

OCTOBER 2020

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ABORIGINAL ROUNDTABLE

BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR MEANINGFULLY
ENGAGING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND
THEIR FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Acknowledgments

Source Nation wishes to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of Australia and custodians of the oldest continuous culture in the world. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and emerging and recognise their wisdom, strength, and resilience.

Source Nation acknowledges the Darug and Awabakal nations and communities of where the consultations were facilitated from by Dixie Crawford and Kerindy Clarke.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men who participated in the consultations and thank them for the contribution and commitment to improving the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and early childhood education.

Key Learnings

Focus Area 1: What are the barriers impacting participation of Aboriginal children in ECE services?

Aboriginal children and families can find participating in ECE services challenging because:

- There's a lack of culturally competent and safe ECE services including culturally incompetent staff, a lack of Aboriginal staff and a western-based curriculum
- There are access issues relating to affordability and transport, and a lack of flexibility for transient families with children
- There are low levels of awareness of the importance of ECE and a lack of confidence or skills to navigate the ECE system amongst Aboriginal families and communities
- There's a fear of child welfare intervention
- There's a lack of investment in Aboriginal-led services.

Focus Area 2: What do Aboriginal families look for in ECE services?

Aboriginal families want ECE services to be **culturally safe environments** that:

- value and nurture culture, language, kinship and identity
- have strong connections to community and Country
- prioritise relationship-building and develop trust
- provide holistic, wraparound support
- are accessible and affordable
- employ Aboriginal staff at all levels

Aboriginal children and families want to feel a **sense of belonging** at their ECE service.



Figure 1: Wordcloud generated from Roundtable discussions

Focus Area 3: How can ECE services effectively engage and empower Aboriginal families?

ECE services can:

- Provide holistic, wraparound support for families including
 - Supported Playgroups to promote a smooth transition to ECE
 - Employ ECE Aboriginal Family and Community Liaison Officers to engage families beyond the gate
 - Provide home-based and intensive support programs
 - Create links to allied health services
- Provide formal and informal engagement opportunities for families and community members.

Focus Area 4: How can the ECE sector work together to ensure best practice approaches?

The sector can:

- Value and support localised, community-driven approaches
- Invest in workforce development with a focus on Aboriginal leadership and employment and the upskilling of non-Aboriginal staff
- Provide long-term funding opportunities, funding support and streamlined application and acquittal processes
- Consistently embed Aboriginal goals and values into ECE curriculums state-wide

- Strengthen accountability frameworks to foster a commitment to Aboriginal engagement and outcomes.

Background

The New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education (DoE) is seeking to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children by co-designing an Aboriginal Early Childhood Education (ECE) Strategy. The strategy will look to address gaps in educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and align to the updated Closing the Gap targets including:

- By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Year Before Schooling early childhood education to 95 per cent.
- By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.
- By 2031, there is a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal languages being spoken.

Source Nation was engaged by the Department of Education Early Childhood Education Directorate to facilitate three early childhood education roundtable discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and leaders within the sector to inform the development of key strategy focus areas.

Three roundtable sessions were delivered via Zoom videoconferencing for two-hours with members from the Early Childhood Education Directorate alongside 23 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders from the ECE sector across NSW. Participants within the roundtable sessions were attending online from rural, regional and metropolitan locations. Roundtable sessions were recorded, with participant consent. The discussions were thematically analysed and synthesised.

The objective of each roundtable session was to: (1) identify the barriers and strategies for greater participation in Early Childhood Education services (ECEs); (2) discuss how Aboriginal children and families want to see ECE services shaped and delivered; and (3) discuss how ECEs can effectively empower and engage Aboriginal children and families, including how to promote Aboriginal education as everyone's business within the sector, ensuring best practice approaches.

Findings

Focus Area 1: Barriers impacting participation of Aboriginal children and their families in ECE services

Roundtable discussions highlighted consistent themes relating to barriers that reduced the likelihood of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families to confidently engage in early childhood education services, including receiving 600 hours of preschool education. Overall, stakeholders emphasised that many ECE services, particularly mainstream ECE services, often failed to recognise and meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities which ultimately has an impact on their willingness and ability to engage with services. Identified barriers impacting the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in ECE services included:

- A lack of culturally competent and safe ECE services including culturally incompetent staff, a lack of Aboriginal staff and a western-based curriculum
- Access issues relating to financial, transport and enrolment barriers and a lack of flexibility for transient families
- Low levels of awareness of the importance of ECE and a lack of confidence in navigating the ECE system amongst Aboriginal families and communities
- Fear of child welfare intervention
- A lack of investment in Aboriginal-led services.

