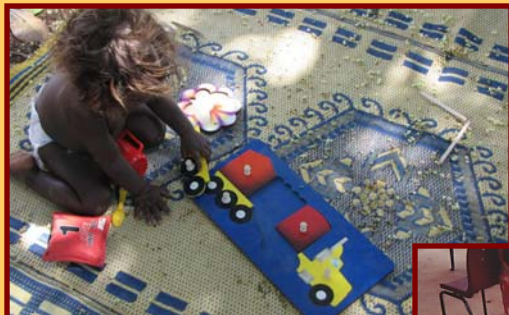


# School Readiness for Australian Indigenous Children: Setting an Agenda



## Summary Report Workshop on 17-18 October 2007



## Welcome To Country

Good morning my name is Bilawara Lee and I am a member of the Larrakia Nation. I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to do the Welcome today for the commencement of this national workshop. I thank you for the respect you show us, the traditional custodians of the land we stand on today. I wish you all the best for a successful meeting and thank you for the important work that you are doing.

The Larrakia people are the traditional owners of the land and waters of the greater Darwin region, including Darwin Peninsula, the Cox Peninsula, most of Gunn Point, rural Darwin, Darwin harbour and adjacent Islands and land west of the Howard River. There are approximately 1600 Larrakia people living in the Darwin area and although our boundaries extend up to 50 km inland we are often referred to as Saltwater People. So it is on that note, it is my privilege on behalf of my Elders and the Larrakia people I welcome you all to gwalwa daranigki – Our Land.

I'd like to thank you all for being here today - those of you who have travel long distances, and especially my brothers and sisters from other Nations. I wish you all the best for a very successful meeting. Hope your stay in my country is a safe and nourishing one - and that the spirits of my ancestors watch over you while you are here.

Thank you – and Mamak.

## Contents

<b>i: Workshop attendees &amp; apologies.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ii: Workshop Agenda.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1: The context of a workshop on Indigenous school readiness.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2: Policy and Indigenous Education – an overview.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2: What is Indigenous school readiness and how successfully has it been fostered?.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3: The challenges of effectiveness: methods, research, politics.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4: Measuring Indigenous school readiness.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5: Getting radical: Identifying the most innovative ideas.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6: A summary of key concerns raised during open-forum discussions.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7: Priorities for attention and action: Unresolved issues.....</b>	<b>17</b>

Prepared by Nick McTurk, Gary Robinson, Jonathan Carapetis, Tess Lea and Georgie Nutton.

This workshop was co-sponsored by the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH), Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and The Ian Potter Foundation

