

Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children



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Successful transition programs from prior-to-school
to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
children

Sue Dockett[^], Bob Perry[^], Terry Mason*, Tracey
Simpson[^], Peter Howard#, Diana Whitton*, Shirley
Gilbert*, Sophia Pearce[^], Prathyusha
Sanagavarapu*, Jen Skattebol*, Christine
Woodrow*

* University of Western Sydney
^ Charles Sturt University
Australian Catholic University

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Glossary

Aboriginal	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
AEA	Aboriginal Education Assistant
AECSSU	Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit
AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
AEW	Aboriginal Education Worker
AERT	Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher
ASSPA	Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness
BST	Basic Skills Test
CDEP	Community Development and Employment Projects
DET	NSW Department of Education and Training
Early Stage 1	The stage of schooling linked with Kindergarten
HSLO	Home School Liaison Officer
K-2	The first three years of school.
K-6	The years of schooling covered in a primary school in NSW
Kindergarten	The first year of formal school in NSW
KLA	Key Learning Area
NFER	National Fund for Education Research
NIELNS	National Indigenous Early Literacy and Numeracy Strategy
PSFP	Priority Schools Funding Program
SaCC	Schools as Community Centres
SENA	Schedule for Early Number Assessment
SSRP	Starting School Research Project
Stage 1	The stage of schooling linked with Years 1 and 2

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The researchers have been privileged to work with many wonderful people during the course of this project. We wish to acknowledge their support.

In particular, we wish to thank the Aboriginal children and adults with whom we have had many positive reactions, not only for allowing us to meet with them but also for the openness and frankness of our discussions. We wish to thank the Elders, past and present, of the numerous land and language groups with whom we have worked for allowing us to pass into their lands in order to carry out this project. We are proud to say that we have been invited back on many occasions and have been greeted as worthy visitors.

Many educators have given up their time to assist us in this project and we acknowledge them all. Without the concerted efforts of these educators and their respective communities, we would have had little to report in terms of successful strategies.

We thank the Project Reference Group for their ongoing and stimulating support, critique and discussion. This report is a direct reflection of these discussions, particularly with a subgroup of the Project Reference Group. In it we have discussed the positive findings of our research. There is much of quality going on in terms of transition to school. There is still much to do.

Finally, we thank all the children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, for their cooperation and their willingness to talk with us, draw pictures, take us on tours and generally act as excellent ambassadors for all of the groups to which they belong. This report is dedicated to those children who represent the reason why educators do what they do.

Executive summary

In early 2004, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) sought expressions of interest from suitably qualified researchers for a project titled *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-To-School to School for Indigenous Australian Students*¹². This project was funded by the National Fund for Education Research (NFER).

The project was designed to:

- identify sites where successful transition to school programs for Aboriginal communities are operating;
- identify the reasons for success, and to identify strategies for successful transition to school for Aboriginal children;
- trial these strategies in sites that nominate as experiencing difficulties in relation to transition to school for Aboriginal children; and
- disseminate strategies for successful transition to school for Aboriginal communities, and, in turn, improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

A case study methodology, based on working together with school, prior-to-school and community members within a series of case study sites (10) and trial sites (5) across NSW was used to address the following key issues:

1. What are the features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?
2. To what extent are these features transferable to other contexts and to what extent might these features be unique to any one particular site?
3. In what ways can linkages between schools, early childhood services and Aboriginal communities be improved to increase the educational attainment of Aboriginal children?
4. What strategies are successful in engaging families who don't readily engage with early childhood services and schools?

1. What are the features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?

The key messages identified in this section underpin the report, focusing on the elements of transition to school programs that support improved student learning outcomes. The findings indicate that improved student learning outcomes are linked to positive relationships – on all levels. Where children feel connected with school, through the relationships they have with their teachers and peers, they are more likely

¹ Early in the project's life, the Reference Group reviewed the title of the project and changed it to *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*. This revised title is used throughout the report, except where the original title is included for historical reasons.

² In keeping with the protocol established in the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004, p. 11), the term Aboriginal is used in this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

to engage with the life of school, including the educational curriculum. When families and school personnel work together, with the involvement of other community groups or agencies as appropriate, they can work together to promote children's wellbeing and educational attainment. Educators too, benefit from positive relationships and interactions with their peers, be they in school or prior-to-school settings, or both.

Positive relationships are critical to the success of transition to school programs. What happens in transition programs also has an impact on how children, families, communities and teachers engage and the messages they promote about expectations and belonging. Transition programs that are successful focus on more than academic or school organisational skills (such as children learning to out up their hand in order to speak). Successful programs are multi-faceted and provide opportunities to build upon the strengths of children, educators families and communities as they work towards promoting positive educational outcomes.

Programs supporting a successful transition from prior-to-school to school settings have the following characteristics:

a) High quality programs and experiences that:

- ✚ actively involve children and families;
- ✚ utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities;
- ✚ focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved;
- ✚ facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy;
- ✚ engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations;
- ✚ are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school;
- ✚ promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school; and
- ✚ promote the general wellbeing of children and families.

b) Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.

c) Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders. Successful transition to school programs build relationships between:

- ✚ families and school
- ✚ children and school
- ✚ communities and school
- ✚ educators in different settings
- ✚ children
- ✚ educators and families
- ✚ other stakeholders as appropriate

d) Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.

This can involve tapping into existing programs or drawing upon the close connections many Aboriginal educators have with their communities. The significance of Aboriginal educators and other professionals, as well as staff in Schools as Community Centres (SaCCs) and other outreach programs is particularly important.

e) Recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

2. To what extent are these features transferable to other contexts and to what extent might these features be unique to any one particular site?

This project utilised the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* (Dockett & Perry, 2001a) that have been developed, implemented and evaluated by two of the chief investigators. These Guidelines hold that effective transition to school programs:

- establish positive relationships between children, parents and educators;
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner;
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs;
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources;
- involve a range of stakeholders;
- are well planned and effectively evaluated;
- are flexible and responsive;
- are based on mutual trust and respect;
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants;
- takes into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

Each of these guidelines reflects broad approaches that together, work to create an integrated transition program that is shaped towards the community in which it operates.

The relevance and importance of these Guidelines were reinforced by this project. For example, in each site the issue of relationships was central to the development of an effective transition to school program. However, in each site, the nature of those relationships, the people and communities involved, differed.

The findings relating to this section of the report emphasise: the importance of the underlying principles identified in the Guidelines; the significance of developing contextually and community-relevant transition programs, which means that no two programs across NSW will be exactly the same; and the importance of all those interested and involved in transition programs having opportunities to learn from others, share ideas and develop networks. While there is no expectation that the same approach will be effective in different contexts, much is to be gained by opportunities to develop networks and share ideas, and to consider how variations or adaptations of approaches can be implemented in local contexts. The building of such networks also has much to contribute to the building of relationships among educators, families and communities.

3. In what ways can linkages between schools, early childhood services and Aboriginal communities be improved to increase the educational attainment of Aboriginal children?

Linkages between prior-to-school settings and schools were promoted when staff in different services had opportunities to network. Important elements of this interaction included:

- getting to know educators in other contexts;
- recognising educators in different settings as professionals and developing a sense of professional trust and respect;
- establishing professional rapport;
- visiting different educational settings;
- discussing educational programs and approaches across settings;
- collaborative projects; and
- ongoing professional development.

When educators in prior-to-school and schools were seen to work well together, families were likely to transfer some of the trust they had built up with the prior-to-school educator to school educators, on the basis that someone they already trusted (the prior-to-school educator) also trusted the other (school educator).

In some communities, strong links exist between some parts of local Aboriginal communities and schools as well as early childhood services. In several of the research sites for this project it was evident that there was no 'one' local community. Like all communities, Aboriginal communities are characterised as much by their diversity as by their homogeneity.

Across the sites, there were several communities in which AECG, Lands Council and Community Working Party groups were actively engaged with educational settings and issues. In some instances, this was related to the employment of Aboriginal people from the local community in schools and early childhood settings.

Strong links between educational services and communities were often facilitated by specific staff – such as the SaCC co-ordinator, AEA, AEW, HSLO or preschool director. The individual contacts made through these personnel were often critical to promoting community engagement with schools. The outreach programs delivered by some SaCC co-ordinators and involving getting out into local communities, presenting a non-threatening and supportive presence for families and providing access to services such as playgroups and toy libraries, were described as particularly important by participants in this project.

Transition to school programs can provide a focus for community collaboration. When community members are engaged in collaborative projects, such as transition to school programs, there are opportunities for community members to develop their own skills and confidence, as well as contribute to a program that benefits others.

Linking with families and communities is largely dependent on effective and authentic communication. Family and community members in several sites relied on communication from prior-to-school services and schools to make judgements about

the transition to school and about how children were progressing when children started school.

4. What strategies are successful in engaging families who don't readily engage with early childhood services and schools?

A major challenge for all transition programs observed throughout this project was accessing children and families who did not attend prior-to-school settings and inviting them, or convincing them, to participate in transition programs. In several cases, contact with these families was achieved through the ongoing work of the AEAs, AEWs, HSLOs, and SaCC co-ordinators. In other communities, there remained large numbers of Aboriginal children and families who accessed neither early childhood services nor transition to school programs. Developing appropriate strategies to reach these members of local communities remains a challenge.

Effective strategies to reach these members of local communities include many of the same strategies identified above. These strategies hinge on families making connections with trusted and respected people (often Aboriginal people) who facilitate their connection with other services, including schools. Ongoing personal contact is the key to forming such connections.

Connections between families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools can only be built in the context of respectful relationships, where the strengths of individuals and families are recognised, even when challenges and other difficulties may also be evident. Family and community members will avoid interactions where they expect to be blamed, shamed, judged negatively, or their expertise and knowledge ignored. They are much more likely to engage in interactions that acknowledge their strengths, respond to their challenges and respect their knowledge.

1. Introduction and Background to the Project

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- disseminate strategies for successful transition to school for Aboriginal communities, and, in turn, improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Up to here for indigenous

A team of researchers based in the Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney but with members from two other NSW universities (Australian Catholic University and Charles Sturt University) submitted an expression of interest and was informed in June, 2004 that this submission had been successful.

³ Early in the project's life, the Reference Group reviewed the title of the project and changed it to *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*. This revised title is used throughout the report, except where the original title is included for historical reasons.

2. Project Team

The Project Team is led by Sue Dockett and Bob Perry, who were co-directors of the Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney at the beginning of the project but, at the time of this final report are members of the Murray School of Education, Charles Sturt University. Other researchers involved in the project over all or part of the period 2004-2007 are:

University of Western Sydney

Shirley Gilbert
Terry Mason
Marilyn Robert
Prathyusha Sanagavarapu
Jen Skattebol
Althea Travis
Diana Whitton
Christine Woodrow

Australian Catholic University

Peter Howard

Charles Sturt University

Tracey Simpson
Sophia Pearce

3. The NSW Context

In NSW, children are eligible to commence school at the beginning of the year in which they turn five, provided that their birthday falls before the end of July in that same year. The first year of formal schooling is called Kindergarten. Children attend Kindergarten full time from the beginning of the school year. There is only one intake of students each year. Children will generally start school all on the same day, often with staggered starting times on the first day.

There are approximately 2200 public primary schools in NSW. One hundred of these have preschools located on the school site and operated under the auspices of the NSW Department of Education and Training. Many children who start school in NSW do not attend DET preschools. A significant proportion of children starting school will have attended early childhood services, such as preschool and child care. However, a substantial proportion of children starting school will have accessed no formal early childhood setting prior to starting school. Many Aboriginal children fall into this latter category.

The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004) notes that the “Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing and youngest population in New South Wales, with over 50 percent of Aboriginal people under the age of 25 years” (p. 53). This report cites Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicating that approximately 25 percent of Aboriginal people in NSW are aged under nine years (p. 53).

Using 2001 census data and data provided by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, the Report cites data relating to primary school enrolment for Aboriginal children and preschool enrolment for Aboriginal children in NSW. Data relevant to this project are reproduced below as Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Enrolment in government primary schools: 1999-2003

Full-time enrolments	Level	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Aboriginal	K-2	8243	8535	8905	9323	9393
Non-Aboriginal	K-2	188 485	187 371	183 209	180 459	177 763

(source: *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004, p. 18).

Table 2. New South Wales preschool census for Aboriginal children

	2000	2001	2002	2003			
	Total	Total	Total	Urban	Rural	Remote	Total
In govt preschools	244	261	361	215	88	45	348
In non-govt preschools	2142	2176	2315	428	1596	337	2361
Participation age 3 yrs	21.5%	22.3%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
Participation age 4 yrs	33.6%	32.5%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
Participation age 5 yrs	7.3%	7.2%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
Total Aboriginal children	2386	2437	2676	643	1684	382	2709

(source: *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004, p. 61)

Additional data detailing the participation rates for Aboriginal preschoolers in NSW are reported in a recent Australian Government Productivity Commission (2005) report entitled *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005* and reproduced below as Table 3.

Table 3. Indigenous children enrolled in preschool and participation rate 2003 (NSW only)

	Number	Rate (%)
Participation age 3 yrs	920	25.8
Participation age 4 yrs	1406	39.1
Participation age 5 yrs	367	10.0

(source: Australian Government Productivity Commission (2005) *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005*, p. 6.5)

The Productivity Commission report cautions that participation rates are inferior measures to attendance rates, as they reflect the number of children enrolled in preschools, rather than the number who actually attend, expressed as a proportion of the relevant population group. Nevertheless, such figures indicate that “in 2003, Indigenous students represented 4.3 percent of all preschool enrolments” (Australian Productivity Commission, 2005, p. 6.4).

Preschool participation rates for Aboriginal children vary considerably across NSW. For example, 59.8 percent of Aboriginal children are reported to attend between six and ten half-day preschool sessions in the Murray (south-western) region, compared with only 7.1 percent of Aboriginal children in the neighbouring Murrumbidgee region (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004, p. 63). In reading these figures, it is important to note that the availability of services varies considerably across areas, and that preschool has been separated from child care attendance. In NSW, child care services with a daily enrolment of more than 29 children are required to employ an early childhood trained teacher and offer an education program. Such services are also able to offer families access to the Commonwealth Child Care Benefit, whereas preschools are not.

The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004, p. 64) notes that:

It is only in the Murray and Sydney districts that the majority of Aboriginal children participated in six to ten half-day sessions per week (59.8 percent and 51.3 percent respectively) in 2003. In all other districts most Aboriginal children participated in five or fewer half-day sessions per week. Only 31.2 percent of all Aboriginal children accessed preschool for more than five sessions per week. So within the small cohort of Aboriginal children who access preschool, there is an even smaller cohort who attend preschool for more than half the week.

The numbers of Aboriginal students accessing mainstream prior-to-school services is low. One suggested consequence of this is that many Aboriginal children are reported to have difficulties as they make the transition to formal schooling.

Further, the Review identified a number of barriers that prevent Aboriginal children from accessing prior-to-school services including the following:

- A major disparity exists in the availability and quality of prior-to-school services in smaller, remote and isolated communities. In other communities, there are waiting lists with insufficient places for children.
- A lack of transport options hinders many Aboriginal families from accessing preschool and other services in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of the state
- High levels of unemployment, low-income and single-parent families and lack of education about entitlements and subsidies create affordability issues for Aboriginal families in their efforts to access prior-to-school services ... it is worth noting that in New South Wales preschool education is not universal and fees are charged.
- Aboriginal families are less comfortable in using services that are not inclusive of the language and cultural practices of their specific communities. (p. 65).

Clearly, there is much to be done to ensure that Aboriginal children and their families are able to access the highest quality transition to school experiences as possible.