Lack of culturally competent and safe ECE environments

Culturally incompetent staff and lack of Aboriginal staff

Roundtable participants discussed the central role all ECE service staff play in creating a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Roundtable participants described there is often a lack of attention was given to developing cultural competency among non-Aboriginal ECE service staff. The lack of participation in learning about, or exposure to understanding Aboriginal lived experiences was viewed as hindering the capability of staff to recognise the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal communities. Lacking insight into the social and political experiences of Aboriginal families and communities means ECE services are ill-equipped to identify the barriers Aboriginal families face and miss opportunities to come up with strategies to assist families in overcoming the challenges.

Ad-hoc cultural awareness training was viewed as a very limited way of building the capacity of non-Aboriginal ECE service staff to approach their work in a culturally safe manner. For example, participating in cultural awareness training did not necessarily result in strengthened relationships with local Aboriginal families and communities or the embedding

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews authentically within ECE curriculums and day-to-day service delivery:

What I'm witnessing a lot is that services do some training and they think that's it whereas it's actually about the daily routine, the daily language, the daily meet and greet and yarn.

It's okay to say we're going to do this Indigenous activity or display this or read this but if there's no underlying intent and purpose for it, there's no point to that. That's not engaging the children or their families. It's just a tokenistic thing to tick a box.

The lack of Aboriginal staff working within ECE services was identified as a barrier to engaging Aboriginal children and families in ECE and the importance of employing local, Aboriginal staff within ECE services was emphasised. Aboriginal staff were seen as crucial to creating a culturally safe environment in ECE services, especially mainstream ones. A lack of Aboriginal staff was also highlighted as a prominent issue within rural and remote communities where attracting and retaining staff was often more challenging. The need for Aboriginal staff within ECE services was seen as vital to ensuring Aboriginal worldviews and lived experiences were recognised and understood and to increasing enrolments of Aboriginal children:

The staff that were working there weren't culturally competent, weren't being sensitive enough to the families that were coming in. We brought an Aboriginal worker there to support families and gradually over a few years, we now have 95% Aboriginal kids in there.

Western-based curriculum and educational goals

ECE curriculums that were inclusive of Aboriginal cultures and worldviews were discussed as a fundamental component of creating a culturally safe ECE service environment for Aboriginal children, families and communities. However, it was noted that mainstream ECE services often lacked the capacity to effectively build relationships with local Aboriginal communities which adversely impacted their ability to embed Aboriginal knowledges in ECE curriculums and family engagement in those services. For example, without sufficient and meaningful community engagement and participation in ECE curriculums, cultural educational activities could be inappropriate, tokenistic or irrelevant to the local community:

At the mainstream preschool they had a good intent and wanted to do things and include Aboriginal perspectives but they don't have relationships with community and don't know where to go so they end up doing something that may not be correct for that part of the land or they might not do anything.

Importantly, the educational goals upon which the ECE system, including curriculums, are built were viewed as being firmly rooted in western values. Prioritising western educational

goals over Aboriginal aspirations for children's learning and development within the ECE system creates barriers for Aboriginal families and communities to meaningfully engage in ECE services. Aboriginal families may feel excluded from the ECE system or be reluctant to participate in the system if its perceived as undervaluing the cultural and identity needs of their children:

We see it as a user pay system. It seems to be geared towards working families so it's very mainstream. It's seen as a way of enabling both parents to work and I think from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, the Aboriginal Child and Family Centres were really built around the needs of children, their developmental needs. Our children have different needs. They have cultural needs; they have a need to maintain a strong connection to their identity. I think the system itself that we are trying to work within isn't friendly towards that, the goals we have for our children.

Access Issues

Several significant accessibility barriers that hinder Aboriginal children and their families from engaging with early childhood education were identified during the roundtable sessions. Some were consistent across various locations in NSW while other access issues may be specific, context and location-based issues.

