, Australia has an obligation to enact specific strategies to address these challenges.

The early childhood setting provides a particularly valuable focus area, given the evidence that the ages from zero to three are a critical time in human development with the setting of neurological and biological pathways.⁴ Targeted and effective early childhood programs therefore offer significant opportunity to transform lifetime trajectories, particularly for vulnerable children.

Within the context of early childhood interventions, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlights the evidence of what works:

- Children at risk of poor developmental and educational outcomes benefit from high-quality education and care programs in the years before school.
- Early learning programs that are supported by the community, provided by educators who are qualified, well-attended, well-resourced, and evidence-based are a key contributor to good early childhood outcomes.
- Helping families and communities to be supportive and effective in their roles in children's lives is a key protective factor for the early years and a key component in the design and delivery of high-quality, effective early years programs.
- Uptake of early learning programs by Indigenous families is enhanced by community partnerships, culturally relevant practice that values local Indigenous knowledge, and appropriate teacher training and support.⁵

This evidence provided within a child rights framework and targeted at the most vulnerable children, charts a clear pathway for change. This pathway is increasingly recognised in the national reform agenda, which enshrines in policy the importance of early childhood education and the necessity of a culturally competent approach in achieving targeted outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including children.

PROMISING EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICE MODELS

In 2009 the Council of Australian Governments took a key step through the implementation of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development ('NPAIECD'), which

established 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Centres (ACFCs). Other integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services are provided through the non-mainstream Federal Budget Based Funded (BBF) program, which supports child care services in areas—predominantly regional, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities—where a market-based approach is not feasible. An estimated 90 of these services deliver Indigenous early year programs.

The foundation of both BBF services and the ACFCs is an early childhood education and care program, like a long day care centre or community preschool. Integrated support services for children and their families are then built around this, based on identified community need. These may include: diverse health services such as health assessments, hearing, psychology, speech pathology and maternal health; transition to school programs; cultural and arts programs; behavioural management programs; additional needs programs; outreach and transport supports; parenting programs; playgroups; legal and housing supports; and family violence counselling. The services have Indigenous community boards which govern their operation and ensure that culture is infused throughout all service provision.

Clear program objectives and long-term funding arrangements are needed to enable these services to deliver long-term benefits.

These not-for-profit entities are essential one-stop shops that have arisen out of community need for culturally strong early childhood and family support services in areas where few accessible services for Indigenous families exist, and rates of disadvantage are high. They operate as culturally grounded, community development engines that nurture and protect children, and support families to raise their children strong, healthy and proud. There are also significant 'flow-on' impacts of such services in Indigenous communities to local workforce development, local governance, leadership, family strengths and stability, and community empowerment.

CASE STUDIES

The unique, holistic approach of these services means that they support a number of central children's rights articulated in the CRC. Some are described briefly below, highlighting service examples.

- **Article 18:** integrated early years services implement parenting programs to directly support the capacity of families to care

for their children, and to ensure that families have access to the additional services they may need.

Logan Aboriginal Child and Family Centre provides a variety of supports to parents and carers. The 'Grandparents Program' provides invaluable respite care and support to the high numbers of grandparents raising children in the community. The 'Deadly Dads' program focuses on fathers' attachment and family relationships, and has been an incredible success with high participation rates. Annually a further 60 parents participate in programs such as 'Circles of Security', 'Incredible Years', '1-2-3 Magic' and the 'Abecedarian Approach'. These programs are invaluable in working with families who have experienced intergenerational trauma and the ensuing erosion of parenting skills that colonisation, child removal and discrimination have brought about.⁶

- **Article 23:** integrated early years services facilitate the participation of high rates of children with a disability, ensuring that they can enjoy their right to early childhood education and care.

From June to December 2014 the nine NSW ACFCs saw the participation of approximately 1850 children, of whom 15 per cent had a disability. Luke's story is just one of these:

Luke's educational journey began with a challenging start. Commencing at a public kindergarten in 2014, Luke was then asked to leave due to what was termed his disruptive behaviour, and inability to cope with the school environment. His mother, a single parent, was incredibly distressed, and turned to her local ACFC, where she knew and trusted the staff. The Centre enrolled Luke for a year's preparation before school, and arranged for him to be assessed. This revealed that a language delay was hindering his successful transition to school. Luke was then linked in with the supports he needed: speech therapy and a playgroup for children with disabilities, both facilitated by and hosted at the ACFC. ACFC staff and the speech therapist supported Luke's mother to ensure consistent care. After a year, Luke began school again through a supported transition process. His language development has improved significantly, confirmed by increased vocabulary and comprehension test results, and he is now succeeding at school.⁷

- **Article 24:** integrated early years services bring an array of allied health services under one roof, ensuring that children's health needs are met. Services also address children's nutritional needs, and work to build families' knowledge of healthy dietary choices.

At Cullunghutti ACFC, child and family health is supported through an extensive range of freely available on-site allied health services delivered through strong partnerships with other service providers.