4. Literature review

4.1 Introduction

Starting school is an important time in the lives of children, families, educators and communities. It is a time when children, and their families, are expected to manage changes in their physical surroundings (Dockett & Perry, 1999); changes in social interactions and expectations (Hamre & Pianta, 2001); changes in the type and structure of learning environments (Fabian, 2002); and changes in how children feel about themselves as learners (Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999). A successful start to school is regarded as setting the foundation for future engagement and success (academic, social and emotional) within the context of school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998)

4.2 What is transition to school?

Transition to school is understood as a process of relationship building (Dockett & Perry, 2001a; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 1999) supported by a range of activities or experiences. In this sense, transition is something that is experienced, rather than something that happens to the child and family. The concept of transition as a process suggests that the timeframe needs to be flexible. Some transition programs operate well before children start school, others start before school and continue on through school until such a point is reached where those involved in transition agree that additional support is no longer necessary. In some situations, transition programs may begin when children start school. For example, if children start school without having made any prior contact with that school, the process of becoming familiar with school, the people in it and the expectations of school starts at the same time.

All participants and stakeholders in transition influence the process and the experiences, and are influenced by the transition. Stakeholders and participants in transition include children, families, educators, other professionals or agencies and communities.

Transition to school occurs within a specific context. The most effective transition programs are those that acknowledge and are responsive to that context (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Transition programs and experiences can provide an important basis for a successful start to school. Transition programs and experiences are a major means of establishing continuity between prior-to-school and school environments and expectations, and building upon and extend the supportive relationships and connections that may already exist between families, community and educators. Where these elements do not already exist, transition programs provide an opportunity for these to be established and maintained (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

4.3 Why is a successful transition to school important?

The ease with which this transition is accomplished has long term impacts on children's school success and family involvement with the school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Luster & McAdoo, 1996). Children who experience early school success are reported to exhibit higher levels of social competence and academic

achievement than those who experience difficulty starting school (Early et al., 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Effective transition programs have the potential to help children—as well as their families and communities—feel comfortable, valued and successful in school. Ramey and Ramey (1999) have summarised the impact of successful transitions as:

- children have good feelings about school, teachers, parents, and peers;
- children show good progress in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development;
- parents and key adults express positive attitudes toward school and promote children's learning;
- teachers and school personnel provide programs adapted to children's individual development and cultural/linguistic diversity; and
- mutually supportive relationships occur among families, school personnel, service providers, communities.

Effective transition programs have the potential to build on children's competencies, extend their social supports and relationships, and promote ongoing school success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). They also have the potential to help children, their families and communities, to feel comfortable, valued and successful in school and to assist educators as they develop positive learning environments for children starting school. Bailey (1999, p. xv) summarises the importance of transition in the following way:

Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-a-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners.

Transition practices and programs vary widely. Partly, this is because different contexts require different responses, partly it is because of the diversity of resources (human and material) that are available to support these programs, partly it is because different people are involved in different places.

4.4 Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs

The Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2001a, 2001b) has developed a series of *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs*, which argue that such programs:

- establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators;
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner;
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs;
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources;
- involve a range of stakeholders;
- are well planned and effectively evaluated;
- are flexible and responsive;
- are based on mutual trust and respect;
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants; and
- takes into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

These *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* have provided a framework for the establishment and evaluation of transition to school programs that has been tested successfully across NSW (Dockett & Perry, 2003c). The Guidelines formed one of the foundations for the brief for this project.

4.5 Issues of readiness

Within the research literature, there is often a connection between the transition to school and perceptions of 'readiness' (Meisels, 1999). Across Australia, the major criterion to determine children's eligibility for school is age. Discussions about readiness are common, especially when families have some choice about when their children will start school. In NSW, for example, families in which a child has a birthday in the first half of the year will have a choice about whether the child starts school at age four-and-a-half, or five-and-a-half years. Both situations meet the legal requirements for starting school.

Readiness means different things in different contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2002). In some contexts, readiness is defined in terms of the skills, behaviours and knowledge of individual children. Such attributes are usually assessed by readiness tests and decisions about the placement of children are based on these tests. While it is important for those in school contexts to become familiar with children and their abilities, concerns about such testing procedures include the:

- cultural appropriateness;
- nature of the test;
- relevance of the test;
- using tests to identify weaknesses rather than strengths; and
- lack of predictive value of such tests

(Bordignon & Lam, 2004; LaParo & Pianta, 2000).

An alternative focus is to concentrate not only on the attributes of individual children, but also to consider the concept of readiness as "an interactive responsibility of the school and community" (Ackerman & Barnett, 2004, p. 9). In broad terms, Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, (2000, p. 540), consider readiness to include the "social, political, organisational, educational and personal resources that support children's success at school entry".

The US National Education Goals Panel (1997) has adopted a definition of school readiness that encompasses:

- children's readiness for school;
- schools' readiness for children; and
- family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness for school success.

This means that, in addition to considering the child who is about to start school, the focus is needed on broader community agendas, for example, Los Angeles county in California (First 5, 2004) has listed the following goals to promote school readiness:

1. children are born at healthy birth weights
2. children receive preventative health care
3. children are free from abuse and neglect and thrive in permanent homes

4. families ensure that kids are safe from unintentional injuries
5. communities offer safe places for children to live and play
6. families have adequate food
7. families have adequate financial resources
8. communities offer affordable housing for families
9. families have supportive networks and are able to find information and assistance
10. families have access to quality child care
11. communities encourage educational attainment for families
12. families and caregivers interact with children in ways that promote cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional and physical development
13. schools and child care programs promote an environment that is conducive to learning
14. schools, families, and caregivers work together to ensure a positive transition to K-6 education
15. communities support families and children with special needs

A further example of this broader, community-based understanding of readiness is demonstrated in the Wisconsin Readiness Indicators reproduced in Table 1.

Clearly, promoting children's success at school needs to be considered in the much broader context of promoting positive life experiences generally. However, there are things that schools can do to promote success at school for all children. These include joining with families, prior-to-school settings and community organisations to develop effective transition to school programs.

A similar view was reflected in the recent *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004), where it was recognised that the term 'school ready' related to "children's preparedness to start school and covers health, physical, social and emotional wellbeing, language and literacy development, and general knowledge about their world" (p. 72). The report notes that schools cannot provide all appropriate supports and services connected to these expectations. Interagency cooperation is essential to meet needs across these areas:

Whether students are 'school ready' is also dependent on the alignment of government agencies, Aboriginal community organisations, community and parents with schools. (p. 73)

Community approaches to school readiness – Wisconsin Readiness Indicators

Responsiveness: Family and Community Supports

- Health care and physical development
 - Access to health care
 - Prenatal care
 - Maternal health behaviours
 - Infant mortality
 - Low birthrate
 - Health and developmental screening
 - Dental care
 - Chronic health conditions
- Family resources
 - Family income
 - Parental employment
 - Poverty
 - Maternal education
 - Early parenthood
 - Family support
- Early care and education
 - Availability (demand vs available space)
 - Quality
 - Accreditation and regulatory status
 - Caregiver wages and workforce stability
 - Caregiver education and training
 - Affordability
- Community conditions
 - Crime rate
 - Family violence and child abuse
 - Poverty

Receptiveness – School Readiness for children

- Teacher training and professional development
- School policies and environment
 - Parent involvement policies
 - School community partnerships
 - Before and after school programs
- Student policies
 - Retention
 - Suspension
- Transition to K policies
- Classrooms
 - Class size
 - Pupil teacher ration

Ready Children

- Health and physical development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language development and communication
- Cognition and general knowledge

Table 1. **Wisconsin Readiness Indicators**

Readiness indicators developed by Wisconsin (Wisconsin School Readiness Indicators Initiative Steering Committee, 2003, cited in Graue, 2006, p. 52). The full report of this initiative is available: <<http://www.wccf.org/pdf/WSRII.pdf>>

Aligned with this view of readiness is the notion from the US National Education Goals Panel that schools, as well as children, need to be considered 'ready' (Shore, 1998). 'Ready schools' provide the necessary supports for children by:

1. focusing on transition. This focus has the aims of
 - reducing cultural, linguistic or contextual barriers for children and families starting school;
 - forging links between children's prior-to-school and school experiences; and
 - adjusting educational practices to respond to children's individual needs and experiences.
2. supporting quality teaching and learning, with the aim of adopting practices that work in specific contexts. Professional development of educators is emphasised, families are included in educational programs, children are regarded as individuals and practices that support each child are emphasised. A key aspect is the strong and articulate leadership of the school.
3. recognising that children can benefit from support outside the school. Such supports can be academic, but also include health care, nutrition and social support. Ready schools promote collaboration among families, school and other agencies.

(Gonzalez, 2002; Shore, 1998)

Adopting a focus on the school context, as well as individual children, means that rather than considering children in isolation, it is reasonable to ask what schools can do and provide to support quality educational outcomes for all children, regardless of their perceived 'readiness' as they start school.

4.6 Positive relationships

Effective transition programs are based on relationships. Without a strong focus on relationships, practices and supports occur in isolation and there is an overall sense of discontinuity and disconnection.

The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004) noted that many Aboriginal children begin school before they turn 5 and many of them have not accessed formal early childhood education services: "The importance of a positive relationship between staff and Aboriginal parents and caregivers from the first day of school is critical" (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004, p. 70).

A wide range of relationships has been connected with positive adjustment to school (Pianta, 1998). These include positive relationships between parents and teachers (Epstein, 1996); peer relationships including friendships (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996); and children's relationships with teachers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Family relationships remain important, as children draw upon these to develop relationships outside the family (Corrie, 2001). The multiple interactions and connections that occur as children start school can provide much support to children and families as they enter the world of formal schooling.

A sense of belonging to the school community is an important contributor to how well children and families adjust to school. Osterman (2000, p. 359) notes that within the school community, “students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school”. There are clear indications that some children and families do not feel ‘connected’ to the school community—rather they experience alienation at school. There are many potential reasons for this, including differences in home and school culture (Toomey, 1989), and expectations of home and school (Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrkowski, & Parker, 1999).

There are consistent research findings that children whose parents are more involved in school demonstrate higher academic performance (Epstein, 1991; Funkhouser, Gonzales & Moles, 1998; Young & Westernoff, 1996). Yet, in many situations there are barriers to such involvement (Jones, Burke & Picus, 2001). In some instances, this can be related to the lack of cultural awareness, or the unavailability of culturally relevant information for families (Aronson, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Some parents report feeling disaffected with school as a result of their own experiences (Dockett & Perry, 1999), and others indicate that they are not sure how best to help their children (Dowling, 1995). Such issues can be exacerbated when the language and culture of the school are not the language and culture of home, and where there is little information that seeks to connect these.

4.7 Aboriginal⁴ children starting school

There is much evidence of inequity of educational access, participation and outcomes for Aboriginal children in Australian schools (Adams, 1998; Cronin & Diezmann, 2002). Wyatt (2006), in the Foreword to the *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* report, volume 3, expresses this clearly:

It is important to accept the reality that the failure of over the past thirty years to improve the educational outcomes of the vast majority of Aboriginal school children has affected three generations of Aboriginal children and young people who are highly likely to have had limited access to lifelong learning, employment and economic opportunities ...there has been tacit acceptance of the non-achievement of educational standards by Aboriginal children and young people. The resultant acceptance of this lack of educational success has a cumulative effect. It is based on the belief that Aboriginal children and young people will never reach their full potential ...their low level of educational success is accepted as a normative expectation. This has to change. (p. vi)

Frigo and Adams (2002, p. 1) suggest that many issues merge early in school-home connections and are perpetuated throughout school life:

In the early childhood years (0-8 years), Indigenous students are less likely to participate in preschooling than their non-Indigenous peers, they have higher rates of absenteeism beginning in primary school, and the early indications of their educational achievement, as measured by state-wide English literacy assessments, indicate that, as a group, they perform at a lower level compared to their non-Indigenous peers.

⁴ In keeping with the protocol established in the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004, p. 11), the term Aboriginal is used in this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This can be particularly important for Aboriginal children. Schools in which Aboriginal children are achieving tend to support Aboriginal culture and actively engage young Aboriginal children in learning. There is often a strong Aboriginal presence at the school—both in terms of students and staff. As well, strong links between the community and the school are evident, and seen as vital in promoting a smooth transition between home and school.

The importance of family involvement within Aboriginal communities in Canada has been recognised in several reports, culminating in the view that:

When valid and effective partnerships between the education community and Aboriginal communities are established, and when these partnerships enable and assist Aboriginal parents to have greater engagement with their children's education and greater involvement in schools, then Aboriginal students will experience improved success in schools. (Malatest, 2002, p. 5)

Canadian research, which is representative of findings in other Indigenous communities (such as First Nations, Plains Indian and Inuit communities) suggests that there are several distinct barriers that impede communication and collaboration between Aboriginal families and schools. Barriers include:

1. *Negative educational experiences of Aboriginal parents*
Many Aboriginal adults have had negative experiences at school, and these experiences influence current perceptions and expectations. Consequences may include Aboriginal families feeling uncomfortable about volunteering to assist in class, or in helping with homework.
2. *Barriers to communication*
Miscommunication can result when there are differences in the preferred communication styles of people, when there are language differences and when communication uses jargon.
3. *Lack of understanding by schools*
Aboriginal parents reported a lack of understanding or empathy from schools related to the difficulties and challenges that were unique to Aboriginal families.
4. *Cultural awareness*
A lack of cultural awareness was linked to varying expectations of family involvement in schools, with Aboriginal families and schools having different views about what constituted successful engagement. There was a noted concern for Aboriginal families discussing their children with people they did not know or trust. Aboriginal families saw schools as having a view of a single Aboriginal culture, failing to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal culture and experience. In addition, locally relevant resources and curriculum was often missing, or outdated.
5. *Poverty and illness in Aboriginal families*
Poverty has an impact on interactions with school when a lack of resources means that accessing transport to get to school is difficult, or when the cost of child care

prohibits attendance at school functions. Chronic health problems also limit possible interactions with schools.

6. *Lack of engagement strategies by schools*

Aboriginal families report that some efforts to involve them in schools do not seem genuine – for example asking them to attend celebrations of Aboriginal culture when they have not been consulted about the celebrations or had input.

7. *The intimidation factor*

Parents can feel intimidated by the school environment and the people within it. Some families report racism in their dealings with school.

8. *Negative nature of parental contact*

Often, contact between schools and families related to discussing problems children were experiencing.

9. *'Segregation' of Aboriginal students.*

A predominance of Aboriginal children in support classes or special programs was often regarded as a form of segregation: “While Aboriginal parents acknowledged that such supports were often necessary, it was also noted that such programs should not become a catch-all for Aboriginal students who may be experiencing difficulties in a traditional classroom setting” (Malatest, 2002, p. 14).

While these factors have been identified in a different cultural and political context, they resonate with issues identified in discussions of parent-school collaboration and communication within Australia. The same report (Malatest, 2002), noted that examples of best-practice strategies in schools to overcome these barriers included:

1. engaging parents in the decision-making process—viewing parents as genuine partners in school activities and decision-making, particularly—but not only—in relation to Aboriginal curriculum.
2. communicating—using processes that built trust between schools and parents; used multiple channels of communication; and provided opportunities for parents to meet in a social setting.
3. thinking outside the [school] box – considering innovative ways of delivering programs and services.
4. recognising and addressing barriers.
5. recognising Aboriginal role models – having a visible Aboriginal presence in the school, including both school staff and families.

The recent *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004), indicates that “one of the most effective ways to support Aboriginal children into the formal school setting is through transition programs which prepare children for Kindergarten” (p. 64). The following factors are identified as underpinning successful transition programs (p. 64):

- involvement of Aboriginal families and key Aboriginal groups in decision-making
- positive relationships and genuine collaboration between families, schools, early childhood services, key community groups and local service providers

- a learning community that promotes the sharing of information, cultural insights and expertise by all parties concerned with children’s transition to school
- a holistic approach to addressing the specific health, development and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal children in the context of strengthening the capacity of families and communities to meet those needs
- a dual focus on providing information and support for parents as well as quality early learning experiences for children.

The review noted the support for transition programs from Aboriginal families and communities, and identified a specific need to “develop strategies to support transition to school for all Aboriginal children, including children attending Aboriginal preschools, DET preschools, other early childhood services and particularly children who do not access any prior-to-school services” (p. 65).

The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004) clearly recognises the importance of transition to school programs for Aboriginal children and provides strong backing for the present project which seeks information on what works in these programs, and why.