Financial barriers

The financial burden placed on Aboriginal families when attempting to access ECE services was identified as a key barrier to participating in ECE. The financial cost of both Aboriginal and mainstream ECE services was viewed as having an excluding effect for many Aboriginal children and families, who continue to experience poorer socio-economic outcomes than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This was seen as particularly straining for Aboriginal families with multiple children. Roundtable participants explained that for Aboriginal families experiencing poverty, ECE may be viewed, understandably, as less of a priority than providing basic necessities for children such as food and housing. They also highlighted how families may choose not to send their children to ECE out of fear of being judged by non-Aboriginal staff for being unable to provide their children with healthy foods:

The cost is often prohibitive, trying to put food on the table and sending kids to preschool.

There's lots of barriers around fees and costs and the way that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services are structured around access.

It could be they don't have the funds available to provide the healthy lunch that's expected in a mainstream school so they just won't send them that day. It's easier to keep them home then face the judgement of someone else saying 'oh, you haven't provided that today'. It goes back to that welfare context of feeling judged.

In addition to ECE service fees, the cost of documentation required to enrol children in ECE creates barriers for Aboriginal families. The need to provide birth certificates at the point of enrolment was identified as a challenge and common deterrent for Aboriginal families. Roundtable participants explained the many circumstances that Aboriginal children and families experience that result in the loss of important documentation, such as, domestic violence or involvement with the out-of-home care system. The cost of replacing lost documentation can be too great for many families:

Birth certificates for a lot of families is a barrier especially if they are transient or are in out-of-home care. That's a big barrier and families not having the resources to access those so we have had to put in a lot of time to help families in our playgroup to get access to their birth certificates and immunisations. The cost of those, especially if they've moved and have a few children is huge.

If they've left a domestic violence situation or they've had to move states or there could be multiple children in the one family, that's a big financial barrier having to provide this documentation that you may have had once upon a time then it's been lost or destroyed. The thought of having to do all of that that when you're trying to deal with life and survival, it just gets pushed aside and it's easier not to do it.

Transport barriers

A lack of transport for Aboriginal children to attend ECE services was consistently acknowledged as a significant barrier for services who do not provide school pick-ups and drop-offs for children. This was more difficult for Aboriginal families living in regional and remote locations, who may live some distance away from their preferred, closest or only ECE service. With limited or no access to public or private transportation, getting children to an ECE service becomes a difficult a task:

Transport is also a big barrier. We don't have a bus which is difficult.

We've got an Aunt in town who's got her grandkids and great grandkids enrolled in our service now but she's struggling with transport. They live 20 minutes-drive from the service and the house does have a car, but they prioritise that for the people in the house that work.

We are spread out geographically, but we only have the one preschool and for some of our families it's really hard to get to. We struggle to get the numbers of Aboriginal kids into that preschool. Ideally for us we'd be looking for another preschool that's close to one of the fastest growing aboriginal communities.

Transience

Being a transient Aboriginal family was identified as a barrier to participating in ECE. Although transience can promote Aboriginal kinship connections and connections to Country, ECE services may not recognise transience as a cultural strength or cater to transient families. Roundtable participants indicated how some ECE services were inflexible

to the needs of transient families, giving preference to non-transient families who can provide more secure enrolments and payment of fees:

I think there are a lot of families that are transient as well. They have family come over or they travel a bit. We need to be flexible for those families.

Preschools might have already met their quota or be reluctant to take on a family if they know the child is going to come and go in a month and there's someone else who is going to be there from 3-5 years old.

Low levels of awareness and confidence

Roundtable participants reported low levels of awareness of the importance of ECE amongst Aboriginal families and communities. They expressed how early childhood learning was not talked about in Aboriginal family and community settings as much as primary and secondary education. Low awareness of a children's rights to access and receive education and the importance of ECE to children's development, impacts participation of Aboriginal children in ECE services including receiving 600 hours of preschool education.