**The views expressed in this discussion paper do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government.**

### i: School Readiness for Australian Indigenous Children: Workshop Attendees

Associate Professor Garth <b>Alperstein</b> Co-Director Community Paediatrics Sydney South West Area Health Service <a href="mailto:alpersteing@email.cs.nsw.gov.au">alpersteing@email.cs.nsw.gov.au</a>	Ms Pat <b>Anderson</b> Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health <a href="mailto:Pat.anderson@health.gov.au">Pat.anderson@health.gov.au</a>
Dr Fiona <b>Arney</b> Senior Research Fellow, Research & Strategic Evaluation Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia <a href="mailto:Fiona.Arney@unisa.edu.au">Fiona.Arney@unisa.edu.au</a>	Professor Lesley <b>Barclay</b> Chair, Health Services Development Charles Darwin University <a href="mailto:natasha.lawrence@cdu.edu.au">natasha.lawrence@cdu.edu.au</a>
Ms Stephanie <b>Bell</b> Director Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Inc <a href="mailto:stephanie.bell@caac.org.au">stephanie.bell@caac.org.au</a>	Ms Robyn <b>Benbow</b> A/Manager Early Years, Teaching, Learning and Standards, DEET <a href="mailto:Robyn.benbow@nt.gov.au">Robyn.benbow@nt.gov.au</a>
Professor MaryAnn <b>Bin-Sallik</b> Dean of Faculty of Indigenous Education and Research, Charles Darwin University <a href="mailto:Maryann.bin-sallik@cdu.edu.au">Maryann.bin-sallik@cdu.edu.au</a>	Ms Donna <b>Burton</b> Assistant Secretary, Family Health & Wellbeing Branch, Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health <a href="mailto:donna.burton@health.gov.au">donna.burton@health.gov.au</a>
Professor Jonathan <b>Carapetis</b> Director Menzies School of Health Research <a href="mailto:jonathan.carapetis@menzies.edu.au">jonathan.carapetis@menzies.edu.au</a>	Ms Nareen <b>Carter</b> Manager Central Australia Red Cross Australia <a href="mailto:ncarter@redcross.org.au">ncarter@redcross.org.au</a>
Professor Joan <b>Cunningham</b> Services, Systems and Society, MSHR <a href="mailto:Joan.cunningham@menzies.edu.au">Joan.cunningham@menzies.edu.au</a>	Mr Ken <b>Davies</b> Deputy Chief Executive Education Services Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training <a href="mailto:ken.davies@nt.gov.au">ken.davies@nt.gov.au</a>
Ms Debbie <b>Efthymiades</b> General Manager Teaching, Learning and Standards, DEET <a href="mailto:Debbie.efthymiades@nt.gov.au">Debbie.efthymiades@nt.gov.au</a>	Professor Alison <b>Elliott</b> Head of School, Education Education, Health and Science Faculty, Charles Darwin University <a href="mailto:Alison.elliott@cdu.edu.au">Alison.elliott@cdu.edu.au</a>
Associate Professor Lyn <b>Fasoli</b> Academic and Research, Early Childhood Research, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education <a href="mailto:lyn.fasoli@batchelor.edu.au">lyn.fasoli@batchelor.edu.au</a>	Associate Professor Alma <b>Fleet</b> Institute of Early Childhood Macquarie University <a href="mailto:Alma.fleet@mq.edu.au">Alma.fleet@mq.edu.au</a>
Mr Mick <b>Gooda</b> Chief Executive Officer Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health <a href="mailto:mick.gooda@menzies.edu.au">mick.gooda@menzies.edu.au</a>	Ms Barbara <b>Gray</b> NT Treasury <a href="mailto:Barbara.gray@nt.gov.au">Barbara.gray@nt.gov.au</a>
Leanne <b>Goldsworthy</b> Department of Education, Science and Training, Northern Territory Office <a href="mailto:leanne.goldsworthy@Dest.gov.au">leanne.goldsworthy@Dest.gov.au</a>	Dr James <b>Griffin</b> Director Early Learning and School Readiness Program, Child Development and Behaviour Branch, NICHD <a href="mailto:griffinj@mail.nih.gov">griffinj@mail.nih.gov</a>
Ms Susie <b>Hopkins</b> EarInfoNet MSHR <a href="mailto:Susie.hopkins@menzies.edu.au">Susie.hopkins@menzies.edu.au</a>	Dr Shane <b>Houston</b> Assistant Secretary, System Performance and Aboriginal Policy, Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services <a href="mailto:shane.houston@nt.gov.au">shane.houston@nt.gov.au</a>
Ms Cindy <b>Kerslake</b> Acting Assistant Section Manager, Northern Territory Office Department of Families & Community Services <a href="mailto:cindy.kerslake@facsia.gov.au">cindy.kerslake@facsia.gov.au</a>	Ms Sue <b>Kruske</b> Graduate School for Health Practice, Charles Darwin University <a href="mailto:Sue.Kruske@cdu.edu.au">Sue.Kruske@cdu.edu.au</a>
A/Prof Tess <b>Lea</b> Director of the School for Social and Policy Research, Charles Darwin University <a href="mailto:Tess.lea@cdu.edu.au">Tess.lea@cdu.edu.au</a>	Professor Bill <b>Louden</b> Dean of Graduate School of Education University of Western Australia <a href="mailto:bill.louden@uwa.edu.au">bill.louden@uwa.edu.au</a>
Ms Kath <b>Magarey</b> Project Manager, MECS NT DEET <a href="mailto:Kath.magarey@nt.gov.au">Kath.magarey@nt.gov.au</a>	Dr Karen <b>Martin</b> Senior Lecturer, School of Cultural & Language Studies in Education, Faculty of Education Queensland University of Technology <a href="mailto:kl.martin@qut.edu.au">kl.martin@qut.edu.au</a>