4.8 Conclusion

Starting school is an important time in the lives of children. Children who successfully adjust to school, who feel connected to school and who have positive relationships with the adults and other children at school are likely to experience school success. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal children. Families who feel involved with, supported by and connected with the school are likely to support their children in ways that promote their engagement with school. Schools and other community agencies that work together not only support each other, but also support the children and families with whom they work. The resources put into making the transition to school a positive one—characterised by strong relationships between all involved—are minimal compared with those required to manage problems that emerge later and which may have their roots in ineffective transitions to school.

5. Methodology

5.1 Reference Group

The *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project has been managed by a Reference Group. Membership of the Reference Group is representative of the major organisations with an interest in education for Indigenous Australians. The membership includes:

- Early Childhood Unit, NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) (Senior Manager/Director - Chair)
- Aboriginal Programs Unit / Indigenous Education Directorate, DET
- Planning and Innovation DET
- External Relations DET
- Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC)
- New South Wales Primary Principals Association (NSWPPA)
- Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)
- Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit
- New South Wales Teachers Federation
- Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations
- Office of Childcare (DoCS)
- Early Childhood Council
- Department of Education Science and Training
- Children's Services Forum

The *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Children* Reference Group functions primarily to guide, monitor and report on the successful implementation of the National Fund for Education Research (NFER) project. The Reference Group provides advice on strategic issues to the General Manager Access and Equity and the Senior Manager Early Childhood. The matters for advice relate to:

- identifying key issues impacting on this research project;
- overseeing and monitoring of this research project;
- implementing methodology;
- tendering and successful tender process;
- selecting sites demonstrating best practice;
- selecting sites for trialling;
- administering NFER research project;
- consulting with Aboriginal communities;
- providing processes for ongoing feedback;
- reporting to the Minister for Education and Training, the DET Board of Management and to AESOC; and
- other matters.

5.2 Researching in Communities

Transition to school occurs within communities. Hence, research on successful practices in transition to school must be undertaken within these communities. The methodology in the case study and trial phases of the *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project has recognised the diversity of the communities involved and the people within these communities, and has endeavoured to seek collaborative input from all in these communities who are involved with the transition to school process. All members of the project team have adhered to the ethical conduct of research in Indigenous communities and have sought to build the capacity of each of the communities in which they have worked.

In their review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes, Mellor and Corrigan (2004) describe what they see as the limitations of much of this research.

1. Research has generally been either testing without context or small case study.
 2. Research has generally focused on a specific set of the population.
 3. Research findings have been equivocal, incomplete or unclear.
 4. There has been a focus on the uniqueness of the Indigenous experience of education.
 5. Indigenous education research has been to an extent isolated from the broader research discourses over teacher quality, ongoing professional development, class sizes and social and emotional readiness for formal education.
 6. Indigenous education has not been integrated with discourses in other disciplines, such as developmental, cognitive and social psychology, paediatrics, sociology and public and community health.
 7. Research has focused predominantly on 'problems'.
 8. The relationship between cause and effect has been asserted, rather than the inferences tested through research.
 9. There is a tendency to adopt and promote the significance of single solutions.
- (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 46)

The current project attempted to avoid many of these perceived limitations by adopting approaches informed by decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999). In recent years there has been considerable critique around the production of academic knowledge about Indigenous peoples as on-going colonialism (Gandhi, 1998; Kaomea, 2004; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Smith, 1999). Central to these critiques are questions about who has the power to name Indigenous experience and how this naming has the potential to reify (or intensify) existing power relations. In response to and as part of these critiques, Swadener, Kabiru, and Njenga (2000) developed a set of guidelines for collaborative work between 'insider' and 'outsider' partners and to ensure that power issues between western academic agendas and community issues are balanced. While Mutua and Swadener (2004) later suggest that these 'rule-governed formulas' cannot be expected to work across every localised power relationship, these guidelines have salience as reflexive methodological tools in research with Indigenous communities. Ongoing reference points for the project drawn from these guidelines include:

- collaboration on all phases of the study;
- understanding of languages and cultural nuances;
- compensation;

- making findings available to local share holders;
- participating in the community in an on-going way; and
- interrogating privilege.

The case studies and trial site visits have extended over a total period of more than 18 months and involved multiple visits to each site, allowing the researchers and communities to get to know each other and to build relationships. Findings have been developed collaboratively with community members through drafting, checking and redrafting of reports and through sharing of findings with as many community members as possible. Smith (1999, p. 15) emphasises the importance of research that reports back to community

There are diverse ways of disseminating knowledge and of ensuring that research reaches the people who have helped make it. Two important ways not always addressed by scientific research are to do with ‘reporting back’ to the people and ‘sharing knowledge’. Both ways assume a principle of reciprocity and feedback.

This mechanism for negotiating meaning and developing a shared world view have worked towards avoiding research approaches where:

...ill-formed perceptions and assumptions about the values and ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and social organisation have emerged from the comparison of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world to the spiritual, social, political and economic perspectives of European colonisers. Colonists judged the civility and worthiness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and societies by the degree to which they perceived it conforming to European customs and norms. (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003, pp. 1-2)

The project team has recognised that our work in each site involves working with difference and celebrating this difference whenever possible and from as many perspectives as possible. We recognise that “working with difference in a research context takes time, care, patience and the building of robust relationships” (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003, p. 3). The methodology planned and implemented in the case study phase of the project has endeavoured to achieve these features.

5.3 Case Studies

5.3.1 Case Study Site Selection

Ten case study sites for the project were chosen by the Project Reference Group. The major variables that were considered in the choice of sites were:

- evidence of successful transition to school program;
- involvement of communities in the transition programs;
- proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the schools and prior-to-school settings in the site;
- geographical spread of sites across NSW.

5.3.2 Case Study Methodology

Each of the case studies was undertaken by two investigators from the project team. In all but two of the sites, one of these two was an Aboriginal researcher. Where this was not the case, the researchers involved had a strong background in working with Aboriginal communities. The case studies involved at least four visits to each site.

5.3.3 Case Study Implementation

The methodology for the case study phase of the project involved:

- an average of five visits per site undertaken by two members of the research team
- at each site, discussions with relevant education staff, community, family members and children;
- collection of relevant demographic data from each site;
- identification of the transition coordinator and/or team in each site;
- observations of transition programs and activities; and
- evaluation of the transition program.

Details of each of these elements are included in the case study site reports.

5.4 Trial studies

5.4.1 Trial site selection

In conjunction with the project team, the Project Reference Group selected five sites for this phase of the project. Selection criteria included:

- a. evidence of a willingness to develop or build upon existing transition to school programs for Aboriginal children and families;
- b. existing connections with communities that could promote involvement in transition to school programs;
- c. the proportion of Aboriginal children in the schools and prior-to-school settings in the site; and
- d. geographical spread of sites across NSW.

5.4.2 Trial site methodology

Each of the trial site studies was undertaken by two researchers from the project team, with initial visits commencing in Term 2, 2005. One researcher involved with each site was Aboriginal. The program for trialling in the five identified sites followed the general procedures for forming transition teams, implementing and

evaluating transition programs which have been established by the SSRP (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

5.4.3 Trial site implementation

The methodology for the trial phase of the project involved:

- at least four visits per site undertaken by two members of the research team
- at each site, discussions with relevant education staff, community, family members and children;
- collection of relevant demographic data from each site;
- identification of the transition coordinator and/or team in each site;
- observations of transition programs and activities; and
- evaluation of the transition program.

Details of each of these elements are included in the trial site reports.

5.5 Data Collection and Analysis

5.5.1 Coordination of data collection

A variety of data collection processes were adopted during both phases of the project. In a study such as this one, such a variety is necessary as it allows for contextual, site and project team differences to be accommodated inside an overall methodological scheme. Prior to each visit, notebooks were prepared so that all of the project team members understood the purpose of the visit and the information that was to be gathered. The notebooks also contained lists of appropriate questions for each participant or group of participants. At team meetings, these notebooks were discussed and teams were prepared for the visits.

5.5.2 Site reports

In order to coordinate reporting of findings from each site, a proforma was developed. This allowed teams to produce individual site reports that contained information under common headings but encouraged diversity reflective of the sites and the team members. These site reports were developed by the two members of the project team who visited the site and were discussed in team meetings. The reports were discussed with participants in the site. These discussions sometimes led to changes in the reports and, in every case, were appreciated by the site participants because of the clarity and insightfulness of the reports and because the researchers had taken the time and effort to share them with the site participants before sharing them with anyone else. Abridged reports for case study and trial sites are incorporated as Appendices 1 and 2 of this report.

5.5.3 Data collection approaches

Data for this project was collected using:

- interviews;
- drawings;
- observations; and
- document analysis;

5.6 Interstate benchmarking

The funding for this project comes from the National Fund for Educational Research. Hence, it was felt appropriate that the interim results from the study, particularly the

case study component of the study, should be tested in at least two other states beyond New South Wales where the data have been generated. There were two opportunities to do this.

On November 3, 2005, two members of the research team met for two hours with officers of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services in Adelaide. On April 11, 2005, two members of the research team travelled to Brisbane for two meetings – one with three members of the Indigenous Education Committee of the Crèche and Kindergarten Association and the other with the Director, Curriculum and two of her colleagues from Education Queensland.

5.7 Some general comments

A major influence on the progress of the trial phase of the project has been the development and implementation of large, funded projects incorporating a transition to school focus, across the sites. Since the establishment of the trial site locations, each of the five sites has become involved in at least one such major project. These include the Schools in Partnership (SiP) program (1 site); Families First transition network (1 site); Kids Excel (1 site) and Communities for Children (2 sites). In each case, one consequence has been a shift in focus at the site level towards the commitments and requirements of the funded program, and a lessening of focus on the project described in this report, which did not include access to substantial financial resources within sites. While the project team has continued to be welcomed across the sites, some of the impetus for the development of transition to school programs outlined in this project, has been subsumed into other projects.

6. Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

6.1 Introduction

The research team wishes to acknowledge the support they have received from participants in each of the case study and trial sites. In particular, we wish to record our appreciation for the openness expressed in conversations, the organisation of visits, and the willingness to share experiences.

The study sites and the people and communities involved in them reflect the complexity of transition to school. In some sites, multiple stakeholders were actively involved in the transition processes and program, in other sites, many fewer stakeholders were represented. Some sites were recipients of additional funding for transition programs, others relied on ongoing resources.

In each site there was a commitment from adults to making the transition to school a positive experience for children. Evidence of this commitment was seen in openness to ideas and suggestions and the willingness to learn about transition programs with the aim of continually improving practice.

Within the context of wanting to learn more about effective transition programs and practices, there has been no general sense that there should be a standardised approach to transition, or a ‘one-size-fits-all’ notion. Rather, those involved in transition to school programs at each of the sites are acutely aware of the contexts in which they are located and make significant efforts to connect with, acknowledge and respect their communities.

In a general sense, transition programs across the sites were regarded as programs that occurred before children started formal schooling. However, in some sites, there was recognition that transition programs continued into the new school year. Sometimes this was in the form of ongoing contact with those involved in the transition program (such as Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA) or Aboriginal Education Workers (AEW) and in one case, it consisted of ongoing individual support for a child with special education needs.

In some communities, strong connections between prior-to-school services– such as preschool and child care–and schools support transition to school programs. In several sites, Aboriginal preschool services have had a major role in instigating, implementing and following up on transition programs. In each site, there is an awareness that transition to school programs will be different for children who have not attended prior-to-school services and those who have.

In overview, the project team concurs with comments made in relation to the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, volume 3, which focuses on improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal children, in that we are keen to “acknowledge individual commitment and localised success” but at the same time must emphasise the “need for change” based on “insightful understanding of the

challenges” (Wyatt, 2006, p. vi), involved in providing high quality educational opportunities for Aboriginal children. Such change needs to occur at all levels – from local to whole of government, if we are serious about attaining equitable educational outcomes for all.

6.1.1 Interstate benchmarking

Two opportunities for interstate benchmarking of interim results in this project were taken.

South Australia

On November 3, 2005, Bob Perry and Sue Dockett met with a group of educators from South Australia to discuss the recommendations from the project to that point. The meeting was held at the offices of the SA Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) and was attended by:

- ✚ two teachers from an Aboriginal early childhood service, one of whom has been appointed to work specifically with 3-year-old Aboriginal children on literacy;
- ✚ two project officers with DECS working in advisory roles for Aboriginal education;
- ✚ a senior project officer with the Aboriginal Early Childhood Team within DECS;
- ✚ a coordinator of the Early Childhood Initiative program; and
- ✚ two policy and program officers from DECS with specific responsibility for early childhood and/or literacy programs for young children.

Members of the group were provided with an overview of the project, methodology and a copy of the recommendations from the Interim Report. It was noted that there are several differences between NSW and SA, in terms of starting school. One of these relates to the timing of starting school, with SA currently supporting several intakes of children into the first year of school (Reception) across any one school year in contrast to NSW where all children commencing school start at a common time.

The South Australian educators were very enthusiastic about the project and its interim findings and suggested that while they may prefer to report the findings in slightly different words, they were certainly compatible with the South Australian Aboriginal education context. The educators were particularly keen to stress the need for meaningful transfer of children’s records from prior-to-school settings to schools and suggested that even though in South Australia these settings are responsible to the same government department, such transfers do not routinely occur. The educators concluded the meeting by wishing the project well and recording their hope that the final findings might be widely disseminated.

Queensland

On April 11, 2006, Terry Mason and Bob Perry travelled to Brisbane for two meetings with leading educators in both the prior-to-school and school sectors.

In the first meeting, three members of the Crèche and Kindergarten Association, including the President of the Association met with the researchers for one hour to discuss the general findings to that point. The meeting was held at the Head Office of the Crèche and Kindergarten Association.

In terms of transition to school, Queensland was in an interesting state of change, because of the introduction of the preparatory year in schools. Hence, there was much discussion around the impact of the extra year of school on the successful transition to school of Aboriginal children. The meeting participants felt that there was much to learn from the project and its findings and was very grateful that the team members had taken the time to talk with them about it. They endorsed the findings and suggested that they were quite pertinent to Queensland, even in the state of change in which they found themselves.

The second meeting in Queensland was held in the office of the Director, Curriculum of Education, Queensland. It was attended by the Director and two of her curriculum colleagues responsible for early years and Indigenous education. The meeting lasted for more than one hour.

The project methodology and findings were outlined and discussed. Again, there was some discussion around the changes occurring with the introduction of the preparatory year and how this might affect both preschools and the first year of school. The meeting participants were keen to endorse the importance of community involvement in education in general and in transition to school in particular. They saw the relevance of the project's findings to their own contexts and requested that when the final report was available that they be able to access it.

While the meetings in Queensland were more informal than that in South Australia, they reiterated the relevance of the project and its findings across two other states beyond NSW. In both cases, there were suggestions that slightly different wording might be more effective in each of the states but that the essence of what had been found up was undoubtedly relevant to the different contexts.

6. 2 Key issues

The key issues to be addressed in the research, as outlined in the project brief, are:

- 6.2.1 What are the features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?
- 6.2.2 To what extent are these features transferable to other contexts and to what extent might these features be unique to any one particular site?
- 6.2.3 In what ways can linkages between schools, early childhood services and Aboriginal communities be improved to increase the educational attainment of Aboriginal children?
- 6.2.4 What strategies are successful in engaging families who don't readily engage with early childhood services and schools?

Each of these is discussed in this section of the report. While the case study and trial site phases of the project were undertaken separately, the findings from each phase are combined in the following discussion. This enables a consolidation of information, for example, about features of successful transition to school programs. Specific data from each of the sites are contained in each of the reports in Appendices 1 and 2.

6.2.1 What are the features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?

Overview

Programs supporting a successful transition from prior-to-school to school settings have the following characteristics:

- a) High quality programs and experiences that:
 - + actively involve children and families;
 - + utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities;
 - + focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved;
 - + facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy;
 - + engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations;
 - + are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school;
 - + promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school; and
 - + promotes the general wellbeing of children and families.
- b) Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.
- c) Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders. Successful transition to school programs builds relationships between:
 - + families and school
 - + children and school
 - + communities and school
 - + educators in different settings
 - + children
 - + educators and families
 - + other stakeholders as appropriate
- d) Recognition of strengths that exist within the community. This can involve tapping into existing programs or drawing upon the close connections many Aboriginal educators have with their communities. The significance of Aboriginal educators and other professionals, as well as staff in Schools as Community Centres (SaCCs) and other outreach programs is particularly important.