A lack of confidence and skills to navigate the ECE system was also identified as a barrier for Aboriginal children to participate in ECE. For example, it was expressed that some Aboriginal parents and families find enrolment processes overwhelming and confronting due to the complexity of forms and the requirement for supporting documentation such as birth certificates and immunisation records. Without support to complete forms, parents with low levels of literacy may struggle to enrol their children. Roundtable participants highlighted that some parents may feel too shy or fearful to reach out for support and assistance or be unaware that support exists.

There's a shyness. Parents can be shy and don't know the help is there.

There can be fear and anxiety of systems and a lack of confidence to walk through the front door.

Fear of child welfare intervention

Fear and mistrust of ECE services was also identified as a barrier to engaging Aboriginal children and families. The knowledge and experience of the Stolen Generations and fear of welfare (Department of Community and Justices, formerly known as DOCS and FACS) agencies taking children from ECECs is a barrier to families trusting that their children will be safe in ECE settings. As a result of collective and intergenerational trauma as well as intergenerational child welfare intervention, families may avoid situations where their families can be monitored or under surveillance:

The service was set up by DOCS which was a barrier. I had an Aunt who said she wouldn't come back because it's just another way to take their children.

There's that fear also of that welfare stigma. We are assessed and sometimes [parents] prefer to keep their children with their family if they have grandparents or aunts.

Lack of investment in Aboriginal-led services

Roundtable participants identified the lack of investment in Aboriginal-led ECE services as a barrier for participation in ECE for Aboriginal children and families. Aboriginal-led services were viewed as being best placed to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and families. While there are a growing number of Aboriginal-led services that are supported and co-designed with local Aboriginal communities, there are still too few to service and reach Aboriginal children and families across the state:

I think the level of investment in Aboriginal-led services is not there. There's just amazing leadership in those services...That creates a barrier for children to participate. We need more of those services that are supported by the community, designed by the community, overseen by the local community and employ local people...I think the core of it is culture and identity and I just think when you're dealing with a mainstream model and system, it makes it very difficult to grow and develop that.

Inconsistencies in the way different models of ECE services are funded were also viewed as disadvantaging Aboriginal-led services. Roundtable stakeholders indicated that this placed the responsibility on Aboriginal-led ECE services to seek out their own sources of funding to provide their children and families with adequate support. Where ECE services managed to secure funding, it was often short-term which left ECE services in precarious circumstances, unable to guarantee the long-term future of their important programs, such as the Ninganah No More language program.

We're not funded in the same way as ACFCs so we don't have access to Intensive Family Support and those things. To make that happen we have to form partnerships and be street smart and pull some money from somewhere which might be short term...We need the funding to make it work.

Ninganah No More has been such a successful program. What would make it more successful is a long-term approach to policies where services aren't forced to reapply for these programs each year or each term. It takes a long time to establish those outcomes.

Focus Area 2: What do Aboriginal families look for in ECE services?

Roundtable participants identified a number of important attributes that Aboriginal families look for when assessing whether or not to participate in ECE services. These attributes were framed as vital to fostering Aboriginal engagement in ECE services and overcoming the above challenges Aboriginal families face.

Overall, Aboriginal families want ECE services to be **culturally safe environments**. This encompasses the following:

- valuing and nurturing culture, language, kinship and identity
- having strong connections to community and Country
- prioritising relationship-building and developing trust
- providing holistic, wraparound support
- being accessible, affordable and flexible
- employing Aboriginal staff at all levels

Feeling a **sense of belonging** at an ECE service was consistently emphasised as an critical need for Aboriginal children and families.

Relationships and trust are really important and that's what we mean by cultural safety. If families feel that, it's going to make a huge difference. Preschool shouldn't be thought of as something separate but part of our community and family.

Families are looking for culture, Aboriginal staff, relationships. They're also looking for community involvement and an open service where people can come as they please. They are looking for a sense of belonging. People want to trust and feel comfortable to come into the service and say 'hey, I'm having a bit of trouble with this, what can I do?'. And also, for it to be affordable. Most of all they want their kids to have a good time there and a good experience and that's because of the culture, relationships and belonging.

They want to send their kids somewhere that language and culture is taught and respected and is immersed into everyday life in these centres. They want our centres to reflect our community's culture.

