

Literature review: Indigenous early childhood education, school readiness & transition programs to primary school ^[1]

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Executive summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience an educational trajectory that often differs from that of non-Indigenous Australians. As a heterogeneous group - with diverse cultural and social values, norms, practices and expectations - efforts to improve the educational plight of Indigenous Australians are faced with an added degree of difficulty (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson & Carapetis, 2008). Indigenous early childhood education has become an increasingly important policy priority in Australia, with the Australian government demonstrating their commitment to ensuring better access to early childhood education for all 4 year old Aboriginal children from remote communities in the Rudd and Gillard Governments Closing the Gap initiative, which commenced in 2009 (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). Sadly, early childhood education access and outcomes for Aboriginal children have remained relatively unchanged since the commencement of the Closing the Gap initiative (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). In 2015, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational achievements remains. Quality early childhood education is often seen as the key to improving Aboriginal educational outcomes.

Since the educational experiences of Aboriginal Australians are often framed from a 'deficit' perspective, whereby the failures of Indigenous people to engage with the mainstream educational system are seen as the 'problem', an alternative approach to Indigenous early childhood education discourse is preferable. This alternative approach highlights the strengths that many Aboriginal children possess when commencing school, strengths that may result from Indigenous child-rearing practices. Consequently, this literature review utilises a strengths-based perspective for Aboriginal early childhood education and school readiness, noting that Aboriginal children are frequently expected to adapt to a foreign educational system whereby school expectations differ from that of their home environment.

The role that television can play in assisting Indigenous children to adapt to and understand Western school environments will be discussed in this review. Indeed, television is a powerful tool that can assist in expanding a child's worldview through exposure to foreign, unfamiliar content. Educational television in particular can be extremely beneficial to a child's development by assisting young children to understand difference and even develop emerging literacy skills.

However, it is important to acknowledge that transitioning to school is a holistic, relational process that occurs over a period of time before and after the very first school day, thus requiring not only children to be ready, but schools as well. The failures of some mainstream educational systems to adapt to the needs of Aboriginal children commencing school need to be acknowledged if Aboriginal children are to experience a successful transition to school. This review reinforces the idea that any measures of Aboriginal children's school readiness are frequently undertaken from a mainstream, Western perspective, thus potentially overlooking the importance of Indigenous child-rearing practices and values on school readiness. Ideally, any evaluation of the effectiveness of transition programs in supporting the school readiness process will utilise a combination of measures that derive from both mainstream and Indigenous perspectives.

Ultimately, the main purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview about the factors that ensure an effective transition to school for Aboriginal children and the role that television can play in achieving it. It is not the prerogative of this review to identify all the factors that impede Indigenous success in early childhood schooling. Rather, this review of the literature identifies those factors that lead towards Indigenous success in the transition to school, thus utilising a strengths-based perspective on Aboriginal early childhood education, school readiness and transition to primary school. In focusing on transition programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes for Aboriginal children commencing schooling, the information provided in this literature review will be able to inform future directions for the development of culturally-safe transition programs for Indigenous children commencing primary school.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: aboriginal ^[4]

pre-school ^[5]

school-system ^[6]

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