- e) Recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

Each of these elements is discussed below, illustrated by examples of practice drawn from both the case study and trial sites. Key messages are also highlighted.

a) High quality programs and experiences

actively involve children and families

High quality transition to school programs don't just happen *to* children, they actively involve children in a range of ways. However, transition to school programs are not only for children. Successful, high quality programs involved families both as a strategy for supporting the children as they started school and as a means of providing information for parents themselves.

Key messages

1. High quality transition to school programs actively involves children in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programs.
2. Families know their children well and have much to contribute to transition programs.
3. Starting school is a time of transition for families as well as children. Support and encouragement for family involvement in transition programs can be the start of ongoing positive relationships between home and school.


Successful practice

1. School tours

- Kindergarten children took adults on a tour of their school.
- Kindergarten children created illustrated book for sharing with new children.

2. Involving families

- Workshops for adult family members were held during children's transition program.
- Family members made lunches and ate these at school with their children.
- Preschool staff invited parents and family members to visit the preschool at any time.
- Comfortable relationships adult family members had with the preschool staff served as a base for the development of relationships with school staff.

 ***utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities***

High quality transition programs were well-known and well-regarded among family and community. They drew upon a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities.


Key messages

1. Multiple strategies and options are needed to effectively engage with families and communities.
2. Lack of family or community involvement does not necessarily signal lack of interest in children's education. Instead, it can signal discomfort with the avenues and opportunities that exist for such involvement.

Successful practice

1. Linking with the community and families

- Shopfront was rented in the main shopping centre for a limited period in order to distribute information.
- Community liaison officer was employed to make contact with and spend time in the local community.
- Meetings of school staff and families were held at the preschool or other site away from the school, where families felt more comfortable.
- A playgroup was developed on the school site so that families could start to feel comfortable entering the school.

 ***focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved***

Successful programs were generally underpinned by the building of positive, respectful relationships. In many sites, much of the success of these approaches depended on Aboriginal staff, such as AEAs and AEWs, and Aboriginal staff in prior-to-school settings.

High quality programs respect and welcome a range of stakeholders in transition and work to develop programs that are centred in the community. In such programs, the contributions of prior-to-school educators and families are welcome.

Key message

1. Transition is a time of relationship building among all involved.

Successful practice

1. Sharing expertise

- Educators from preschools spent time in Kindergarten classrooms, and Kindergarten teachers replaced them in preschools.

2. Recognising children's expertise

- Kindergarten teachers asked children to draw and comment on their first year at school. On comparing the drawings and comments from children in different classes, the Kindergarten teachers explored their different pedagogical approaches and their interactions with children through these.

 ***facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy***

High quality transition to school programs utilised comprehensive approaches to literacy and numeracy, engaging children in a range of meaning making and numeracy activities. High quality programs drew on relevant resources and emphasised strategies to promote meaning and understanding, and within these, attention to specific elements of literacy or numeracy as appropriate.

Some programs were described as more 'holistic' than others, concerned with broad issues about the transition to school, including Aboriginal identity, health and general wellbeing, as well as skills. While it is possible to represent programs as either skills focused or holistic, programs usually contained elements of both perspectives, and differed only in emphasis.

The focus on skills *is* important in a number of ways. Firstly, children have a strong sense of why they go to school and what they will do there. They are confident that they go to school to learn, and that reading and writing are parts of that learning process. They expect to engage in such activities: to do so means that they are joining the ranks of the 'big kids'. Such skills are expected by parents and communities and are associated with school and what happens in school. These skills form a major part of the 'aspirational curriculum' referred to by both Aboriginal children and their parents. However, transition programs with only a skills based curriculum can slip into deficit models, where children are assessed on what they cannot do, rather than what they can do. Programs then seek to 'make up for' the perceived deficit. Some programs sought to promote connections between school and home literacy, with strategies such as asking children to bring items from home and talk about them.

Key messages

1. Helping children develop skills and literacy and numeracy are important elements of high quality transition programs.
2. On its own, however, this focus is insufficient for a high quality transition to school program.

Successful practice

1. Making meaning

- Children were excited to see their work (drawings, paintings) displayed on the classroom wall, accompanied by their name and a teacher comment, when they started Kindergarten.
- **Children's expectations of school**
- Children were asked to draw what they thought school would be like and, sometimes, were encouraged to check on their perceptions after they had started school.

 ***engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations***

High quality transition to school programs focus on the strengths and competencies children bring with them as well as setting high (yet realistic) expectations. All involved work towards attaining these expectations.

Across sites, the nature of transition to school programs varied, but there was a common expectation among families that children would learn the behaviours required for school, and then some more. Families were eager for their children to do well at school, seeing this as a step towards success in later life.

The nature of experiences included in transition to school programs signalled to children and families, the sorts of experiences that the school considered important. Many of these were similar to experiences the children would undertake in Kindergarten. In both transition to school activities and later school curriculum, high quality programs planned meaningful, relevant and engaging curriculum for all involved.

Key message

1. Adults must have high, yet realistic, expectations for all children entering school.

Successful practice

1. More than learning to put your hand up

Most Aboriginal parents wanted their children to learn about Aboriginal culture and ways, as well as wanting their children to succeed at school. For some parents, this meant this meant that they and their children needed to learn to interact with people at school knowing how to ask questions, speak with the teacher, put up their hand and so on. In the transition program, these families wanted their children to learn such skills, but then to move beyond these.

+ are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school

High quality transition to school programs were regarded as important by the whole school. School principals played an active role in such programs, as did both staff and children from across the school.

Key message

1. All school personnel have a role to play in transition to school programs.

Successful practice

1. Spending time with the principal

The school principal spent as much time as possible with the transition group, and their families. Sometimes this involved sitting and talking with people, other times reading a story. Her familiar presence established her as someone who was interested and approachable.

+ promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school

One of the aims of transition programs is to promote a sense of belonging at the school, accompanied by the view that school is a place where Aboriginal children can succeed. High quality programs adopted this aim and promoted the view the Aboriginal children and families should be strong and proud.

Key messages

1. Children and families 'read' the images projected by schools. These affect children's and families' sense of belonging and connectedness to the school.
2. The images promoted by schools convey beliefs about who is expected to succeed at school.

Successful practice

1. Strong and proud

- Connections among children already at school were promoted through buddy systems.
- Recognition of successful students in both preschool and school;
- Modelling through images of successful Aboriginal adults.

2. Culturally appropriate resources

- Culturally relevant resources were purchased for use in the transition to school program. As well as being excited by accessing new equipment, Aboriginal children and families were pleased to see broad elements of Aboriginal culture represented in positive ways in the school.

3. Aboriginal staff

- Aboriginal identity in schools was promoted when Aboriginal staff were employed at school. This was particularly the case when Aboriginal staff had positions of responsibility, such as Aboriginal teachers, as well as support roles or when the staff held important positions in the community, such as a revered Aunty or Elder.

4. Not always Aboriginal specific programs

- Some parents of Aboriginal children were clear that they wanted their children to access the same programs as other, non-Aboriginal, children. The rationale was largely that Aboriginal children need to succeed in a 'white world', including 'white schools'.

promote the general wellbeing of children and families.

General wellbeing for Aboriginal children and families covers a wide range of areas, such as health, parenting, housing and employment. In some sites, particularly where schools hosted a Schools as Community Centre (SaCC), the sites acted as community hubs, connecting families with specific services.

Key message

1. Effective transition to school programs link with other community services.

Successful practice

1. Connecting people and services

- The AEA noted clearly that her role was about connecting people to services, but that this could only be done with knowledge of individual people and the ability to listen appropriately to those people. Her long connection with the community, as well as a long history of connection with school services, meant that she knew individual people and knew which services would be best for those individuals. She acted as a broker of services and a negotiator of interactions and through this, made connections that promoted the general well-being of children and families.
- Personnel from other than education services were invited to contribute to the transition programs, often by delivering information sessions for parents, covering topics such as: immunization; otitis media; nutrition; attendance requirements; and specific issues related to school curriculum, such as the importance of parents reading to children.
- In one site, the co-location of a dental health unit on the school site meant that a child requiring urgent dental attention could be taken directly to that service. The child was accompanied by the entire preschool group, making the experience quite a social, as well as a community learning event.

b) Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation.

Successful transition to school programs actively involves a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as both based in, and responsive to, the community.

Key message

1. Successful transition to school programs are based on collaboration across a wide range of stakeholders.

Successful practice

1. The importance of AEA/AEWs

- The Aboriginal Educational Assistant (AEA) or Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) was described as a valuable resource in the transition to school for Aboriginal children and families. This was in a formal sense, where the AEA/AEW was often the driving force behind the transition program, as well as informally, where the AEA/AEW was the personal bridge between the community and the school.
- In sites where Aboriginal families did not access formal prior-to-school services, the AEA had an important role in identifying children starting school, connecting with families and promoting their participation in the transition program.
- An AEA in any school has the important role of leading the building of connections between the community and the school, and trying to balance the demands and expectations of each. A successful AEA has credibility and support in both communities, as well as a wide range of knowledge and skills to promote the engagement of children and families in schools. The success of transition to school programs for Aboriginal children and families depend largely on this credibility and support for the AEA.

2. Schools as Community Centres (SaCC)

- The facilitators of Schools as Community Centres often have a similar role to that of the AEA, in that they are actively engaged in reaching out to communities with the aim of engaging children and families in experiences and programs that support both connections with school and general wellbeing.
- SaCC facilitators initiated several opportunities for interaction across communities, such as mobile playgroups, gatherings in the local park, information packages or meetings and networking.
- The SaCC facilitator brings together all stakeholders in the learning community, including families not accessing formal prior-to-school services, early childhood services, schools, support groups and networks for young parents. Connections between and among these groups, as well as with local businesses and services such as health are promoted.
- In one site, there are close connections between the preschool teacher (non-Aboriginal), the preschool assistant (who is Aboriginal) and the SaCC

facilitator (non-Aboriginal). These people work together to connect with families and build connections with the school.

3. Joint Planning

- The Aboriginal preschool and local school in one site have made plans for the transition program, based on previous experiences as well as their involvement in the research project. The staff in each location have forged stronger links than previously existed and are actively involved in joint planning.

4. Community visibility

- One school principal saw her role to include encouraging community participation in the school. She indicated that a prime strategy had involved her spending lots of time in the local shopping centre and other community areas as a means to maintain a high level of visibility and approachability within the community.

5. Joint programs

- In one site, the community transition to school program is run jointly by the public and Catholic schools and one of the local preschools. The public school provides the venue, two AEA's to work in the program, and some of the materials needed; the preschool provides the teacher for the transition program; and the Catholic school provides an AEW and some materials. The program is planned jointly and caters for many Aboriginal children who do not access prior-to-school services in the town.

c) Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders.

Successful transition to school programs build relationships between:

- + families and school
- + children and school
- + communities and school
- + educators in different settings
- + children
- + educators and families
- + other stakeholders as appropriate

The importance of positive relationships was emphasised in almost every discussion with children, families, educators and community members. Families emphasised the importance of a positive relationship with the school, often brokered by the AEA or SaCC co-ordinator; children talked about the importance of being with friends or family at school; educators described the importance of having positive relationships with other educational settings and community members emphasised the importance of feeling accepted and welcome in the school environment.

Key messages

1. Promoting positive relationships in transition programs sets in place strategies to promote the continued involvement of families in their children's school education.
2. Building positive relationships is the basis of successful transition to school programs. Positive relationships are based on:
 - trust and respect;
 - reciprocal relationships; and
 - reciprocal communication.

Successful practice

1. **Children's drawings**
 - Children's drawings of school and what they liked about school often focused on relationships—with other children, teachers or with family members already at school.
2. **'Their' room**
 - In one site, all interviews conducted by the project team with parents and children were conducted in the school staff room. Parents expressed the view that if the staff were willing to give up "their room", then what was happening must be important. Children revelled in being allowed into the teachers' 'inner sanctum'.

Building trust and respect

Key messages

1. Building trust and respect takes time and effort.

Successful practice

1. Communication

- Building a sense of trust relies heavily on communication. Trust and respect was seen to exist in transition programs where communication between and among participants had a high priority. Communication included not only the desire to share information, but also the willingness and the skills to listen to what different participants had to say.

2. Emotions

- Even where positive relationships exist, the emotional side of transition for families, as well as children, needs to be recognised. For example *During a parent discussion, one mother suggested that she was really concerned about her last child starting school in 2005. Her experience with her older children was that there is a very big feeling of emptiness in the mother on the first day and in the first weeks of school. She felt that the school did not realise this and that the mothers were often left to cope on their own. "You bring the kids to school and they take them from you. The kids will never be the same again. They're gone. They are not stolen but it feels that they have gone."*

Reciprocal relationships

Key messages

1. Reciprocal relationships exist when participants have the confidence to share information and are assured that relevant information will be shared with them.
2. Reciprocal relationships are about educators in schools and prior-to-school settings finding out about families and children, about families and children finding out about educators and schools and what they have to offer, and then working together to make school and school experiences as positive as possible.
3. Reciprocal relationships between agencies and organisations (such as SaCCs, schools, prior-to-school settings) can promote a sense of professionals working together.

Successful practice

1. School Expo

- The School Expo is jointly planned by the SaCC, preschools and the local DET office. It is one day extravaganza where volunteers (and some educators) walk the streets with balloons and encourage families to come and collect information about starting school. They do welcome children and their families at the transition program in the school and this is one of the ways they try to catch the attention of this group.

Reciprocal communication

Key message

1. Reciprocal relationships are based on communication.

Successful practice

1. School-community communication

1. The Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO) has regular contact with families in their homes and this has significantly contributed to growing confidence between the community and school resulting in a significant increase in attendance patterns.
2. The Kindergarten teacher goes into the preschool to work with the children in several of the prior-to-school settings. Children are part of this program and they visit all the local prior-to-school settings to play and work with the incoming children.
3. The SaCC co-ordinator runs a number of parenting groups in a number of local venues.
4. The school participates in an open-day that is organised by the SaCC and targets families who may otherwise fall outside of these communication networks.
5. The school has a high ratio of staff from the local Aboriginal community and these relationships contribute to the effectiveness of school/preschool/community communication

2. Prior-to-school and school communication

- Liaison between the school and prior-to-school setting is focused on building relationships between the incoming children and their Kindergarten teacher and school aged peers.
- The local Aboriginal preschool draws primarily on the funds of knowledge children bring from their communities as a foundation for learning experiences including literacy and numeracy based learning.

Teacher-child relationships

Key message

1. The relationship established between school staff and children in transition to school programs affects children's sense of connection with school and their identity as a school student.

The relationship building between the transition teacher or facilitator and the children was highlighted in several sites. Having children who trust the teacher, who are keen to be with the teacher and who respect and respond positively to the teacher, provides a solid base for children starting school. This needs to be matched by teachers who have a similar trust and respect for the children, their knowledge and understandings and their ability to become successful school students. This requires a conscious effort on the part of the teacher to engage in interactions that build such trust and respect.

Successful practice

1. Welcoming ritual

- The arrival ritual at one site was very welcoming for children. Each child entering the room collected their nametag from the teacher. Children went over to the teacher, who was kneeling on the floor, and searched for their own nametag. The teacher encouraged each child and cheered when they made the appropriate choice. She pinned the nametag on to each child and engaged in a one-on-one conversation as she did this. Her manner was quiet and gentle as she interacted individually with the children. She remained at the child's level and often was the recipient of a hug from the children involved.

2. Familiar support

- Aunty G. was a key organizer and supporter of the transition to school program, spending a lot of time with the children and families involved. She then followed the children as they started school, remaining in the Kindergarten classroom for the first term as a familiar and supportive adult in the relatively new environment. This support was continued into the second school term.