Focus Area 3: Empowering Aboriginal families through effective engagement

A number of strategies for effective engagement and empowerment of Aboriginal families in ECE services were put forward. This included strategies to overcome barriers to participation in ECE that have already been successfully implemented in ECE services across the state such as supported playgroups, home-based programs, Aboriginal Family and Community Liaison Officers, links to allied health and providing families and communities with formal and informal ways of engaging with ECE services.

Designing and implementing holistic, wraparound support for families

Supported Playgroups

While support exists for transitioning children from ECE to primary school, little support is provided to transition children from home to ECE. Supported playgroups were identified as an effective pathway for Aboriginal families to transition from home to ECE. Supported

playgroups, facilitated or visited by ECE service staff, were highlighted as an excellent opportunity for building relationships and familiarity with families, promoting ECE and providing assistance with enrolling in ECE services. Supported playgroups were recognised as a place where the knowledge, skills and awareness of ECE for Aboriginal families could be nurtured:

Supported playgroups are the first step in getting our kids enrolled in preschools.

We have a little hub and we run a lot of supported play groups out of that and while we do that, we are actually supporting our parents to upskill them or give them education around next steps and looking at early childhood places and how to do that. We connect those families, wherever they live, with preschools or early learning and daycare programs...Having mentors at supported playgroups is something that's a real strength to build parent's capacity of what the next steps are with starting early education.

Home-based programs and support

Home-based programs that have been developed to encourage early learning and participation in a quality early childhood education program were put forward as an effective strategy for engaging Aboriginal families. Going into the homes of Aboriginal families to support them to build rich home learning environments and to nurture their role as children's first teachers was discussed as a successful way of building on the strengths of Aboriginal families and in turn, increasing enrolments in ECE services. Both the Aboriginal Families as Teachers and HIPPY programs were heralded as providing the mentorship and guidance Aboriginal families may need to feel empowered to actively participate in their children's early learning:

With the Aboriginal Families as Teachers program, we go out to home and take books parents can read to their children. It's about getting parents ready for child's first year in preschool. We've seen an increase in enrolments at our community preschool and mainstream schools. It's that support, that hand holding. They might not be sure of the processes. It provides mentorship and access to a person you trust and can get advice from. Someone who knows you need a birth certificate.

Our HIPPY program provides a wrap-around service and has allowed us to build those strong relationships.

Aboriginal Family and Community Liaison Officers

Funding and establishing Aboriginal Family and Community Liaison Officers roles within ECE services was viewed as an effective strategy for engaging and empowering Aboriginal families in ECE. The importance of providing support to Aboriginal families outside of ECE premises, in places where they feel more comfortable, was emphasised. Roundtable stakeholders consistently voiced the need to have designated Aboriginal workers who can

work with families 'beyond the gate' to establish rapport and identify their strengths, needs and barriers. Importantly, it was noted that existing ECE service staff may not have the capacity to take on this significant role due to competing demands on their time. Community outreach, through attending community events and advisory groups was identified as another critical way to build relationships and strengthen connections to community that could be led by an Aboriginal Family and Community Liaison Officer:

We need to spend more time with the families and be enabled to go to their homes or wherever they feel comfortable meeting. It could be down at the weir (the local river), or coffee shop...It's about having a conversation with families to see what the barriers or problems and strengths are that they have and unravel all of that before they can concentrate on their children. It's equally important to look after the parents as well to empower them to then contribute to their children's education.

Community liaison work is important. One of the services we're working with has established that program already and they are now at capacity with enrolments with the vast majority being Aboriginal children. The key to that was having someone support families beyond the gate. I call it beyond the gate because we need to engage with community.

The key person is the person who goes out and sees the families. They might go to other school events and just be another Aboriginal face from the service that's involved with community and families and goes and sits on a couple of groups that really lifts the profile of ECE and makes those links with families outside the services. That's always worked for us.

Links to Allied Health and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

Building in opportunities for children and families to be linked into allied health or additional support services within ECE settings was also identified as a strategy for engaging Aboriginal families in ECE. The importance of ensuring that all needs of children and families could be met in one place, the ECE service, was stressed by roundtable participants. By doing so, families can have easier and earlier access to the range of supports they may need and feel confident that their ECE service approaches child and family wellbeing in a holistic way:

With kids who have developmental issues, that they're picked up early, identified early and kids get access to a service to overcome those.