These include:

- speech and occupational therapy
- psychology
- paediatric services, including child hearing assessments, health checks and coordination of GP assessments for allied health plans
- antenatal maternal health assessments.

These services support numerous children who previously experienced limited access to health professionals.⁸

- **Article 28:** integrated early years services foster children's educational development through high-quality, culturally appropriate early learning programs and specific strategies to support positive transitions to school.

Of the 650 children participating in a formal early learning program through one of the nine NSW ACFCs, nearly 80 per cent had not previously accessed an early childhood program.⁹ Not only do Indigenous integrated services support children through high-quality education programs, they are also critical in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's school attendance, participation and outcomes. These services run transition to school programs that see Indigenous children socially and developmentally ready for school. They build relationships between the family and school, and prepare the school to receive the children— factors critical for an effective transition. Given that first relationships with school shape a child's educational journey, this role is fundamental in ensuring Indigenous education outcomes.

The success of such programs is confirmed by the Principal of Thomastown West Primary School in Victoria, who highlights the work of Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre:

... we have gone from one Indigenous student in 2009 to last year we had 20 and we are now 5 per cent Indigenous So the transition for the students and their families is really great because it can be tricky ... to work with the Aboriginal community, understanding what do you want. Bubup Wilam have been fantastic as an advisory board particularly to me as a Principal.¹⁰

- **Article 30:** culture informs every aspect of integrated early years services. These services support children and their families to learn about, celebrate and be proud of their culture and languages. Further, they support the capacity of other service providers and schools to be culturally competent through engagement and partnerships. Where children move frequently or are in out-of-home care, the services can be a safe, consistent part of children's lives and play a significant role in connecting them to their culture. As a community

controlled organisation, they often scrutinise wrap around services, ensuring only culturally competent service provision to children. They also provide a cultural lens to all programs, actioning the right to culture.

It is critically important that cost-saving measures are not prioritised over the provision of essential services for our most vulnerable communities.

Culture forms part of the 'life and breath' of Ningkuwum-Ngamayuwu Halls Creek ACFC, operating in the remote Kimberley region. Cultural, language and community activities are an integral part of the daily program, with the service supported in this by staff from the Kimberley Language Resource Centre and local community members. A cultural advisory group, comprised of Elders and community members, provides staff with advice and guidance on cultural and community matters. The flow-on effects of this are openly visible in increased community pride in the local culture and centre.¹¹

- **Article 31:** integrated early years services are valuable spaces in which children can play and experience recreational, cultural, and artistic activities.

Educators at Koonibba Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service in remote South Australia take their children on weekly nature walks through the community. These walks connect children with their environment and ground them in their community and history. Activities such as building wiltjas (bush shelters) help children explore the traditional practices of their ancestors, and conduct group problem-solving. Interaction with community members who accompany the walks help children develop strong links with their community and to see their natural environment as communal land for which they all share responsibility.¹²

CONCLUSION

These services provide diverse critical supports with immediate and long-term impact, offering a significant opportunity for widespread progress in Indigenous children's rights. This conclusion has some significant policy implications. While the building blocks are in place—with a strong policy platform, evidence of what works and a group of community owned services with existing relationships of trust with communities—clear program objectives and long-term funding arrangements are needed to enable these services to

deliver long-term benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Most ACFCs have partial funding until June 2015 only. The BBF program has been underfunded for a long time with a fixed bucket of funding currently under review, with reform anticipated in the next few months. It is critically important that cost-saving measures are not prioritised over the provision of essential services for our most vulnerable communities.

Secondly, service provision must be scaled up. Existing data suggests that only 2.9 per cent of Indigenous children participate in approved early years services, despite making up 5 per cent of the population.¹³ A recent Productivity Commission report identified a gap of 15 000 places in early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.¹⁴ Increasing availability of Indigenous integrated early year services then provides a clear avenue for redressing these low rates of participation, and a significant opportunity to meet Australian Government 'Closing the Gap' objectives.

The authors propose an expanded, non-mainstream Australian Government program to adequately resource existing services and fund the establishment and operation of new services to redress the identified service gap. This approach requires a fundamental shift in our thinking. It requires us to recognise young children as rights holders, and to recognise that these services are the vehicles or "children's rights chariots" through which we empower our youngest and most disadvantaged citizens to realise their rights. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services are one-stop rights shops that address a number of children's rights, not in isolation, but collectively, to ensure maximum positive impact on children's development. Not only do they support children directly, they also support capacity-building within the ecological environment surrounding the child. They harness the 'village' in the raising of our children.

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- 4 Coalition of Australian Governments, National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia (2009) 3.
- 5 Linda J Harrison et al, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes*, Resource sheet no. 15 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (August 2012) 1-2.
- 6 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Fact sheets on our early years services - what is the issue and what needs to happen?* (2014) 7.
- 7 Ibid 3.
- 8 Ibid 4.
- 9 Ibid 2.
- 10 Ibid 1.
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- 12 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Good Practice Fact Sheets*, Fact Sheet 02 (2013).
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- 14 Ibid.

Solar Eclipse
 Karina Coombes
 Acrylic on linen