3. Respecting children's learning

- Children need to feel respected and valued in order to participate effectively in both transition and school programs. Respect for children as learners can be demonstrated by involving them as stakeholders in the transition process, for example, by asking what it is they would like to know about school, or about being at school or involving them in a variety of other ways. Often children already at school played a major role in welcoming new children and helping them settle into the school environment.

Relationships among children

Key message

1. Children's engagement with school and at school depends a great deal on their connections with peers. Positive connections with other children can be built during transition to school programs.

Successful practice

2. Buddies

- Children's peer and familial relationships can be critical to a young child's confidence in a new educational environment. One school transports some of the Aboriginal Year 3 children to ALL of the local prior-to-school settings for a couple of hours once a week (for one term) to read, play and interact with the younger children. These children are then informal buddies once the younger children come to school. Staff at one of the prior-to-school settings (with few Aboriginal children in attendance) suggested that this strategy is effective in addressing negative perceptions of Aboriginal people.

Relationships between agencies, prior-to-school settings and schools

Key message

1. Reciprocal, trustful relationships between those involved in agencies, prior-to-school settings and schools promote positive transition to school programs. Where children, families and communities have a sense that all are working together for the benefit of the children, there is a great opportunity for positive interaction.

Successful practice

1. Community relationships

- Relationships between the Aboriginal preschool and the school were facilitated through the SaCC.
- Families First, the school and preschool combined to develop a supported playgroup that was the central feature of the transition to school program.
- The public school, the Catholic school and the town's prior-to-school agencies combined to resource, plan and implement the community transition to school program.

d) Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.

Key messages

1. Successful transition to school programs do not exist in isolation. They recognise, build on and contribute to, community strengths.
2. Successful transition to school programs can be instrumental in building community capacity, both by providing resources and support and by facilitating the development of skills among community members.
3. Building community capacity can help ensure the sustainability of quality transition to school programs.

Community capacity building is the term generally used to describe the process of strengthening the capability of the community so that it can play a more active role in the economic and social life of that community. It can be defined as “the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive changes” (Howe & Cleary, 2001). Much potential exists for transition programs to expand the roles offered to communities and families. In some sites, some families and some community members already demonstrate aspects of empowerment and evidence of community capacity building.

Recognising community strengths can involve tapping into existing programs or drawing upon the close connections many Aboriginal educators have with their communities. The significance of Aboriginal educators and other professionals, as well as staff in Schools as Community Centres (SaCCs) and other outreach programs is particularly important.

Successful practice

1. Families First networking

One site has a DET preschool attached to the school and is centrally located to many Aboriginal families. However, few Aboriginal children attended the preschool. A strategy to increase the numbers was:

- to establish a playgroup supported by one of the teachers and the AEA under the auspices of Families First. While slow to start, the playgroup numbers gradually increased, with many Aboriginal children and their families attending regularly and moving onto preschool.

e) Recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

This element draws together the many points made in the previous discussion. It recognises that the experiences of transition to school (for children, families, educators and communities) are complex and dynamic, and that there is no one correct way to respond appropriately to this. Transition to school programs need to be connected to communities and responsive to communities. Different communities will result in different transition programs, and as communities change over time, different programs will be needed in the same community.

Within transition to school programs, different strategies and approaches will be needed to engage different children and families in school education. The time and resources expended in making these initial connections between children, families and school is repaid many fold in future positive interactions where children's education and wellbeing is the prime focus.

Improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children

The first key issue to be addressed in this project:

- The features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?

The project has identified features of successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school, but claims much less success in linking these to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Key message

1. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that attendance at quality transition to school programs impacts positively in student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children. Other transition to school research indicates that this is the case generally.

Data available to the project team to ascertain learning outcomes for Aboriginal children was largely anecdotal. Only a few sites were willing to share with the project team data such as attendance records and early school assessment tasks (such the SENA and early literacy assessment). In some schools, this was because these tasks had not yet been completed, or in the case of the SENA, the school was not utilising the *Count Me in Too* program. In sites where this information sharing did occur, there seemed to be a clear link between consistent attendance at a successful transition to school program and engagement with school. However, the project had insufficient data to test this proposal statistically.

The project has identified a tension between the voluntary nature of transition programs and school records. Children are not required to attend transition to school programs and, as the transition program is outside the usual programs of school, recording attendance was a matter for individual staff and/or programs. In some instances, promoting attendance was regarded as more important than constantly checking the roll. Informal records ensured that safety issues were addressed across sites, but it was usually not possible to ascertain whether or not children with irregular attendance in kindergarten had attended transition programs.

Overview of key messages in this section

- High quality transition to school programs actively involve children in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programs.
- Families know their children well and have much to contribute to transition programs.
- Starting school is a time of transition for families as well as children. Support and encouragement for family involvement in transition programs can be the start of ongoing positive relationships between home and school.
- Multiple strategies and options are needed to effectively engage with families and communities.
- Lack of family or community involvement does not necessarily signal lack of interest in children's education. Instead, it can signal discomfort with the avenues and opportunities that exist for such involvement.
- Transition is a time of relationship building among all involved.
- Helping children develop skills and literacy and numeracy are important elements of high quality transition programs.
- On its own, however, this focus is insufficient for a high quality transition to school program.
- Adults must have high, yet realistic, expectations for all children entering school.
- All school personnel have a role to play in transition to school programs.
- Children and families 'read' the images projected by schools. These affect children's and families' sense of belonging and connectedness to the school.
- The images promoted by schools convey beliefs about who is expected to succeed at school.
- Effective transition to school programs link with other community services.
- Successful transition to school programs are based on collaboration across a wide range of stakeholders.
- Promoting positive relationships in transition programs sets in place strategies to promote the continued involvement of families in their children's school education.
- Building positive relationships is the basis of successful transition to school programs. Positive relationships are based on:
 - trust and respect;
 - reciprocal relationships; and
 - reciprocal communication.
- Building trust and respect takes time and effort.
- Reciprocal relationships exist when participants have the confidence to share information and are assured that relevant information will be shared with them.
- Reciprocal relationships are about educators in schools and prior-to-school settings finding out about families and children, about families and children finding out about educators and schools and what they have to offer, and then working together to make school and school experiences as positive as possible.
- Reciprocal relationships between agencies and organisations (such as SaCCs, schools, prior-to-school settings) can promote a sense of professionals working together.

- Reciprocal relationships are based on communication.
- The relationship established between school staff and children in transition to school programs affects children's sense of connection with school and their identity as a school student.
- Children's engagement with school and at school depends a great deal on their connections with peers. Positive connections with other children can be built during transition to school programs.
- Reciprocal, trustful relationships between those involved in agencies, prior-to-school settings and schools promote positive transition to school programs. Where children, families and communities have a sense that all are working together for the benefit of the children, there is a great opportunity for positive interaction.
- Successful transition to school programs do not exist in isolation. They recognise, build on and contribute to, community strengths.
- Successful transition to school programs can be instrumental in building community capacity, both by providing resources and support and by facilitating the development of skills among community members.
- Building community capacity can help ensure the sustainability of quality transition to school programs.
- There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that attendance at quality transition to school programs impacts positively in student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children. Other transition to school research indicates that this is the case generally.

How can transition to school programs for Aboriginal children be made more successful?

Not all transition to school programs for Aboriginal children are equally well planned, successful or relevant to the children and their families involved. In this brief section, some of the issues highlighted by the project are discussed briefly and possible solutions suggested.

Nature of the program issues

The intended participants of transition programs, and the aims of these programs varied across sites. In some locations, the transition programs studied were designed specifically and exclusively for Aboriginal children and families. In other sites, transition programs were open to all children starting school and their families. Some families supported programs specifically for Aboriginal children starting school, others regarded such programs as stigmatised.

The majority of programs contained a focus on developing children's skills in preparation for school. Some programs had this as their exclusive focus. In some cases, underpinning such an approach was a deficit view of Aboriginal children and learning, suggesting that the children started school with little relevant knowledge that would help them in school. Sometimes this view was expressed by family members as well as educators.

There was also inconsistency in the degree to which positive Aboriginal identity was highlighted within programs. Some programs celebrated the strength and pride of Aboriginal children, families and communities, while other programs reflected a deficit view of Aboriginal children and families.

The underlying philosophy of transition programs has a major impact on the nature of the program and the ways in which it is implemented. In general, there appear to have been few opportunities for those involved in transition programs to discuss 'big issues' such as philosophy, pedagogy and continuity.

Possible solutions

- Transition to school programs are contextually specific and need to be planned and implemented within the resources of each community.
- By involving as many of the different stakeholder groups in a community as possible, issues around the philosophy of the transition program and its relationship to matters such as Aboriginal identity can be resolved in the planning stage.
- The most successful transition to school programs recognised and celebrated the strengths of the children, their families and community, as well as the strengths of the educational institutions in that community.

Family involvement

High levels of family involvement in school have been associated with increased school success for children (Epstein, 1996). In a similar way, family involvement in transition programs can be an important contributor to children's successful start to school. Few transition to school programs in the project sites recognised the barriers to involvement that may impact on Aboriginal families, and without this recognition, were not well-placed to respond in innovative and flexible ways.

In some of the sites, families and communities had a strong sense of trust and confidence in the staff at either preschool or school, and did not feel a need to become actively involved in changing things. While this can be seen as a vote of confidence in the staff, it can also be seen as something on which communities need to work in order to develop partnerships.

Possible solutions

- School and prior-to-school settings need to be pro-active, under the advice and direction of Elders and revered others in the Aboriginal communities, in involving families in the educational programs of their children, including transition to school. Possible strategies include informal meetings, invitations to Elders and revered others to play a real role in the planning and implementation of transition to school programs and listening sessions where the educational setting strives to find out what the community has as concerns.

Communication issues

Communication is a crucial element of effective transition programs. The research team was aware of the challenges of communication in some sites, with a general lack of communication in some situations and particular issues related to cross-cultural communication and interactions.

There was variability in the nature of interagency connections and school-prior-to-school connections—with some working particularly well and others needing a great deal of support.

Possible solutions

- Communication is a critical issue in the development of relationships and transition to school is about such relationship development. Possible strategies for developing stronger communication with Aboriginal families and communities include:
 - liaison through AEAs and other community leaders about the best ways to communicate with the local families and communities;
 - informal gatherings such as barbecues, picnics in parks; or community gatherings suggested by family and community members; and
 - discussion with Aboriginal community members about issues that are of interest to them, perhaps through media other than print, particularly if there is, for example, a tradition of painting or other arts and crafts in the community.
- Communication is also sometimes a concern among professionals such as school teachers, early childhood educators, health and welfare personnel. Such

professional communication has worked best in situations where people know each other well, as people can see the value of the jobs that they all do. Families First has been active to develop successful transition to school networks.

Transience

Many communities are in the process of being established, or re-established, particularly in regional and rural areas. As this process of re-settling occurs, there can be a high level of movement between and among communities. This can present a barrier to the ongoing involvement of children, family and members of the community in transition programs. Most programs were based on regular and ongoing participation, partly as familiarisation to school practices and expectations for families and children. Where some sessions were missed, those running the programs expressed concern that the maximum potential of the program would not be achieved.

Possible solutions

- The professionals involved in transition to school programs and education in general know that transience is a fact of life for many families. Mechanisms such as community support groups for families who have just arrived in a community can be established by parent groups such as the P&C or by other community groups. Schools and prior-to-school settings can help in the establishment of these groups through sharing of information about meeting times and by encouraging families to attend.

Transport

Across the sites, only a few transition to school programs provided a specific bus service to transport Aboriginal children from their homes to school. Several preschools, particularly Aboriginal preschools, provided a bus service, but this often did not extend to the early years of school, or to transition to school programs. Transport to school remained a barrier for many families, particularly where public transport was virtually non-existent or unreliable. Where children usually walked to school, lack of transport became a problem and sometimes an excuse, particularly during bad weather. Where transition programs did offer transport for children and families there was increased involvement in the program.

Possible solutions

- Transport is perceived to be a barrier to the involvement of families and/or children in transition to school programs,.. This may involve a reprioritising of resources or an extra effort to raise the funds required. However, the results of helping some families with specific needs to attend programs are well worth the effort.

Funding

The transition programs operating in several of the project sites were supported with additional dedicated funding, through programs such as NIELNS. Additional funding had a significant impact on programs, sometimes in terms of the length of the

transition program, number and timing of sessions, personnel involved and the resources available to support the program. However, it was noted that applying for this funding required a major commitment that had to be repeated annually. Additionally, some funding dictated priority areas for transition programs and determined who was, or was not, eligible to participate in such programs. Where resources were limited, some transition programs were accessible only to children who would be attending a specific school the following year.

Throughout the trial phase of the project other, different funding issues became apparent. Each of the trial sites became the recipient of substantial funding, through programs such as *Schools in Partnership* (SiP), *Kids Excel*, *Communities for Children* or *Families First*. In some sites, transition to school was an integral part of the funded programs; in other sites, this was not so. Responding to the agendas within these funded projects was a prime focus within each site, and this had the result of overwhelming a small project about transition which did not deliver substantial funding to those involved. This did not stop sites being supportive towards this project and welcoming to the project team, but it did change the emphasis and importance accorded to the project. On the other hand, in some of the project sites, extra funding meant the capability of implementing some of the innovative ideas introduced in discussions with members of the project team.

Personnel

The people involved in transition programs varied across sites. Some programs drew on the skills, experience and expertise of a wide range of people, including community members, prior-to-school educators, interagency workers as well as school staff. Other programs were seen as being 'owned' by stakeholders, usually those in schools, and those representing the school were regarded as having the power to guide and direct programs.

Possible solutions

- Transition to school programs need to involve actively as many community stakeholder groups as possible. The programs themselves need to be seen as community resources, implemented by community members.

Organisational issues

Some school processes presented barriers to transition to school programs. The most obvious of these was the inability of schools to nominate their Kindergarten teacher/s early enough to have them actively involved in the transition program.

In several of the sites, schools and prior-to-schools were co-located on the one campus. In some instances, this promoted wide-ranging communication and interaction. In others, co-location did not transfer to extensive collaboration about transition programs. Sometimes this could be attributed to the histories of the respective sites. Another factor impacting on this was the expected school enrolment of children attending the prior-to-school setting. For example, of children attending one preschool co-located with a school, only 4 of the 20 children starting school were expected to attend the school. The others were enrolled at more than a dozen other schools within the broad local area. At this site, it was explained that many families

chose to have their children attend the preschool—for both philosophical and pragmatic reasons—but that they then opted for children attending a school closer to home. Again, the lack of transport for school children had some impact on this decision.

Possible solutions

- Just being aware of such barriers is a good start to working through them. All schools and communities have some barriers through which they must work in order to provide effective transition to school programs. Being willing to listen to other people about what they perceive these barriers to be is an essential first step.

Planning and evaluation issues

Overall, there was a general lack of formal evaluation procedures for transition programs. Partly, this can be related to the relative recency of programs, and a gradual building up of expertise in the area. Until recently with the development of the *Indicators of Progress* instrument, strategies for the evaluation of transition programs have been limited.

A further issue relates to the nature of transition programs. Many of the important elements of these programs are essentially intangible. Elements that are easily measured (such as specific academic skills) are not the only, or even the most important elements of transition programs. Providing evidence to support the effectiveness of transition programs constitutes a barrier to the extension and continued support for these programs.

Across the sites, there was some discussion of using standardised measures – either as a form of ‘exit’ measure or as a means of assessing the problems and issues to be addressed within transition programs. The *Indicators of Progress* instrument (Dockett & Perry, 2006) has been used in each site to emphasise current strengths and possible developments in transition to school programs. It has been met with some enthusiasm in spite of its extensive and comprehensive nature.

Possible solutions

Formal and extensive evaluation of transition to school programs needs to be built into the implementation of each program. This will need some resources, most particularly teacher time, but it will help progressively improve the programs. One possible evaluation instrument is the *Indicators of Progress* document. The results of the application of the *Indicators of Progress* procedure have not been included in this report to maintain anonymity of participating communities.