Bringing allied health into services so parents don't have to seek that out in their own time.

Yes we have educational people who know their roles but identifying disabilities and kids with needs is a big barrier. Provide some help with NDIS applications and referrals.

Providing formal and informal engagement opportunities

Roundtable participants discussed how providing families with engagement opportunities, both formal and informal, can effectively build trust and goodwill between ECE services and Aboriginal families and communities. Formal engagement opportunities that were identified included space for parents and family members on ECE committees, boards or advisory groups as well as P&C committees. Roundtable participants highlighted the importance of more informal and more engaging forms of family and community relationship building such as hosting barbecues and encouraging family and community members to share their strengths with children and staff at ECE services. These formal and informal engagement opportunities can encourage families and community members to actively participate in ECE services, empowering them to have a say and feel valued:

There needs to be a real effort to being inclusive and involved with parents. They have skills and knowledge they can share with the children and service. Involve them in the program and decision-making, the implementing as well.

One of dads comes across as really shy but he's a wonderful artist and we asked him to come in and paint with the kids for a couple of hours and it made such a difference to that relationship. Now he comes in and feel safe and valued. Now we have this awesome relationship and his child has really come out of his shell too.

We invited a dad to help cook the barbecue and he continued to help with barbecues for a year or two after his kids left the service. He spreads the work in the community now and says 'those girls will look after you'.

We need more involvement from Elders in our preschools. Keeping them connected with what's happening in preschool settings. Elders want to see what their kids are doing in the preschool setting, for example, invite them to performances and shows.

Focus Area 4: Working together and ensuring best practice approaches in the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Sector

Systemic improvements to the way the ECE sector approaches Aboriginal education and engagement were explored.

Valuing localised, community-driven solutions

Importantly, it was suggested that the Department of Education needs to approach Aboriginal ECE in a localised and context-based way. A sector-wide and policy-level prioritisation of community participation in decision-making and co-designing ECE services was identified as key to supporting communities to develop relevant solutions to local barriers and challenges. This included working flexibly with Aboriginal communities and acknowledging their differences:

We need the Department to approach services in a locally-based way. Each area has their own barriers and solutions to overcome them in their own way. How can the department, rather than a one shoe fits all approach, be able to work flexibly with communities because how one community overcomes an issue is different to another community.

Where we've seen the greatest success is where all of those contextual issues are addressed at an individualised level and where solutions are co-designed and community is a part of that process. Every community is very different.

Roundtable participants provided many examples of where ECE services successfully implemented strategies to address specific barriers experienced within their local community such as providing transport, meals and subsidies or employing local Aboriginal staff to key roles such as bus driving and community liaison.

Workforce Development

Investing in Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal Leadership

A lack of Aboriginal staff to work in ECE services was identified as a significant gap in the ECE service sector. To bridge this gap, roundtable participants suggested that more needed to be done to promote careers in ECE, such as providing scholarship opportunities and wage incentives, especially in remote regions. The need to provide training, development and career progression opportunities and advice was also viewed as strategy for retaining existing staff and reducing staff turnover. This included opportunities to attend conferences, roundtables, and training that is relevant to the specific needs of Aboriginal children and families. The need to see more Aboriginal people in leadership positions in the ECE sector and to receive formal or informal mentorship for a career in ECE were also put forward as important Aboriginal workforce development strategies:

We need workforce development. More aboriginal people working in the early years sector is really important and retaining the people already working there by supporting them to develop and grow.

There needs to be Aboriginal leadership in services. Directors and CEOs and managers.

Ensuring that local Aboriginal people are targeted and prioritised when recruiting ECE service staff was also deemed necessary. The need to value the wealth of knowledge and skills a local Aboriginal person can bring to ECE roles was emphasised, including making sure that eligibility criteria is flexible and doesn't exclude qualified local Aboriginal people. For example, one stakeholder shared how a local Aboriginal educator was excluded from applying for a position at an Aboriginal preschool because she didn't meet the rigid eligibility criteria of holding a double degree:

This is a 60% Aboriginal student school and we had a young woman that I knew was qualified to teach in the preschool and was really excited about the job coming up because it's the Aboriginal preschool of the town. She can do it with her eyes closed, was just brilliant. But when the ad came out, they wanted someone with a double degree with preschool to year 6 so she was excluded off the bat because they do want that flexibility to move them over into the mainstream school. Could we do a clause or something so that if it's an identified pre-school, it doesn't exclude her as a local Aboriginal person because she doesn't have a double degree? Now she's gone to a community preschool but she's really disappointed.