**i (ctd.): School Readiness for Australian Indigenous Children: Workshop Attendees**

<p>Dr Peggy <b>McCardle</b>  Chief of Child Development and Behaviour Branch; &amp;  Health Scientist Administrator  National Institute of Child Health and Human Development,  Centre for Research for Mothers and Children, National  Institutes of Health  <a href="mailto:PM43Q@nih.gov">PM43Q@nih.gov</a></p>	<p>Ms Sarah <b>McLelland</b>  Project Officer, Early Childhood Section  Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health  Department of Health and Ageing  <a href="mailto:Sarah.McLelland@health.gov.au">Sarah.McLelland@health.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Nick <b>McTurk</b>  Research Associate  School for Social Policy Research, CDU  <a href="mailto:Nick.mcturk@curtin.edu.au">Nick.mcturk@curtin.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Ms Jenny <b>Mitchell</b>  Research Team  Tangantjere Council  <a href="mailto:jenny.mitchell@tangantjere.org.au">jenny.mitchell@tangantjere.org.au</a></p>
<p>Dr Peter <b>Morris</b>  Project Leader -Head, Ear &amp; Respiratory  Program  MSHR  <a href="mailto:peter.morris@menzies.edu.au">peter.morris@menzies.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Lorna Murakami-Gold  Research Associate  Graduate School of Health Practice,  Charles Darwin University  <a href="mailto:lorna.murakami-gold@cdu.edu.au">lorna.murakami-gold@cdu.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Associate Professor Victor <b>Nossar</b>  Associate Dean, School of Medicine, Sydney, The  University of Notre Dame  <a href="mailto:vnossar@nd.edu.au">vnossar@nd.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Professor Frank <b>Oberklaid</b>  Director  Centre for Community Child Health  <a href="mailto:frank.oberklaid@rch.org.au">frank.oberklaid@rch.org.au</a></p>
<p>Dr Barbara <b>Paterson</b>  Director  Child Maternal Health Division  <a href="mailto:Barbara.paterson@nt.gov.au">Barbara.paterson@nt.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Ms Lesley <b>Podesta</b>  First Assistant Secretary, OATSIH  Australian Government Dept of Health &amp; Aging  <a href="mailto:lesley.podesta@health.gov.au">lesley.podesta@health.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Professor Margot <b>Prior</b>  University of Melbourne and Murdoch  Children's Research Institute  <a href="mailto:priorm@unimelb.edu.au">priorm@unimelb.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Mr Marius <b>Puruntatameri</b>  Chairperson, Education Committee,  Community Fellow of the School for Social  Policy and Research  Tiwi Land Council  <a href="mailto:Marius.puruntatameri@nt.gov.au">Marius.puruntatameri@nt.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Associate Professor Gary <b>Robinson</b>  Co-Director, School for Social and Policy Research,  Charles Darwin University  <a href="mailto:Gary.robinson@cdu.edu.au">Gary.robinson@cdu.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Rob <b>Roseby</b>  Northern Territory Department of Health  <a href="mailto:Rob.Roseby@nt.gov.au">Rob.Roseby@nt.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Tricia <b>Rushton</b>  General Manager Northern Territory  Smith Family  <a href="mailto:tricia.rushton@thesmithfamily.com.au">tricia.rushton@thesmithfamily.com.au</a></p>	<p>Professor Sven <b>Silburn</b>  Director, CDH  Professor Population Sciences  Telethon Institute for Child Health Research  <a href="mailto:s.silburn@curtin.edu.au">s.silburn@curtin.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Dr Rob <b>Simons</b>  Head of Research &amp; Evaluation  The Smith Family  <a href="mailto:rob.simons@smithfamily.com.au">rob.simons@smithfamily.com.au</a></p>	<p>Ms Fiona <b>Skelton</b>  Assistant Section Manager  Footprints in Time: LSIC  <a href="mailto:fiona.skelton@facsia.gov.au">fiona.skelton@facsia.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Associate Professor Paul <b>Torzillo</b>  Medical Director  Nganampa Health Council  <a href="mailto:pault@med.usyd.edu.au">pault@med.usyd.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Roz <b>Walker</b>  Research Manager, Kalunga Research Network, Telethon  Institute for Child Health Research  <a href="mailto:rozw@icmr.uwa.edu.au">rozw@icmr.uwa.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Denise <b>Williams-Kennedy</b>  Researcher and Educator  Sadadeen School  <a href="mailto:Denise.kennedy@ntschoools.net">Denise.kennedy@ntschoools.net</a></p>	<p>Mr Greg <b>Wills</b>  Student  MSHR  <a href="mailto:Greg.wills@menzies.edu.au">Greg.wills@menzies.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Professor Ken <b>Wyatt</b>  Director Aboriginal Health  WA Dept Health  <a href="mailto:Kenneth.wyatt@health.wa.gov.au">Kenneth.wyatt@health.wa.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Professor Stephen <b>Zubrick</b>  Director, CDH, Professor &amp; Head of Division, Population  Sciences, T.I.C.H.R.  Curtin Centre for Developmental Health  <a href="mailto:S.Zubrick@curtin.edu.au">S.Zubrick@curtin.edu.au</a></p>

**i (ctd.): Workshop on School Readiness for Australian Indigenous Children: Apologies**

<p>Ms Paula <b>Arnol</b> CEO Danila Dilba Health Service <a href="mailto:paula.arnol@daniladilba.org.au">paula.arnol@daniladilba.org.au</a></p>	<p>Mr David <b>Ashbridge</b> CE Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services <a href="mailto:David.ashbridge@nt.gov.au">David.ashbridge@nt.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Dr Ngiare <b>Brown</b> Assistant Director Indigenous Health MSHR <a href="mailto:Ngaire.brown@menzies.edu.au">Ngaire.brown@menzies.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Anne <b>Chang</b> Chair of Child Health MSHR <a href="mailto:anne_b_chang@health.qld.gov.au">anne_b_chang@health.qld.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Jenny <b>Cleary</b> Assistant Secretary Health Services Division NT Department Health &amp; Community Services <a href="mailto:Jenny.cleary@nt.gov.au">Jenny.cleary@nt.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Professor Sandra <b>Eades</b> The Sax Institute, Faculty of Medicine University of Sydney <a href="mailto:sandra.eades@saxinstitute.org.au">sandra.eades@saxinstitute.org.au</a></p>
<p>Professor Marilyn <b>Fleer</b> Faculty of Education Monash University <a href="mailto:Marilyn.Fleer@Education.monash.edu.au">Marilyn.Fleer@Education.monash.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Andrew <b>Fuller</b> Fellow of the Department of Psychiatry and the Department of Learning and Educational Development at the University of Melbourne <a href="mailto:jnyahead@satlink.com.au">jnyahead@satlink.com.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Anne <b>Glover</b> Senior Lecturer Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, School of Education University of South Australia <a href="mailto:Anne.glover@unisa.edu.au">Anne.glover@unisa.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Mr Tony <b>Greer</b> Group Manager - Indigenous and Transitions Department of Education Science &amp; Training <a href="mailto:tony.greer@dest.gov.au">tony.greer@dest.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Colleen <b>Hayward</b> Director Kulunga Research Network Telethon Institute for Child Health Research <a href="mailto:colleenh@ichr.uwa.edu.au">colleenh@ichr.uwa.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Vanessa <b>Johnston</b> Post-doctoral Fellow MSHR <a href="mailto:vanessa.johnston@menzies.edu.au">vanessa.johnston@menzies.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Associate Professor Helen <b>Milroy</b> Director, Centre for Aboriginal Medical and Dental Health University of Western Australia <a href="mailto:helen.milroy@uwa.edu.au">helen.milroy@uwa.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Mr John <b>Patterson</b> CEO Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT <a href="mailto:john.paterson@AMSANT.com.au">john.paterson@AMSANT.com.au</a></p>
<p>Mr Julian <b>Pocock</b> Director SNAICC <a href="mailto:julian@snaicc.asn.au">julian@snaicc.asn.au</a></p>	<p>Mrs Jennifer <b>Prince</b> Under Treasurer Northern Territory Treasury <a href="mailto:Jennifer.prince@nt.gov.au">Jennifer.prince@nt.gov.au</a></p>
<p>Associate Professor Mark <b>Rose</b> School of Indigenous Studies Melbourne University <a href="mailto:rosemj@unimelb.edu.au">rosemj@unimelb.edu.au</a></p>	<p>Ms Dorothy <b>Scott</b> South Australia - Home Visiting <a href="mailto:dorothy.a.scott@unisa.edu.au">dorothy.a.scott@unisa.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Ms Jenny <b>Scott</b> Deputy Secretary Family and Community Services <a href="mailto:Jenny.scott@nt.gov.au">Jenny.scott@nt.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Kate <b>Senior</b> MSHR <a href="mailto:kate.senior@menzies.edu.au">kate.senior@menzies.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Dr Adam <b>Tomison</b> Acting Director FACS Policy and Service Devt Branch NT DHaCS <a href="mailto:adam.tomison@nt.gov.au">adam.tomison@nt.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Dr Marcelle <b>Townsend-Cross</b> Course Coordinator/ Lecturer Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples Southern Cross University <a href="mailto:mtownsen@scu.edu.au">mtownsen@scu.edu.au</a></p>
<p>Professor Graham <b>Vimpani</b> Head of Discipline of Paediatrics &amp; Child Health, University of Newcastle <a href="mailto:Graham.Vimpani@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au">Graham.Vimpani@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au</a></p>	<p>Ms Yalmay <b>Yunupingu</b> Educator Yirrkala Community Education Centre <a href="mailto:Yalmay.yunupingu@ntschoools.net">Yalmay.yunupingu@ntschoools.net</a></p>