Curriculum issues

Few transition programs focused on Aboriginal knowledge, or the place of Aboriginal knowledge within school. A more usual perspective was to consider how Aboriginal children and families could adjust to the predominant knowledge structure of schools and school curriculum.

Possible solutions

- Involvement of Aboriginal people in the planning as well as the implementation of transition to school programs should assist in developing programs that are sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the children participating in them. As well, a realisation that not all families want a specifically Aboriginal transition to school program for their children suggests that a balanced approach to the curriculum of the program needs to be adopted. What is critical is that the program offers something that is relevant to each child and helps to show each child that school is a place where she/he wants to be and can be successful.

Resource issues

Staff in several sites expressed frustration at the lack of authentic resources to use in transition programs for Aboriginal children and families. While some materials were commonly available, not all schools had complete sets of these, or funding to upgrade and modernise resources. Other staff operating transition programs indicated a general lack of time to develop culturally relevant and locally appropriate resources. Still others used additional funding to purchase resources, which sometimes did not arrive until programs had been operating for some time.

Possible solutions

- While transition to school programs need to be seen to be contextually specific, it may be possible, after extensive consultations with the relevant communities, to have community members plan and make appropriate resources. This strategy also provides another way in which community members can be involved in the program in a way that benefits the children of the community.

Issues related to Aboriginal children with disabilities

In one of the case study sites provision had been made within their transition to school program for children with disabilities. However, the focus on transition to school for this child was all about the physical needs and the modifications necessary in the school to accommodate the child. While the carer recognised the need for cultural affirmation as well as responsiveness to physical needs, this was not an area of priority in this child's transition program.

Possible solutions

- Adopting a philosophy of a holistic approach to transition to school should ensure that all of the needs of the child, family, school and community are considered.

Simplistic solutions

In several discussions across the sites, some simplistic solutions to the 'problem' of transitions and transition programs were advanced. These included the notion that developing a preschool on a school site would solve any transition issues, and the idea that having transition programs operate for a full year (or at least as much of the year as possible) would ensure that children were in an advanced state of readiness for

school when the Kindergarten year eventually came. These solutions do not reflect the complexity of transition or broad notions of transition programs as building relationships among all stakeholders.

Some strategies that reflect the complexity of the transition process can be drawn from the concept of 'ready schools' that is reflected in current US transition research and practice (Shore, 1998) and discussed in the literature review of this report. Ready schools challenge the notion that children need to change in order to fit the structures and expectations of school, and instead focus on ways in which schools can be responsive to their communities and to individuals and their families within these communities.

Possible solutions

- All stakeholders in transition to school programs need to see the issues that are expected to be met by such programs as complex. A multi-faceted approach is needed as the programs are dealing with many people, all of whom have particular needs. Some strategies will work for some children and their families, other strategies will be needed for other families.

6.2.2 To what extent are these features transferable to other contexts and to what extent might these features be unique to any one particular site?

There is no one correct format for transition programs. The programs that are successful are specifically related to the contexts in which they operate. This suggests that a program deemed to be successful in location is not necessarily going to be successful in another location. There are many reasons for this, including different personnel, different community issues and different understandings about what is important in transition to school. Rather than replicating what happens in other transition to school programs, transition teams need to be encouraged to consider the underlying principle for particular actions and experiences and to work through how that principle can be enacted in their own location.

However, while the specifics of programs may not be transferable, many of the general focus areas are. In other words, the same principles underpin successful programs, even if the specifics of the programs differ. This is the rationale behind the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* published by the *Starting School Research Project* (Dockett & Perry, 2001a) and utilised in this project. These Guidelines hold that effective transition to school programs:

- establish positive relationships between children, parents and educators;
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner;
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs;
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources;
- involve a range of stakeholders;
- are well planned and effectively evaluated;
- are flexible and responsive;
- are based on mutual trust and respect;
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants;
- takes into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

Each of these guidelines reflects broad approaches that together, work to create an integrated transition program that is shaped towards the community in which it operates. The relevance and importance of these Guidelines were reinforced by this project. For example, in each site, the issue of relationships was central to the development of an effective transition to school program. However, in each site, the nature of those relationships, the people and communities involved, differed.

Key messages

1. The underlying principles of successful transition are transferable across sites.
2. The *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* (Dockett & Perry, 2001a) provide the basis for developing locally relevant transition to school programs.
3. Developing locally and contextually relevant transition to school programs means that programs will be different in different contexts.
4. Building collaborative networks among educators, families and communities provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and approaches that can be adapted for specific contexts, as well as obtaining feedback about existing programs.

Successful practice

1. A focus on relationships

- Prior-to-school staff focused on building relationships between children and Aboriginal children and staff at school. Rather than visit the Kindergarten class when they went on school visits, they visited the Year 1 class, which had an Aboriginal teacher and a substantial number of Aboriginal students.
- The Aboriginal preschool director accompanied parents and children on their transition visits to school to support those who felt vulnerable and uncertain in the school environment.
- Relationships established between families and prior-to-school staff helped provide a bridge for children and families connecting to school when the preschool teacher delivered the transition program at the school.

2. Connecting with Aboriginal staff

- The school's AEA played a key role in the organisation of the transition to school program through identifying families who would benefit from participation and encouraging families to participate.
- The AEA was one of the key transition program leaders. She liaised with the prior-to-school staff and other agencies within the community, contributed significantly to funding applications and coordinated formal and informal interactions with the school, the high school and the local AECG.
- Extra funding has enabled the establishment of a home visiting program in a remote town. Visits commence while the mother is pregnant and are planned to continue until the child starts school. The coordinator of this program is an early childhood teacher.

Overview of key messages in this section

- The underlying principles of successful transition are transferable across sites.
- The *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* (Dockett & Perry, 2001a) provide the basis for developing locally relevant transition to school programs.
- Developing locally and contextually relevant transition to school programs means that programs will be different in different contexts.
- Building collaborative networks among educators, families and communities provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and approaches that can be adapted for specific contexts, as well as obtaining feedback about existing programs.

6.2.3 In what ways can linkages between schools, early childhood services and Aboriginal communities be improved to increase the educational attainment of Aboriginal children?

Links between prior-to-school and school services

Linkages between prior-to-school settings and schools were promoted when staff in different services had opportunities to network. Important elements of this interaction included:

- getting to know educators in other contexts;
- recognising educators in different settings as professionals and developing a sense of professional trust and respect;
- establishing professional rapport;
- visiting different educational settings;
- discussing educational programs and approaches across settings;
- collaborative projects; and
- ongoing professional development.

When educators in prior-to-school and schools were seen to work well together, families were likely to transfer some of the trust they had built up with the prior-to-school educator to school educators, on the basis that someone they already trusted (the prior-to-school educator) also trusted the other (school educator). Such relationships facilitated information sharing between families, prior- to-school and school settings. This was particularly important in situations where children with additional needs were starting school and schools were keen to make appropriate provision for these children.

Key message

1. Professional networking facilitates greater connections between prior-to-school and school settings

Successful practice

1. Collaborative approaches to transition

- A community preschool that had the highest proportion of Aboriginal children enrolled among all the town's prior-to-school settings took a particular interest in the transition to school of Aboriginal children to the local public school. The preschool director accompanied 'her children' to some transition classes, helped plan the program with school teachers, attended AECG meetings and was very much involved as the children moved to the school. Such involvement, while time consuming, was seen to be a core component of the preschool's role in the community.

Location

In several sites, preschools and schools were co-located on DET sites. In some cases, this proximity facilitated on-going interaction, both between the staff in each setting and the children. However, issues such as:

- different timetables, so that staff breaks and preschool sessions did not coincide with school breaks and session times;

- different philosophies about education in general and Aboriginal education in particular; and
 - different approaches to engaging with families
- sometimes mitigated against close relationships among staff.

Key message

1. Proximity itself is insufficient to promote positive links between prior-to-school and school settings.

Philosophical issues

A number of prior-to-school staff described their approach to education as ‘child-centred’ and contrasted this with what they perceived as the ‘curriculum-centred’ approach of schools. In some instances, school educators considered that children were not being prepared appropriately for school by preschool programs which focused more on play than academic knowledge. These stereotypical views and expectations do little to promote positive interactions. They can be overcome by time to network and visit different settings, as people build awareness of what happens in different contexts and as they construct relationships of trust with their colleagues.

Key message

1. Professional relationships between educators in prior-to-school and school settings can be built through professional networking opportunities over time.

Information sharing

In sites where there is strong positive connection between prior-to-school and school services, much discussion is likely to have occurred about the forms of information sharing most likely to support transition to school and the most appropriate means of collecting this. Aware of the current NSW licensing requirements for children’s services and privacy requirements, such information sharing is done in a context of permission from, and the involvement of, families.

Key message

1. Developing appropriate and authentic approaches for sharing relevant information is the key to building positive links between prior-to-school and school services.

Successful practice

1. Sharing information

- Educators across prior-to-school and school settings devised their own, agreed forms of sharing information and strategies and educators in different contexts visited other settings to observe what such information might mean in practice.

Links between early childhood services, schools and Aboriginal communities

In several sites, there appeared to be strong links between some parts of local Aboriginal communities and schools as well as early childhood services. In several

sites it was evident that there was no 'one' local community. Like all communities, Aboriginal communities are characterised as much by their diversity as by their homogeneity. In at least one site, divisions within and among the communities had a significant impact on who was likely to be engaged with a particular school or early childhood setting and who was not.

Key message

1. All communities are characterised by diversity as well as homogeneity. Connecting with communities requires multiple strategies and approaches. It takes time and resources.
2. Strong links with communities are promoted when educational staff reach out to communities.

Across the sites, there were several communities in which the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), Aboriginal Lands Council and Community Working Party groups were actively engaged with educational settings and issues. In some instances, this was related to the employment of Aboriginal people from the local community in schools and early childhood settings.

Strong links between educational services and communities were often facilitated by specific staff – such as the SaCC facilitator, Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA), Aboriginal Education Worker(AEW), Home School Liaison Officer, school principal, or preschool director. The individual contacts made through these personnel were often critical to promoting community engagement with schools. The outreach programs delivered by some SaCC facilitators and involving getting out into local communities, presenting a non-threatening and supportive presence for families and providing access to services such as playgroups and toy libraries, were described as particularly important by participants in this project.

It was important that once established, these links were maintained, for example, where the preschool director had worked to build a positive connection with families or community members, it was important that this connection moved with families as their children started school. Families who felt supported at the prior-to-school service but who then moved to a school where there was little connection with families, felt isolated and vulnerable in the new context.

Successful practice

1. Keeping the connection

Several sites worked to keep the connections that had already been established before children started school.

- Preschool staff visited the school with children and families as part of the transition program. Preschool staff also spent the first several weeks of the new school year at the school to support the children in Kindergarten as well as the families making the transition.
- The AEA who delivered the transition program remained with the new Kindergarten children in their classroom, working with the classroom teacher, during the first two terms of the new school year. Even after this, she continued to spend time with the children in the playground at lunch time and visited the classroom whenever possible.

Aboriginal staff in educational settings

One important strategy in building connections with Aboriginal communities was the active involvement of Aboriginal staff in schools and prior-to-school settings.

Aboriginal staff in schools have multiple, sometimes conflicting, roles that relate to both education and student welfare. These staff may also be the least trained (in terms of professional qualifications). Family and community members who may feel uncomfortable about visiting schools will often be more comfortable seeking out the AEA or AEW who may well already be known to them. Support and ongoing professional development needs to be available for Aboriginal staff to assist them to manage their complex roles. In addition, it is important that there is a whole school approach to supporting Aboriginal education and that all staff are trained in ways that provide the best possible educational environment for all students.

Key message

1. Many connections between communities and educational settings are facilitated by Aboriginal staff.

Successful practice

1. Transition can be facilitated by Aboriginal staff

- The Aboriginal preschool director, who lived in and was highly respected in the community, assisted many Aboriginal families as their children moved from her preschool to the local public school. She played an active role in linking parents with school teachers by introducing them, facilitating joint meetings and ensuring meaningful records about the children were transferred to the school.

Involving community members in transition to school programs.

Across all sites, there were efforts to provide information for families and community members and to pass on to them information that the educational services regarded as important in relation to the transition to school. In sites with strong links to the community there were opportunities for families and community members to do more than listen to information. However, only in few instances were family and community members active participants of transition teams, with responsibility for planning, delivering and evaluating transition to school programs.

Involving Elders or other Aboriginal community members in respectful ways can promote the incorporation of culturally relevant and locally appropriate knowledge and resources with transition programs, but also in the broader curriculum of both prior-to-school and school programs.

Key message

1. Involving family and community members as participants in transition teams can promote engagement in educational settings.

Successful practice

1. One community member can make a difference

- A supported playgroup was established under the leadership of a team consisting of a non-Aboriginal school teacher, the AEA and an Aboriginal parent. The parent was influential in the community in ensuring that Aboriginal children attended the playgroup. For some this meant that the parent collected and transported other Aboriginal children as well as her own to the playgroup. As time went on, the parents of these other children began to come along to the playgroup. Many of them said that they were ‘just there to see what was happening’ but they tended to stay and become regular attendees.

Outreach programs

Some programs offered through schools, early childhood settings and SaCCs involved using locations other than school sites for playgroups, parent meetings, community get togethers and specific information sessions. As well as the focus of these sessions, an important factor was the willingness of those organising the sessions to spend time in community settings, such as local parks, community halls, or sites located within areas identified as providing substantial amounts of housing for Aboriginal families. Being seen in the local community was regarded by community members as an indication that efforts to build connections were genuine.

Key message

1. Building community connections requires being seen within the community.

Successful practice

1. Door knocking

- Two Aboriginal community members were employed by the school in one site to ‘door knock’ the suburb. Their purposes were to ask that families what they would like from the local school, to ascertain if there were any children starting school in the subsequent year and to invite families of such children to become involved in the transition to school program.

Celebrating Aboriginal achievement and effort

The ways in which the achievements of Aboriginal children, families and community members are celebrated provide powerful messages about what is expected and valued. In several sites, the achievements of all students, including Aboriginal students, were prominently displayed in the entrance foyer of schools.

Key message

1. The expectations of others impact significantly on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students. Educators need to hold high expectations for Aboriginal children.

Successful practice

1. Children are capable learners

- The expectation is built up through the prior-to-school setting(s) and extended into school, sometimes because of the involvement of the prior-to-school educators in the transition programs, is that all children, including Aboriginal children, are capable learners. In one school, this was being recognised through an analysis of the knowledge exhibited in children's drawings about starting school.

2. Recognising the achievements of children and their families

- Practices that ensure that the achievements and efforts of Aboriginal children and families are recognised include:
 - celebrating effort as well as achievement;
 - inviting family and community members to share, in appropriate ways, their own achievements;
 - recognising and celebrating the strengths of the community;
 - recognising and respecting Aboriginal knowledges, including this as appropriate in curriculum, guided by the knowledge of local Elders; and
 - developing and utilising culturally appropriate and locally relevant resources.

Community capacity building

Definitions of community capacity vary, but they all focus in some form on “the degree to which a community can develop, implement and sustain actions ... [which allow] communities to exert greater control over their physical, social, economic and cultural environments” (Smith, Littlejohns & Thompson, 2001, p. 33).

Transition to school programs can provide a focus for community collaboration and capacity building. When community members are engaged in collaborative projects, such as transition to school programs, there are opportunities for community members to develop their own skills and confidence, as well as contribute to a program that benefits others.

Key message

1. A focus on community capacity building recognises that all communities have strengths and that these can be enhanced as members work towards achieving a community goal. The skills and abilities of individual community members are also enhanced, adding to the breadth of expertise available within the community.

Successful practice

1. Enhancing individual capacity can enhance community capacity

- One of the AEWs at a preschool had wanted to train as a teacher for a long time but had not taken opportunities in the past. Through her work in the *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-To-School to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project, she discovered an alternative route to teaching and is now enrolled in a teacher education course, thus enhancing her own skills and the overall capacity of her community.

Personal communication

Linking with families and communities is largely dependent on effective and authentic communication. Family and community members in several sites relied on communication from prior-to-school services and schools to make judgements about the transition to school and about how children were progressing when children started school.