Upskilling non-Aboriginal staff

Roundtable participants determined that non-Aboriginal staff will continue to play a role in delivering ECE services to Aboriginal families in many circumstances and as such, should be upskilled in the areas of community engagement and decision-making and cultural safety. Emphasis was placed on the importance of practical, real-world training rather than theoretical based learning so non-Aboriginal staff could meaningfully participate in Aboriginal education and engagement. For example, providing opportunities for Aboriginal staff and community members to share their knowledge with non-Aboriginal staff. This was viewed as important not only for Aboriginal children, families and communities but Aboriginal staff too. Creating a culturally safe environment can support the retention of Aboriginal staff in ECE workplaces:

Upskill staff around cultural awareness and sensitivity and self-determination. What does that look like for staff and children on the ground?

it needs to be a holistic approach that includes the management committees, admin staff, the educators, engaging with communities.

With departmental schools its about making them aware of having a culturally safe environment for those workers and understanding the complexities they have sometimes and supporting them when they are doing their studies. Cultural safety has to be with the staff not just having a culturally safe environment for the children.

Improving funding models

Roundtable participants highlighted a significant need to improve funding models for ECE services. This included the provision of long-term, rather than short-term funding to address long-held community barriers to engaging in ECE. It also included the need to provide clear and centralised information about grants, support with applying and acquitting and streamlining and simplifying grant application and acquittal processes where possible:

We are dealing with intergenerational issues and it can't just be dealt with in a 4 year strategy. A lot of the issues we face in our communities we're talking about decades, if not centuries old legacy issues that can't just be addressed in a 4 year term. Some of the support needs to be quite localised and outside these short term strategies.

There needs to be funding and grants available. Where we are seeing success is providing services with support to know where the grants are and how to go about accessing the grants and then being successful with receiving grant programs and acquitting the funding.

Roundtable participants also described a lack of funding available for much-needed support services and programs for Aboriginal children and families. Gaps in funding that limit the capacity of ECE services to provide holistic, wraparound supports to Aboriginal families needs to be addressed:

We have our own therapists team onsite weekly so support families and model strategies so families feel strong when they leave our service. But we have to hustle for money, its barely funded.

Also we need to have funding for emergency placements when FACS are involved. Some families have to have kids attend 5 days so they are not removed.

Design and implement a consistent approach to Aboriginal ECE curriculum

The inclusion of Aboriginal worldviews, knowledges, languages and cultural protocols in Aboriginal ECE service curriculums was recognised as a fundamental strength of those services when compared to mainstream ones. However, roundtable participants explained that a consistent approach and commitment to embedding Aboriginal worldviews in curriculums needs to be developed and applied. This could foster a shared learning journey between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, families and staff and ensure all Aboriginal children have access to culture and identity regardless of which ECE service they attend:

Families want to see themselves in the learning and teaching there and that's what we get in Koori schools but outside of that in the mainstream, we really need to be pushing the mainstream preschools to be pushing that Aboriginal curriculum as well. Not just in particular areas but across the board.

Aboriginal preschools Embed Aboriginal perspectives naturally. How do we get mainstream services to embed Aboriginal cultural perspectives? How do we assist mainstream services to go in a culturally and respective way.

The Ninganah No More language program has been key to going on a shared journey in learning. It's good for everyone and it's not just about teaching the Aboriginal kids language.