## ii: Workshop Agenda

### Wednesday 17 October

8:00 for 8:20 start	<p><b>Session One: Introduction and Context</b>  Welcome to Country – Bilawarra Lee, Larrakia Nation  Opening Remarks – Professor Jonathan Carapetis, Menzies School of Health Research  Australian Government Perspective - Ms Lesley Podesta, Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health</p>
9:00 – 9:45	<p>Dr Peggy McCardle, Chief, Child Development &amp; Behavior Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD)  An international perspective on enjoining health and education research:  What the National Institute of Child Health and Development, National Institute of Health (USA) has achieved.</p> <p>Dr James Griffin, Director, Early Learning and School Readiness Program, Child Development &amp; Behavior Branch, NICHD  International evidence on early child development and school readiness.</p>
9:45 – 10:15	<p>Dr Ken Wyatt, WA Department of Health and Associate Professor Tess Lea, School for Social and Policy Research, Charles Darwin University (CDU)</p> <p>The Australian context: Why bring the health and education research agendas together the local Indigenous context?</p>
10:15 – 11:15	<b>Morning Tea</b>
10:45 – 11:15	<p><b>Session Two: Why focus on school readiness?</b>  Associate Professor Gary Robinson, School for Social and Policy Research, CDU  Summary of literature and shared definitions with an invitation for debate and refinement</p>
11:15 – 11:40	<p>Associate Professor Garth Alperstein, Sydney South West Area Health Service  Universal evidence for early childhood programs that improve the health, developmental, and educational outcomes of children aged 0-8 years?</p>
11:40 – 12:00	<p>Dr Nick McTurk, School for Social and Policy Research, CDU  What is the evidence for Indigenous programs that improve school readiness?</p>
12:00 – 12:45	<p>Facilitator: Dr Frank Oberklaid, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne  Interrogation of the definition of school readiness</p>
12:45 – 1:30	<b>Lunch</b>
1:30 – 3:30	<p><b>Session Three: The challenge of effectiveness – methods, research, politics</b>  What do we know about models of intervention from each of health, education and early childhood care/family support? How do they make a difference for being ready for school?</p> <p>Professor Victor Nossar - Health model: Home-visiting  Associate Professor Gary Robinson - Family support model: Let's Start  Professor Lyn Fasoli - Education models: NT mobile pre-schools  Nareen Carter - Integrated Early Childhood Centres 2004-06 (<i>Based on the end of project report 2006 as prepared by Nareen who no longer works with this project or for FACSIA</i>)</p>



## ii: Workshop Agenda Ctd.

2:45 – 3:30	<b>Facilitated panel discussion: The challenge of effectiveness and the politics of experimental research in Australia.</b> Facilitators: Associate Professor Paul Torzillo and Associate Professor Tess Lea
3:45 – 4:45	<b>Session Four: Measuring readiness. What can and should we use these measures for? Facilitated panel discussion: What are the gaps?</b> Facilitator - Professor Margot Prior Professor Steve Zubrick - Australian Early Development Index Professor Bill Loudon - Perspectives from the education sector Professor Frank Oberklaid - Perspectives from the health sector
4:45	Day's wrap up and housekeeping – Jonathan Carapetis
7:00 for 7:30	<b>Dinner</b> - Hanuman Restaurant, Mitchell St. (Darwin Entertainment Centre)