Key message

1. Effective communication needs to be regular and accessible to families and communities. Communication only when there is a problem to be solved can lead to alienation of families and communities.

Successful practice

1. **Personal communication**
 - In one site, the preschool director regularly accompanied the bus driver on the trip to pick up children. In some instances, this enabled her to talk with family members about problem issues, and in other instances it enabled her to say 'hello' to family members who did not regularly visit the preschool.

Supporting educators

The final element identified in this project as a means for promoting connection between schools, prior-to-school services and communities related to supporting educators. This is a multifaceted notion that recognises that educators in each of these settings has a significant impact on the teaching and learning experiences children encounter in classrooms and the value placed on learning experiences that occur outside the classroom, such as in family and community contexts.

Ongoing professional development opportunities can impact on the nature, type and frequency of interactions with family and community members through

- emphasising the importance of working with families and communities;
- facilitating contact between family and community members and educators, for example as educators learn about the local communities from Elders and other significant members of Aboriginal communities;
- challenging assumptions and stereotypes;
- sharing examples of effective practice;
- identifying areas for professional support, for example, in adapting or implementing curriculum;
- recognising educational as well as community strengths;
- developing shared educational goals; and
- promoting collegiality across different settings.

The project team has noted the importance of professional development:

- being offered to all adults involved in transition to school programs;
- involving both prior-to-school and school staff, where appropriate; and
- specifically relating to AEA's and AEW's.

Key message

1. Ongoing professional development is an important plank in a policy of promoting connections between educational services and communities.

Successful practice**1. Schools in Partnerships**

- The involvement of two of the sites in the Schools in Partnership (SiP) program has meant that school and prior-to-school professionals and other community members in these sites have been able to become involved in professional development activities such as:
 - whole school meetings facilitated by the principal, district DET personnel and community leaders;
 - visits to exemplary transition to school programs;
 - planning meetings with consultants.
- Teachers, AEs and community members have all benefited from this professional development.

Overview of key messages in this section

- All communities are characterised by diversity as well as homogeneity. Connecting with communities requires multiple strategies and approaches. It takes time and resources.
- Strong links with communities are promoted when educational staff reach out to communities.
- Many connections between communities and educational settings are facilitated by Aboriginal staff.
- Involving family and community members as participants in transition teams can promote engagement in educational settings.
- Building community connections requires being seen within the community.
- The expectations of others impact significantly on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students. Educators need to hold high expectations for Aboriginal children.
- A focus on community capacity building recognises that all communities have strengths and that these can be enhanced as members work towards achieving a community goal. The skills and abilities of individual community members are also enhanced, adding to the breadth of expertise available within the community.
- Effective communication needs to be regular and accessible to families and communities. Communication only when there is a problem to be solved can lead to alienation of families and communities.
- Ongoing professional development is an important plank in a policy of promoting connections between educational services and communities.

6.2.4 What strategies are successful in engaging families who don't readily engage with early childhood services and schools?

A major challenge for all transition programs observed throughout this project was accessing children and families who did not attend prior-to-school settings and inviting them, or convincing them, to participate in transition programs. In several cases, contact with these families was achieved through the ongoing work of the AEAs, AEWs, HSLOs, and SaCC co-ordinators. In other communities, there remained large numbers of Aboriginal children and families who accessed neither early childhood services nor transition to school programs. Developing appropriate strategies to reach these members of local communities remains a challenge.

Many of the strategies and approaches noted in the previous section are relevant in connecting with families who do not readily access early childhood and school services. In particular, it was noted that personal contact with a respected or trusted representative of the school or early childhood community (including parents or family members) and/or with trusted and respected community members such as Elders was the most likely to result in families engaging with that educational contexts. Ongoing personal contact is the key to forming such connections.

Connections between families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools can only be built in the context of respectful relationships, where the strengths of individuals and families are recognised, even when challenges and other difficulties may also be evident.

Key messages

1. Ongoing personal contact is most effective in reaching families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools.
2. Aboriginal educators can play key roles in establishing connections with families and communities. However it is not only the responsibility of Aboriginal educators to promote such connections – it is the responsibility of all educators within schools and prior-to-school settings.
3. Aboriginal educators need to be supported in their roles of educators and in facilitating connections with the local community – this could mean accessing ongoing professional support and training.

Successful practice

1. **Shopfront**
 - A shopfront was rented for a limited period in order to distribute information about schools and transition programs. Personnel from the school and SaCC were regularly available to offer information, share experiences and generally meet families and children.
2. **Taking the program to the family**
 - Staff from one SaCC initially made contact with one family in a shopping centre. After several conversations, an offer was made to hold a playgroup in the family's yard. When the playgroup number grew too large, a transfer to the school facilities was made. Family support for the playgroup continued.

3. Involving fathers

- In one site, there was a 'Fathers Program' coordinated by the local university. The transition team worked with the university program and promoted the involvement of fathers within the school and preschool as a conduit to family involvement and information sharing.

4. Creative projects

- CDEP workers were involved in school and community projects such as generating artworks for schools and establishing native gardens

5. The Aboriginal Medical Service

- In several communities, transition programs were advertised through the Aboriginal Medical Service. Flyers were placed in waiting rooms and programs available for families were advertised.

6. NAIDOC Week

- NAIDOC week was used as a trigger to initiate important contact with Aboriginal communities. In some sites, planning NAIDOC week involved a broad range of people from the community, representing different ages, genders and backgrounds.

Overview of key messages in this section

- Ongoing personal contact is most effective in reaching families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools.
- Aboriginal educators can play key roles in establishing connections with families and communities. However it is not only the responsibility of Aboriginal educators to promote such connections – it is the responsibility of all educators within schools and prior-to-school settings.
- Aboriginal educators need to be supported in their roles of educators and in facilitating connections with the local community – this could mean accessing ongoing professional support and training.

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Appendices

Appendix 1	Case study reports
Appendix 2	Trial site reports
Appendix 3	Information for dissemination to communities about successful transition to school
Appendix 4	Information for dissemination to educators about successful transition to school

Appendix 1 Case Study Reports

Case Study A

Background demographic data

This case study involved a Community School and Pre-school situated in the City of Sydney. In 2003, this area had a population of around 81,000 residents. Distinctive features of the site are:

- The pre-school is one of 37 early childhood and pre-school services available in the area.
- The pre-school is an independent Aboriginal pre-school, licensed to cater for 40 children. The pre-school had operated as an early childhood service in 1971, catering specifically for the inner city Aboriginal community. While it is no longer an exclusively Aboriginal service, it regards Aboriginal children and families as the major clientele.
- The community school opened in 2003 after the amalgamation of several inner-city schools. Approximately 75% (18) of the Kindergarten students were Aboriginal.

Key features of site

- One third (8) of the children attending the pre-school in 2004 moved to the primary school in 2005. However, several of the children attending the pre-school do not live in the immediate area, and proceed to other schools.
- Staff of the community school were keen to emphasise the diversity of their school community, regarding Aboriginal children and families as one of the many groups that constituted their community.
- The role of programs operated by the Schools as Community Centres (SACC) and Parents as Teachers (PAT) programs were highlighted with their staff actively engaged in community outreach work. They were influential in helping families make contact with education services.
- Across the site, many families are experiencing hardship, urban renewal programs have seen substantial increases in the number of families moving into the area to access to work and education.
- In addition to the Aboriginal communities, there are several substantial Asian communities within the local area. Staff at the community school indicated that there was a need to facilitate transition for children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Many of the children attending early childhood services in the area, then attend schools outside the area. This presents a challenging process of planning connections between early childhood services and schools.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- In 2003, the transition program operated by the community school operated over 9 weeks of Term 4, for two mornings each week. In 2004, this changed to become a program operating over 6 weeks in Term 4, one morning a week between the hours of 9.30 and 11.40 am.
- The program was described as “run pretty much like a morning session at Kindergarten” and “giving children a snapshot of what Kindergarten would be like, without playing the whole video”. Resources within the school were organised in ways that the transition program operated outside the

Kindergarten program, meaning that transition program children were not in the same room as current Kindergarten children.

- The transition program was seen as promoting school readiness through building social skilling and social interactions, helping children have positive interactions with other children, developing a social readiness for school; and assessing cognitive readiness.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Success of this transition program within the pre-school is based on the commitment to family and community, such as the provision of transport. Also important are the willingness of pre-school staff to negotiate with 'family and mob' for students. Another major strength was the work of the Early Childhood Network, which brought together early childhood and school staff across the area to focus on transition as a process. This group provides a forum for discussion and exploration of ideas and approaches. One challenge for the Network is to remain an open, accessible and inclusive group that seeks to involve all those interested and involved in transition to school.

Further strengths include:

- involvement of Aboriginal staff in the transition program, providing explicit messages for children and families that Aboriginal children and adults belonged at school.
- commitment to Aboriginal education and to the local community;
- demonstrating that Aboriginal children and adults belong at school and can be successful at school;
- focusing on the social as well as the academic elements of transition; and
- recognition that greater collaboration was required in order to facilitate positive transition to school.

General comments:

The pre-school in this case study is well-established and respected, serving many Aboriginal families within the community. There was a demonstrated willingness and commitments from both school and pre-school staff to enhance the interactive relationships between the pre-school and primary school. Transition to school is a complex process in any context. It is possibly more complex in this case study because of the different stakeholders and the need for ongoing communication and collaboration between them. For example, the SACC and PAT programs provide contact with many families who may not access early childhood services and could facilitate greater involvement for these families in transition programs. Drawing upon the various expertise and connections could result in a more extensive and inclusive approach to transition.

Case Study B

Background demographic data

Case Study B is situated in a public school in the suburbs of a regional NSW city.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- a rich cultural mix of students;
- students from all backgrounds assuming leadership roles;
- a spacious well-equipped environment;
- strong emphasis on numeracy and literacy;
- dominance of Department of Housing residences in the suburb;
- approximately 45% students coming from single parent families;
- Priority Schools Funded Program(PSFP) status;
- highly mobile student population; and
- approximately 23% of the students are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

At the end of 2004, the school had approximately 335 students, 118 of whom were Aboriginal.

Key features of site

- The school site is pleasant with plenty of grounds for play. Artwork is in place on buildings and children's work is in evidence.
- Many of the teachers have been at the school for in excess of 10 years, some up to 18 years. The Principal described his staff as "the most cohesive staff I have come across" and added "the infants teachers are amazing—they are so calm".
- Aboriginal families expressed the feeling that they felt welcome in the school. They also expressed the importance of the AEA in ensuring that there were links between the Aboriginal families and the school.
- There are changing demographics within the community with more settlement among Aboriginal families.
- There are two main community-based early childhood settings. A new "for profit" long day care centre has just opened near the school, opposite a community pre-school which reports enrolments being lost, due to the lower fee structure available in the new setting. (This community pre-school closed in 2006).
- There seems to be an emerging appreciation of Aboriginal culture and language in the community prior-to-school settings.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- While there is a school wide transition/orientation program for all children starting school run over two days, the main initiative for Aboriginal children is KinderStart which has been operating at the school for six years.
- KinderStart runs for five weeks (Weeks 6 – 10 of Term 4)—three mornings a week for three weeks and five mornings a week for two weeks with some full days. The classroom is set up as a pre-school.
- KinderStart was extended to run for the entire Term 4 in 2006.
- The transition class teacher from 2003 suggested that "my aim was to get them to write their name, use playdough to strengthen their manipulative skills, to recognize their name, when to get the play lunch out—things we take for granted—and even just to sit and listen and find the way around and meet the personnel about the place". Observations in the transition classroom and

discussions with the 2004 teacher suggest that the same sorts of activities were made available in 2004 and 2005.

- Both a (casual) teacher and an experienced Aboriginal Education Worker who has been involved with KinderStart for three years are employed through the grant which enables the program to run. The teacher runs the program for the five weeks but the AEW is employed not only for the duration of the program but also for Term 1 of the following year. During Term 1 the AEW “filters through the Kindergarten classes”, making sure that the Aboriginal children and families are settling in well. In 2006, the AEW was employed into Term 2 to assist with challenges after the first school holidays.
- The prior-to-school centres display school fliers on notice boards and have notices about school and the importance of enrolment in their newsletters, beginning Term 3. Both bring children to school for one hour visits.

Perceived strengths of the transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Involvement of specifically employed AEW who is an identity in the community. One parent suggested that “the Aunty XXX bit makes a great softener. It’s not that having to go to the teacher with Mr and Mrs, it’s Aunty XXX. To me, it’s like they might feel a bit more comfortable to go to Aunty XXX and tell her that that kid is bullying them rather than having to go to the teacher” Another parent referred to the AEW and suggested that “they [the children] all love her”. A staff member of the school suggested that “XXX is the common factor as she knows the children from the community. The teacher relies on her a lot—her knowledge and her community links. She works in the school. Sometimes there is enough money for her, sometimes not.”
- Employment of extra teacher to take the KinderStart group.
- AEA at the school who is a key link with the community. In the Principal’s words: “The liaison between the AEA and the parents brings the whole thing together. She relates the good things that are happening at school to the community. She is a really valuable person and to have her living in the community makes her even more valuable.”
- There is a growing awareness of language and culture. One way in which this is being demonstrated is through efforts to involve Aboriginal men in the prior-to-school programs.
- The parents of children undertaking KinderStart in 2004 were full of praise for the program and the benefits it was bringing to the children. Comments included the following:
 - “XXX thinks he is actually at school. The kids think they have started.”
 - The reason he is here is for him to make friends and to settle him down. It is good for him to spend the last month or so with kids who he will go to school with.”
 - “The kids like wearing school uniform to KinderStart. It gives the kids some identity with the school.”
 - “I know he is going to be right now to come next year because he knows where everything is and he knows you’ve got to listen to your teacher.”
 - “I feel more comfortable now. I know XXX will be right.”
 - “I still have apprehensions about the first day of school but I think he’ll be alright.”

General comments

There is a genuine commitment within the school to engage with Aboriginal families and children and to promote their engagement within the school. In this way, transition is not considered as something that occurs for children, it is considered a process involving children and families and their connections with school.

Case Study C

Background demographic data

Case Study C is located in a public school in a western NSW town of approximately 3500. Distinctive features of the school include:

- in December 2004 the K-6 school had an enrolment of approximately 350 students with 40% identified as Aboriginal;
- 25% of the school staff are Aboriginal;
- a Schools as Community Centre (SaCC) located at the school;
- a community based pre-school located across the road from the public school; 30 of the children attending pre-school identified as Aboriginal, and 10 of those starting school in 2005 were Aboriginal.

Key features of site

- The size of town means that people know more about each other than in other communities. There is a sense of 'looking after' each other particularly with the Aboriginal community.
- Within the community women are leading the family. Strong role models are not there for many families. One community member commented: "The extended family often stops the new man (where partners have changed) from taking control." There is incredible respect for the women Elders.
- Having Aboriginal staff at the school – including AEAs and Aboriginal tutors – helps people feel more comfortable: "They act as windows to the school and the community and have worked to break down barriers". The presence of the AEAs was valued in terms of making and maintaining contact with families, particularly when many families were transient.
- Funding and support remains an issue. There was a strong suggestion from teachers that the DET needs to consult with the Aboriginal community about funding and the needs of the community.
- Families First operates a number of playgroups – at the SaCC and in the park. These are at no cost and these seem to be successful in contacting families and promoting interactions.
- There are some support services in the community for families, including Family Support talks to parents about transition.
- There are a lot of larger families and the impact of learning from siblings and other family members about school is important. A number of families are reported to have problems with managing time and organising family lives with school.
- There are plans for a mobile library that will offer some additional support to families.
- There is a sense of community ownership of the pre-school, which was established about 40 years ago.
- The Aboriginal community is quite stable, with only a few new families arriving each year.
- Achievements in 2003 include success with working with chronic non-attendees and BST results being 1.5-2 points above the state average for Aboriginal children and a Director General's Award for the difference made to learning for Aboriginal children.
- The Tutor's In School Program is seen as positive. Having this job is valued now and adds to the skills of the local workforce.
- There can be difficulties accessing health support services when required.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- The transition program in its 2004 form, was developed by the staff, open to all students and structured around a range of orientation activities, where children participated in developmental play; reading groups; formal school assembly; and visits to the school for 2 days per week (starting mid term 3).
- Transition experiences continued once school has started, with regular interactions and contact with the AEA's, tutors and Aboriginal literacy and numeracy support staff.
- There is a strong view among school staff that the efforts being made in the early years, such as in the transition program, are making a difference in the primary years, particularly in terms of Aboriginal students wanting to be involved at school and succeeding as leaders academically, socially and in the sporting arena.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were reported as being:

- connectedness between the school and pre-school, both in location and in connection with staff and program;
- teachers at the school are seen as accessible;
- the Kindergarten teacher gets to know the children and families before they start school;
- there is a feeling that all stakeholders know something of the transition program;
- the children all participate in the program;
- pre-school groups are organised so that children going to school the following year are together;
- pre-school staff are well regarded by school staff;
- there is a strong relationship between the school and pre-school. Pre-school and school teachers have conversations about transition and grouping children;
- children have opportunities to become familiar with the school and what it will be like for them at school;
- packs that go home for over the holiday period to encourage reading and writing are a popular idea; and
- there are increasing numbers of Aboriginal children entering Kindergarten.