Strengthen accountability requirements for mainstream services

Implementing strategies to build accountability within mainstream ECE services was suggested as a way of ensuring best practice approaches are being applied within mainstream services in relation to cultural competence and safety. This included employing

Aboriginal assessors to evaluate ECE service performance in relation to Aboriginal education and engagement and the implementation of a star rating indicator that could incentivise ECE services to increase their cultural competency and safety skills and practice. The development of a Cultural Safety Framework for services to use a guideline was also suggested. Making the development of Reconciliation Action Plans and compulsory yearly cultural safety training a required component of contractual funding agreements with ECE services was also put forward as a way of encouraging ECE services to work more collaboratively with their local Aboriginal community, ensuring they prioritise community engagement and collaboration on an ongoing basis:

We need to dig deeper so that there's accountability for partnerships with families and communities. A lot of services need to know their community better. There needs to be more accountability on mainstreams services to work community

People don't know what they don't know. Mainstream can be really oblivious to Aboriginal education. RAPs for all organisations who have agreements with the department could be part of their contractual agreements to make people think about what they are doing to engage the local community or what they are doing to support Aboriginal children in their education. It could help link them into community.

Assessors who are Aboriginal and can-do ratings for Aboriginal education and services.

Survey Responses

In addition to the roundtable sessions, stakeholders participated in an online survey providing response to five questions. In total eight out of twenty-three participants of the roundtable provided responses between the dates of 17 September 2020 to 25 September 2020.

The following questions and responses were received for the survey:

How do we embed Aboriginal cultures and worldviews into early childhood education?

ECE services can:

- Provide opportunities for self-determination in decision-making for Aboriginal families.
- Established positive and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities to ensure localised cultural contexts and lived experiences
- Increased Aboriginal workforces
- Ensure Aboriginal culture and curriculums are included in funding agreements and reporting processes
- Invest in Aboriginal run-organisations and programs for longer periods
- Create Aboriginal education programs and resources for mainstream services

What are strengths and limited of cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous staff in the sector?

Cultural awareness limitations include:

- Lack of connection and knowledge of local Aboriginal communities, organisation, kinship groups and support services available that are relevant early childhood education
- Negative societal common beliefs and perceptions of Aboriginal people, families, and community
- Lack of cultural sensitivity and insight into the lived experiences of Aboriginal children and families

Cultural awareness strengths include:

- ECE services engaging with local Aboriginal families and organisation, through understanding their individual and unique needs
- ECE services providing opportunities for Aboriginal educators to actively participate in teaching within the services
- ECE services positively promoting Aboriginal culture
- Creating a space for trusting and healthy relationships to be built
- Active participation in training that encompasses culture, lived experiences and strategies to effectively engage with Aboriginal children and families

How is your organisation, or the organisations you have contact with identifying and responding to the challenges experienced around accessibility to early childhood education for Aboriginal children?

Our organisation:

- Targets recruitment for local Aboriginal educators and centre staff
- Embeds Aboriginal culture into our service philosophy
- Actively seeks out and create opportunities for Aboriginal people and communities to participate in our service
- Works collaboratively with local services to identify the barriers that families may be experiencing
- Provides financial support to parents and carers of the children enrolled in services
- Undertakes advocacy for Aboriginal children, families and communities with the Australia Government and relevant services, or organisations
- Participates in various partnerships with local organisations in applying for funding.

What has been previously been tried that you think would work to enable and empower participation of Aboriginal parents and carers in early childhood education?

The sector will empower and enable Aboriginal families by:

- Providing opportunities for mentoring and leadership development for Aboriginal educators and staff within the sector
- Providing greater support to organisations when applying for funding opportunities
- Lobbying governments to address payments structures and the financial investment required by families to fund access to ECE services

- Providing education and training opportunities for parents and carers to become involved in ECE
- Providing pop-up services opportunities for children and families to become familiar with ECE services, including Supported Playgroups
- Promoting Aboriginal culture as a compulsory subject to be taught as a part of the ECE curriculum

What is needed to champion meaningful and impactful leadership in early childhood education to achieve greater equitable education outcomes for Aboriginal children?

The sector can:

- Provide adequate and long-term funding to Aboriginal organisations
- Increase Aboriginal workforces including male educators
- Provide greater opportunities for Aboriginal staff to obtain leadership positions
- Ensure procedures and policies relevant to Aboriginal children, families and communities have localised contexts and insights
- Provide unconscious bias training to address inequalities and inequities experienced by Aboriginal children in early childhood education
- Create greater opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in policy and advisory forums
- Ensure non-Aboriginal leaders within the sector have knowledge, insight and demonstrate empathy to the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and communities
- Ensure the state and federal agenda of equitable education for Aboriginal children filters down to grassroots service providers.