**Thursday 18 October**

9.00 – 9:30	<b>Session Five: Creating a receptive environment for school readiness</b> Dr Peggy McCardle, Chief, Child Development & Behavior Branch, NICHD Best practice in connecting research, policy and practice, dissemination and partnerships
9.30 - 9:40	Associate Professor Tess Lea Australian and Northern Territory challenges for connecting research to policy and practice
9:40 - 10.00	Professor Jonathan Carapetis Review of day one with summary presentation - Emerging new ground, key consideration - "what is missing for school readiness?"
10:00 - 10:15	<b>Morning Tea</b>
10.15 – 12:30	<b>Session Six: Getting radical - Identifying the most innovative/radical ideas</b> How will it address the research questions for evidence? What will this address for school readiness? What are the key things that should be enacted? Aim for world's best work
12:30 – 1:30	<b>Lunch</b>
1.30 – 3.30	<b>Session Seven: Priorities for attention and action</b> Facilitator: Associate Professor Paul Torzillo
3.30 – 4.30	<b>Next Steps</b> Professor Jonathan Carapetis
4.30	<b>Close</b>



### **1.1: The context of a workshop on Indigenous school readiness**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2007, the ‘School Readiness for Australian Indigenous Children: Setting an Agenda’ workshop was held in the Crowne Plaza in Darwin, NT. This workshop was jointly organised by the Menzies School of Health Research and the School of Social and Policy Research (Institute of Advanced Studies, Charles Darwin University). It is part of a project co-funded by the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and The Ian Potter Foundation.

This workshop was attended by 50 invited participants from around Australia including delegates from Indigenous communities, Indigenous advocacy and research groups, State and Federal government departments and Non Governmental Organisations. Also in attendance were health and education practitioners and health, education and social policy researchers. Keynote video-conference addresses on North American contexts of Indigenous school readiness and policy application were presented by Professor Peggy McCardle and Dr James Griffin of the National Institute of Child Health and Development.

The purpose of the workshop was to define the evidence gaps relating to:

- i) *the preparedness of Indigenous children for school;*
- ii) *successful transition during years 1 to 3 of formal education.*

The recognition that health and education are intrinsically linked is a salient issue, supported by strong international evidence. Recognising this, the Menzies School of Health Research and the School for Social and Policy Research determined that a health and education collaboration signalled the way forward for Indigenous school readiness. This inter-disciplinary workshop focussed on school readiness for Australia’s Indigenous communities and aimed to form a starting point for research scoping, intervention efficacy evaluation and program roll-out. The workshop agenda was formulated to include the broadest range of potentially effective strategies for the 0 - 8 age cohort and to recognise that if programs are likely to have any success and sustainability, research and intervention needs to have context and cultural relevance and must be embraced by indigenous communities in terms of design, engagement and implementation.



## **1.2: Policy and Indigenous Education – an overview**

In the United States, Black, Hispanic and American Indian / Alaska Native children perform less well on reading scores than other children and raising the literacy rates of these groups to match national benchmark levels is a priority for the Federal Government. In accordance with the [Santiago Declaration 2007](#) on the education of young children, the Child Development and Behaviour branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, part of the National Institutes of Health) is a key player in shaping policy and driving teaching practices in this field. NICHD, an organisation sitting within the health research infrastructure in the USA, produces some of the most advanced educational research in the world. A broad, long-term, cross-consortia research strategy, firmly based on evidence from convergence of studies, meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews, generates knowledge on how children learn and what preventive and remedial measures work for children with learning deficiencies. NICHD employs a six step strategy:

- 1) Creation of stakeholder awareness (policymakers, practitioners, Indigenous people).
- 2) Accumulation of evidence in a systematic and rigorous fashion;
- 3) Dissemination to stakeholders followed by public-speaking and consultation;
- 4) Evidence based policy formulation;
- 5) Piloting of evidence-based practices in real world contexts;
- 6) Assessment to track change and re-implement policy refinement in a feedback loop.

Tangible improvements in the educational outcomes of Indigenous people are evident in the United States. Therefore, turning attention to Australia, the appalling literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students in the Northern Territory relative to non-Indigenous benchmarks alarmingly illustrates that swift and radical action is overdue. Indeed, the equally distressing health outcomes for the Indigenous population can be largely explained-away by these poor education outcomes.

But what is being done to address this? Synergistic research and policy design at the nexus of Indigenous health and education is in its infancy in Australia. The Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program and National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy have achieved some success, particularly in otitis media, without broader, longer-term sustainability.

The Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH), within the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, has interest in supporting the development of a comprehensive evidence base that will inform policy and program development for early childhood interventions focusing on Indigenous children aged 2 - 8 years. To find suitable strategies and replicate the successful policy research model implemented by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the United States will require a similar cross-consortia effort, perhaps through tri-partite investment by the Council of Australian Governments, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Council for Education Research.

**2: What is Indigenous school readiness and how successfully has it been fostered?**

What is meant by ‘Indigenous school readiness’? The traditional or conventional focus on children’s age, physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development doesn’t necessarily allow one to forecast successful transition through school. By contrast, an integrated approach stresses that children should be ready for school, schools should be able to meaningfully engage families and be ready for children and communities should support child development. This approach comprises contextually appropriate services (stable staff), child-sensitive curricula, inter-agency partnerships (childcare, speech therapists and pre-schools) and effective and pro-active linkages with disadvantaged communities and families (e.g. see *‘Pathways to Prevention’*). The effectiveness of policy in achieving these aspirations has been mixed, especially for Indigenous communities. The effectiveness and sustainability of evidence-based mainstream parenting programs (*‘Triple P’*; *‘FAST’*) has not been clearly demonstrated for Indigenous contexts. A range of other programs for the antenatal to age 3 cohort (*‘Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture’*), ages 3 to 5 (*‘Mobile Early Childhood Services’*) and children aged 5 to 8 (*‘Parent School Partnership Initiatives’*) have been implemented in Indigenous contexts with as yet mixed evidence of success. While some early childhood interventions in the USA (*‘High/Scope Perry Preschool’*; *‘Headstart’*), and early literacy programs (*‘Let’s Read’*; *‘HIPPI’*; *‘PEEP’*; *‘SHELLS’*) have set standards for evidence of success, there has as yet been no large scale, research-based translation of these kinds of approaches into Indigenous contexts in Australia.

Generally, there are four key reasons why evidence-based programs have not successfully fostered Indigenous school readiness, or for that matter transition within school. There may be deficiencies in any or all of: consultation and collaboration with Indigenous communities; integrated implementation across age cohorts and into communities; accessibility to integrated services; and rigorous assessment of program effectiveness.

### **3: The challenges of effectiveness: methods, research, politics**

This section outlines some selected intervention models that have been tried in the early childhood developmental period then summarises the challenges of effectiveness.

*Home visiting:* Successful interventions are the ‘*Nurse - Family Partnership Program*’, the ‘*Infant Health and Development Program*’ and the ‘*Chicago Parent-Child Center Program*’. These intensive child-focused interventions have improved peri-natal health, infant cognitive ability, school readiness, child behaviour and parent-child interaction.

More successful strategies target the neediest population subgroups identified via empirically derived risk factors and have multiple visits by nurses rather than para-professionals. There is evidence of acceptability *by* and capacity to deliver *to* Indigenous families (USA) if programs are rolled-out on time, to budget and delivered with fidelity.

*Indigenous pre-school models:* The ‘*Mobile Early Childhood Service Project*’ is a potentially fruitful, intensive pre-school approach. In 2006 - 7, ‘*MECS*’ provided playgroups 4 - 5 times weekly for 140 children aged 0 - 5 in nine previously unserved remote NT communities. School readiness is facilitated by generation of strong community relationships with health clinics, schools, job shop providers, women’s centres and community stores, along with assessment of ear and respiratory health and nutritional intervention. A comprehensive evaluation of site-specific and overall program achievement of short-term outcomes is being conducted by Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE). To date, key barriers to progress have been cessation of long-term funding and staff recruitment issues.

The ‘*Integrated Early Childhood Project*’ ran in 3 NT Indigenous communities between 2004 and 2006 until cessation of funds. A ‘two-way’ approach, specific to community language and culture, engaged communities in consultation processes to integrate existing early childhood services with new delivery models. Three key elements were identified as necessary to achieve school readiness through early childhood intervention:

community ownership of programs; building relationships; recognition of Indigenous culture by non-Indigenous early childhood professionals.

'*Lets Start*' is a promising, targeted school-based intervention for children aged 4 - 6 that works with children with externalising (aggressive and destructive) and internalising (withdrawal and social anxiety) behaviours that are likely to constrain school progress. The 10 week program of small group workshops engages parents from mainstream, urban Indigenous and remote rural contexts. It tackles children's social skills, parenting skills and fosters sensitive and responsive parent-child interactions. Anecdotal evidence indicates improved child behaviour and increased parental sensitivity, which strongly indicates that '*Lets Start*' may contribute to improved school transition if integrated with intensive pre-school programs. Formal evaluation evidence is expected to be published in 2008 - 2009.

Discussion on '*The challenge of effectiveness and the politics of experimental research in Australia*' is summarised as follows:

- 1) *Heterogeneity*: the strategies and programs proven in general populations cannot be indiscriminately applied in urban, rural and remote Indigenous communities.
- 2) *Holism*: Although problems are interconnected, it is unrealistic to attempt to fix everything simultaneously. Research should disclose pathways through complexity by identifying and focussing strategically on individual factors amenable to change.
- 3) *Communities, families and parents*: The interactions between them are complex and suggest the need for differentiated strategies which provide parents and practitioners with options.
- 4) *Educational attainment*: There may be conflict between parents and teachers concerning expectations for the success of Indigenous children at school. Research suggests that there may be a lack of awareness of children's actual achievement on the part of many Indigenous parents.
- 5) *Cost benefit analysis*: Cost benefit analyses of existing programs are more appropriate than raising concerns over the cost of doing things differently. Furthermore, funding should be of a suitable duration for effects to be measurable.
- 6) *Plea for quality evaluation of research*: Many interventions are implemented on the basis of faith, belief and testimony without being designed to allow for evaluation. The expenditure of scarce resources demands that intervention models and program applications are rigorously assessed to measure their effectiveness.

#### **4: Measuring Indigenous school readiness**

The ‘*Australian Early Development Index*’ (*AEDI*) is a teacher-completed index of early child development encompassing 5 domains: physical health; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills; general knowledge. This provides stakeholders with useful child developmental markers at a range of scales and has the potential to mobilise policy re-design, resource allocation and program implementation at community and state levels based on population needs. It has not been validated for use as a measure of school readiness for individual children.

The value of AEDI is greatly enhanced when presented in mapped form and where data are cross-referenced with other indicators (e.g. SEIFA – ‘Index of disadvantage’ or pre-school participation rates) to illustrate spatial-variation in social vulnerabilities and child attributes. From 2007 onwards the ‘*AEDI*’ will be re-applied on existing sites and expanded to include Indigenous communities. This will require a substantial re-design of the Index domain components to create an Indigenous Index (*I-AEDI*), using existing data on 1200 Indigenous participants and focus group consultations. The new ‘*I-AEDI*’ will be piloted during 2008 - 9.

It was noted that there is an imbalance between the “supply side” and the “demand side” of educational research. On the supply side, many researchers are most interested in analysis of issues such as cultural context, power relations or language variation. This research most often takes the form of qualitative case studies and action research methodologies. On the demand side, government research funders are increasingly interested in quantitative research into the outcomes of particular teaching strategies on patterns of student performance or other evidence linked to outcomes of investment. Because of the supply-side preference for rich descriptions, the demand has not been met for evidence-based research on early literacy attainment by Indigenous children. Government agencies sponsoring such work may need to look beyond the early childhood education research community and fund programs of research more generously to attract the skills required to develop a rigorous evidence base to support policy and practice.

The non-identification of struggling readers hinders their school progress whilst others soar ahead. It was felt that the lack of academic progress, particularly in literacy

acquisition, may be the single most important cause of behavioural difficulties in the classroom. However, identifying children with literacy difficulties early on is problematic due to the wide developmental range of young children. Assessment of children's development may be hindered by "false-negative" diagnoses of behavioural problems or equally by "false-positive" diagnoses by teachers who over-state achievement.

Accordingly, measurement tools need improvement: they should focus less on curriculum coverage, and should ideally be based on the most reliable and efficient predictors of literacy attainment - letter knowledge and decoding skills. Further investigation may also be required to establish whether scales designed to measure English literacy performance across the whole population are adequate for Australian Indigenous children in remote school contexts.

#### **5: Getting radical: Identifying the most innovative ideas**

To generate new and radical ideas for consideration in future research, groups of participants from different disciplines and sectors considered what prevents Indigenous children from achieving their educational potential. Six broad themes were identified:

1: *Are there differences in Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous child development, both in social-emotional learning and cognitive development?*

The fundamental question remains to be answered of how to define school readiness, its determinants and appropriate intervention points for Australian Indigenous children. The literature review conducted for this workshop identified references to the lack of recognition by Western schooling (curriculum and teaching design) of the moral, aesthetic and spiritual development of many Indigenous families. During the workshop it was observed that multiple literacies including rich, non-print literacies are important to many Indigenous families. However, they are not often drawn-on by Western pedagogies or written into school curricula, nor are they incorporated within the standardised assessment regimens under which school and student performance are judged nationally and internationally.

2: *What measures of child development have been validated for Indigenous children? What is the validity of early learning assessment tools that are or could be used in remote Indigenous communities?*

Given that the importance of early childhood learning experiences is to build continuity between experiences prior to school and the culture of formal schooling, addressing this would appear to be critical. Some research projects are in the progress of providing partial information. However, new knowledge is needed in this area. One aspect could be in early childhood curriculum design that is inclusive of all domains of child development. Another contentious area of current concern is the need for, and development of, specific measurement tools for Indigenous children such as school entry measures and the AEDI (as recognised by the need for an Indigenous AEDI).

3: *What is the impact of literacy intervention on the learning and parenting skills of teenage Indigenous mothers?*

Some studies suggest that teenage mother-child interactions may be amenable to intervention to improve the acquisition of literacy skills and vocabulary development. The ‘*Abecedarian Study*’ was an evidence-based intervention that specifically improved the learning and parenting skills of teenage mothers. Although not specifically for teenage mothers, there are a number of other promising interventions for parenting styles and early language and literacy development such as ‘*Let’s Read*’ and ‘*Supported at Home Early Language and Literacies*’ (‘*SHELLS*’). Research examining the development of children’s language and literacy skills as a result of a literacy intervention among Indigenous teenage mothers is lacking.

4a: *What programs [interventions] have applicable, adaptable and sustainable curriculum design or content for local indigenous contexts and:*

- i) foster learning outcomes in pre-literacy, numeracy, memory, concentration, sequencing and problem solving;*
- ii) develop parent-child interactions that support skills, behaviours and transition to school;*
- iii) build on the strengths of families and local cultures?*

There was interest in comparative studies of ‘proven’ curricula: ‘*Play And Learn Scheme*’; ‘*Let’s Read*’; ‘*Let’s Start*’; ‘*Strong Beginnings*’; ‘*Effective Preschool PE*’;

*'Incredible Years'*; *'Too Solid'*; *'Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters'*; *'High/Scope Perry Preschool'*. The focus should be on those interventions designed for cognitive development, English language attainment and literacy. An important dimension to this question is the effectiveness of the phonemic awareness elements of programs for children with conductive hearing loss or interruption to hearing levels. The level of evidence supporting high quality preschooling (i.e. the fact that the High/Scope Perry Preschool model was proven in a randomised controlled study) led most participants to support an urgent and methodologically rigorous evaluation of a similar model adapted to an Australian Indigenous context.

4b: *Have the mobile early childhood service and the mobile preschool model worked?*

A retrospective comparison of the outcomes for children that have/ have not received preschool and early learning experiences could be carried out with current data sets. This inquiry would seek to address the service delivery model rather than the program content and teaching methods.

5: *What do teachers of Indigenous children need to do differently to improve child and family connections with school and learning?*

Would Indigenous language speaking students benefit in early childhood from a particular instructional approach? The problematic supply of qualified and experienced early childhood teachers is often responded to by having a prescribed curriculum and methodology even though the evidence from some structured and prescriptive approaches has not demonstrated long term effectiveness. Policy and program implementation areas would benefit from a comparative study that is not restricted to short term English literacy outcomes, but is also focussed on foundation skills and attitudes toward self and learning. Research designs could also provide opportunities to investigate the impact of teacher expectations on student outcomes. Furthermore, the impacts of staff turnover and the consistency of program delivery are important areas that deserve further investigation.

6a: *Is there a difference in performance for children whose families participate compared to those who do not participate in schooling?*

Educational research supports building stronger connections between schools and families to improve educational outcomes, especially in areas of socio-economic



disadvantage. Methods to bridge the parent-school divide require investigation as do the values and expectations held by Indigenous families. Population surveys give clear indication of the general trends and differences in Indigenous families' understanding of school achievement. What should be researched is how the application of research can benefit the development of community participation or support in early learning programs to smooth the transition of children to formal schooling.

*6b: What leads some schools to reach out to families? What would lead more schools to reach out to families?*

This enquiry parallels the previous question by examining the characteristics of school design, structure and culture within the school-family connection equation. This includes determining whether 'transition to school' programs improve children's outcomes and identification of what the necessary ingredients are.

#### **6: A summary of key concerns raised during open-forum discussions**

Participants made reference to four key areas concerning Indigenous school readiness.

*Systems:* A concern raised frequently was that system redesign and the assessment of systemic responses and programs depend on iterative research processes. Central to this, the indicators of social, emotional and cognitive development and the developmental pathways of Indigenous children are not clearly defined.

*Schools:* The Western schooling system privileges individualism and competition and in many ways fails to acknowledge Indigenous values of cooperation and sharing. Learning in schools is culturally-framed by Western knowledge systems, which are different to Indigenous views or value systems. Research on the impact of these conflicting knowledge systems on Indigenous children may assist in the adaptation of learning design to support Indigenous children's success. Rigorous research methodologies such as those employed by the '*High/Scope Perry Preschool program*' are stymied by a practicable lack of clarity surrounding the concept of Indigenous school readiness and the non-Indigenous benchmarks against which children are currently measured.

*Teachers:* The low expectation that some teachers have of Indigenous students may have a negative effect on learning. There is also a perception that there are few high quality teachers working with Indigenous students, although data were not presented to support

this. Connecting individual learners with both content and processes is a fundamental skill and is dependent on the ability of early childhood educators to ascertain the strengths, preferences and attitudes each child arrives with at the classroom door. However, addressing teacher expectations has not been successfully achieved at the system level and there is no research precedent concerning alteration of values, beliefs or deficit thinking within the education system.

*Families, Health and Education:* Participants from a broad range of disciplinary and service contexts agreed that the health sector can contribute to improving the determinants of school readiness, which begin at conception, not at school entry. Furthermore, the health and education sectors need to both support school readiness through the medium of families by improving their awareness and also by empowering families to provide healthy, nurturing environments for children to thrive physically, emotionally and cognitively.

#### **7: Priorities for attention and action: Unresolved issues**

It was agreed that this workshop should be seen as but a first step in suggesting some broad research themes, so that detailed discussion with Indigenous communities could begin, with a view to forming partnerships and determining a shared vision for research. The work of research groups must be context-sensitive, incorporate Indigenous voices and visions and embrace community ownership from the outset. Community ownership of programs and full participation in research is essential for successful research transfer and capacity development. This should be a non-negotiable component of the processes and practices of research design for research with Indigenous communities.

Other key unresolved issues include:

- The issue of localisation or contextualisation for heterogeneous Indigenous communities is critical;
- Translocation of a health research paradigm to an education context may be difficult, since high quality evidence may be measured differently between the medical and education disciplines;
- What is the threshold for the quality of evidence, upon which we would be prepared to proceed with an intervention? Randomised control trials may not always be feasible, but in the past the difficulty of conducting such studies has sometimes been used as an excuse to obtain poor-quality evidence. A joint

approach between the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Council of Educational Research may be needed to achieve a meaningful collaboration across disciplines.

Throughout this workshop a recurring theme was on systems reform since there has been reluctance in the education sector to shift from a didactic to a ‘two way’ engagement paradigm. This is evident in the discontinuities between policy, research and program implementation. Achieving a scientifically rigorous view of what makes “breakthrough” schools and community development will require much broader thinking and a more radical approach through a thematic, strategic working group agenda.