General comments:

There is a history of the school and pre-school working collaboratively on transition to school programs. There are interchanges and conversations between school and pre-school staff that could be strengthened to enhance engagement with community about the nature of the transition program and its operation. The SaCC has an important role in community outreach, interacting with many families who may not access pre-school services. A mobile pre-school and playgroups seem to reach a significant proportion of the community.

Case Study D

Background demographic data

Case Study D is a small rural community located in the central west of NSW with a population of approximately 8,500. The town has two public primary schools and one independent primary school. Distinctive features of the school are:

- in 2004, approximately 200 students were enrolled with 28% of these students identified as Aboriginal. In Kindergarten in 2004 38% of students were Aboriginal. Several Aboriginal people are employed at the school fulfilling important roles in areas such as administration support, library support and playground behaviour support.
- that the Link Up transition program, described as “creating a safe school environment through a positive and proactive approach to addressing the issues of violence, abuse, bullying and harassment” operates at this school.

Key features of site

- The school has a Schools as Community Centre. There is an apparent positive attitude within the school, promoting a positive and pro-active approach to many issues.
- In 2005, an Aboriginal Parent/School Partnership Committee was in place.
- While the formal connections between school and families are supported and encouraged in many ways, more informal strategies for involving families in ways that they wanted to be involved could be in place.
- The town has a large transient population of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families.
- There are different Aboriginal groups represented in the local area, as residents come from a wide range of areas. This has resulted in what was described as ‘factions’ within the community.
- Some Aboriginal families feel empowered and are positive in their interactions with school. They access programs and feel supported. Other families do not feel the same and report feeling anxious.
- There are several community programs, some operating from the school and others operating from other community bases which have an impact on children’s experiences of transition to school eg. Mums on Monday; First Steps to Learning.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- There is a clear commitment to making the transition program work. This extends to seeking additional funding to ensure the full implementation of the program. The Link Up program is described in more detail at the conclusion.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were identified as:

- opportunities for children and parents to build relationships over the year;
- through contact with families in Link Up, the SaCC coordinator is able to encourage families to access other community based services and programs;
- Link Up connects with many other programs operating within the school and community, such as the Beginning Well program which involved trained parent mentors working with individual children in their transition to school;

- the staff involved in Link Up include an experienced early childhood teacher and an Aboriginal assistant. The skills and expertise of these people, working with the SaCC coordinator, are critical to the success of the program;
- the program, which helps children develop familiarity with the school and the people within the school, involves the teacher who will be the Kindergarten teacher for the group of children involved;
- information about children recorded in the Link Up program is transferred to the Kindergarten teacher;
- the program operates on the school site – helping children and parents become familiar with the school and school expectations;
- the school provides physical space and resources for the program;
- children generally settle easily into school at the beginning of the new school year and are ‘well-behaved’ in Kindergarten;
- school staff indicate some significant academic success for Aboriginal children and link some of this to the program.

General comments:

The transition program is a well formulated and detailed program focusing on social interaction and appropriate school behaviour. The program operates from the school perspective and has a focus on safety, protective and preventative behaviours.

Case Study E

Background demographic data

Case Study E is located in a rural area on the NSW coast.

- Predominantly lower socio-economic backgrounds. There is a shortage of rental and public housing and some families are now living in caravan parks.
- In the area, there are 4 main primary schools used by the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- There are strong historical links between these schools and the Communities.

Key features of site

- Primary School 1 has an Aboriginal Resource Room with cooking facilities.
- The Principal has been at the school for 8 years. Stable staff and an even balance between male and female teachers.
- DEST funding has provided for an In-Class Tuition Scheme which employs eight Aboriginal tutors.
- In addition, the school has Families First funding (\$15,000-\$16,000) for the Kindergarten teacher to liaise with local pre-schools in the area. The school has an enrolment of approximately 182 students.
- The School as Community Centre coordinator (SaCC) is located within and administered through Public School 2.
- A range of initiatives have been generated through the centre, such as parenting groups, young mothers' groups and young fathers' groups which operate on the site of Public School 2 as well as on other school sites at Public School 1 and Public School 3 covering South, West and North West of the town.
- Mobile playgroups provide outreach to isolated families. The SaCC coordinator works with several of the local schools and prior-to-school services to run an annual *Starting School Expo*. A local shop front is used as the location for the expo and information is readily available for families who do not have access to other services or programs. The SaCC coordinator is a key player in transition to school in the region and plays an active role in promoting networking among services and schools, and among families.
- The Community Pre-school is located on the western outskirts of the Case Site. It is a new purpose built 40 place centre catering specifically to the Indigenous Community. Children are transported from a wide local area by bus –for many children transport is the key to attendance as many parents have no transport and no public transport is readily available.

There is an Indigenous management committee and a predominantly Indigenous staff with the notable exception of the Director who has been there approximately 12 years. The service operates as a hub where the community can access health services and a range of information provided by the SaCC. The Pre School curriculum strongly engages the 'funds of knowledge' of the families.

Key features of the transition programs(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Staff at the school and pre-school have made the following points about the transition program/s:

Public School 1

- Parents are invited to attend sessions during the first two weeks of the transition program and encouraged to leave the children for the last four weeks of the program.
- Attendance of all children is tracked and if a child does not attend a session without making contact, a home visit is made.
- Health files are kept on each child. A child with a health problem has a health alert card.
- Transport is usually provided by parents and/or the pre-schools, but assistance is provided to anyone having problems attending.
- In the last week of the program, pre-schoolers are invited to stay at the school for morning tea with children in the early years of school.
- Information sheets are sent home.
- A Kindergarten booklet is made, containing photos of Kindergarten children.
- All children go home with their own 'Sow the Seed to Read' bags.

Community Pre School Program

- Schools visit the centre and bring students to read and work with the next years' Kindergarten students.
- The focus particularly in Term 4 is about helping children become 'school ready'. During this time, there is a focus on children demonstrating curriculum outcomes such as naming letters, numbers and colours, participating in guided reading.
- Afternoon sleeps are withdrawn and there is discussion about what 'big school' entails, such as a focus on children sitting still, listening to the teacher and demonstrating positive behaviour.

Strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- The buddy system that operates in Public School 1 with Year 3 and 4 children was identified as a strength. Year 3 and 4 students visit pre-schools and read to children who are about to start school.
- Family connections are also promoted so that there is the possibility of older siblings helping younger siblings as they start school.
- Teachers who visited pre-schools with the students became more familiar with early childhood education environments and the Year 3 /4 students had opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills.
- Visits by teachers and AEAs to pre-school settings. While the focus was on promoting reading, getting to know the children and them getting to know school staff was an important element; and
- Home visits.
- Where appropriate or possible, before-school screening (such as for health assessments) was encouraged. There are various health issues in the community, including a high incidence of otitis media.

Information about school was shared with families through:

- newsletters;
- parent information sessions; and
- information packages

Other strengths were identified as:

- the responsibility for meeting the needs of Aboriginal children and their families is perceived as a shared responsibility between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, between schools and prior-to-school settings, between education and other government departments;
- the SaCC and the coordinator of the SaCC make a significant contribution to transition;
- the focus on developing relationships is critical to promoting positive transition experiences;
- there is a commitment to addressing educational disadvantage and mistrust;
- in schools and prior-to-school settings, there is strategic employment of Aboriginal staff;
- there is a focus on developing a sense of safety for children; and
- there is a focus on children developing a strong self-esteem outside their Aboriginal community, including a sense of themselves as a competent learner as a means of alleviating the recognized racism in the area.

General comments

There was a strong sense that transition to school was about children adjusting to the demands of school and that this was a major factor in children's perceived readiness. One school teacher noted that "many children, and particularly Aboriginal children, didn't seem to be 'ready' when they started school. They didn't know how to behave in a class and didn't realise that there was a routine to be followed". This suggests a view of readiness that is skills based, and located within individual children. Notions of 'ready schools' and 'ready communities', evident in some elements of existing approaches, will be important to explore in future efforts to improve school transitions.

Children's comments and perspectives indicated that they were going to school in order to learn to read, and that they were interested in the people they knew at school.

Case Study F

Background demographic data

Case study F is situated in a rapidly growing outer suburb of a major metropolitan city.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- a rich cultural mix of students with a large English as a Second Language(ESL) population
- a fairly well-established and defined Aboriginal population
- The pre-school is situated in the grounds of the Primary School.
- This school has an enrolment of approximately 500 students, with an average of 3 Kindergarten classes each year. One AEA is employed at the school.

Key features of site

- The pre school is a 20-place pre-school specifically designated for Aboriginal children aged 3 1/2-5 years.
- Many families enrolled their children at the pre-school because of personal contact from the AEA. There is a pattern of increasing enrolment of Aboriginal children, with 12 of the 20 places taken by Aboriginal children in 2004, 16 in 2005 and all 20 in 2006.
- The pre school has a new, purpose built playground
- A health service bus with volunteer driver draws children from a wide area.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The following points were made about the transition program:

- The social element of pre-school is important as they get used to being with different people.
- The transition program starts in Term 3, but attendance remained an issue for some families. Some families were reported to be struggling with arriving on time and regular attendance. If they missed the bus, there was often no other way to get to the program.
- The transition program incorporates activities based fully on the curriculum and, in Term 4, has a focus on preparation for school. There was strong emphasis on children learning colours, numbers, shapes, letters and the rules of school.
- There are many opportunities for children in the pre-school to interact with children at school, such as when the pre-school children join the Kindergarten children for sport.
- Identification and follow-up of health issues was noted as significant. Children were routinely had hearing tests in the first term of Kindergarten.

Perceived strengths

- Attending pre-school was seen to facilitate the transition to school.
- Promoting Aboriginal culture within the school was seen as important and supportive for Aboriginal students and families.
- Aboriginal children feel that pre-school is a special place to go – and see it as leading to going to big school; Excursions organised by the pre-school to the school introduce children to peers and ensure partnerships with other teachers in the school;
- The pre-school and school working together fosters the nature of reconciliation;

- It is important for the school to include the pre-school – eg the pre-school takes part in the public occasions of the school;
- Strong partnerships between the pre-school and school are important – eg the pre-school and school staff are part of all duty rosters, including relief from face-to-face teaching and playground duty. School staff do playground duty at the pre-school;
- The pre-school is designated as an Aboriginal pre-school – this has strengthened Aboriginal identity with the school and community;
- Pre-school children get to know the teachers at school – primary teachers, especially Kindergarten teachers regularly visit the pre-school; and
- Familiar faces can help ease the shock of transition – children can recognise familiar faces in the school and still talk to pre-school staff when they start school.

General comments:

The overall commitment to transition was evident. There is a sense that Aboriginal families have developed strong, trusting relationships with Aboriginal staff. The skills based focus on the transition program was emphasised by those involved in the program. The social and emotional aspects of transition were mentioned, but the curriculum focus on knowledge seemed to predominate.

Case Study G

Background demographic data

Case study G is situated in the “outer” area of a major metropolitan city.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- It is a P-6 school with 300 students – 130 female, 170 male – in the K-6 years and 40 children in the pre-school. Thirty-nine of the K-6 children identify as Aboriginal people.
- There are 11 mainstream classes in the school. As well, there are classes for Junior and Senior IO children, children with emotionally disturbance and children with autism.
- There is a DET two-unit pre-school in the school grounds.
- Counting those employed part-time at the school, there are 32 teachers, including the two pre-school teachers. From data gathered during the first visit, one of the school teachers identifies as an Aboriginal person, as does the Aboriginal Education Assistant.
- The school has developed a strong link with the community and had a ‘really positive’ Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness(ASSPA) Committee that has been replaced by a community group.
- The pre-school is well established with a long-standing teacher who is highly respected by staff, children and the community. It is well-resourced, well-organised and clearly aimed at preparing children for school.
- The school does not have any particular links with prior-to-school services in the community, other than its own pre-school.
- When children were questioned about their first day of school, they all referred to their first day at pre-school.
- In 2005, 40 children started Kindergarten. 25 of them had attended the DET Pre-school. Four identified as Aboriginal. For 2006, the expectation was 55 children starting Kindergarten, of whom 38 had attended Pre-school. Six identified as Aboriginal.

Key features of site

- There was a general feeling that nothing ‘special’ was being done for Aboriginal children starting school and that nothing special was needed. However, Aboriginal children have priority access to places in the pre-school as it is a designated Aboriginal preschool.
- According to the Principal, the school acts as the government in the community. It is the only permanent government entity in the community and is often ‘blamed’ for matters out of its control. There is no church or no shop in the vicinity and the school sometimes has to double as a ‘referral centre’.
- The community is highly motivated for their children to do well at school. Levels of success vary enormously throughout the community but the community does care and the school responds by implementing values which are strongly directed towards the development of the community.
- There is a lot of socio-economic disadvantage in the community as well as many ‘broken’ families. According to the teachers, there are also many young families with parents who want the very best for their children but don’t necessarily have the skills themselves to reach these aspirations. They appreciate the support they receive from the school.

- The parents suggested that there had been marked changes in the community in the last five or six years. Mainly, these changes seemed to revolve around *a wider variety of nationalities* and associated community friction.
- There is no discernible 'Aboriginal' neighbourhood.
- The school is clearly seen as an important community resource. As well as the school and pre-school, a *Parents as Teachers* program and the District Nurse are located in the school grounds.
- The pre-school is located on the school site in such a way that it is physically an integral part of the site. It is also clearly an integral part of the educational program offered on the site. Pre-school staff and children are integrated into the school activities.
- There are no particular attempts to display Aboriginal artwork or motifs around the school although there is one quite striking mural in the playground.
- The staff seem to have a very high regard for each other, are supportive and not at all competitive among themselves.
- There is a culture of support for families and children throughout the school. One teacher described this as "a culture of talking with parents".
- One parent pointed out that "the teachers know the name of every kid in the school".

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- The major point to be made is that the teachers and the community members / parents / grandparents did not see any need for a special transition to school program for Aboriginal children.
- There is an ongoing issue around regular attendance, especially for Aboriginal children.
- The school does a letterbox drop in the community to help stimulate early enrolment of children.
- The Assistant Principal teaches in the pre-school throughout the year, providing relief from face-to-face teaching for the pre-school teachers. This means that she gets to know the children in the pre-school, and they get to know her, well before they come to school.
- The pre-school children join with the school children in celebrations of 'big' events such as NAIDOC week, cross-country days, etc.
- Early in Term 4, the orientation day for children and families is held. It begins with children and parents in the Kindergarten room (current Kindergarten children either go to the pre-school or are in the care of another teacher). Parents then leave and are briefed by the Assistant Principal. This session is of about two hours duration.
- Initially for children who did not attend the pre-school (in 2004 about 25 of the 40 new Kindergarten children had attended the DET pre-school) but now open to all children starting school, sessions are held for the first 8 weeks of Term 4. "Playgroup" sessions are also held in the pre-school for children who do not attend the pre-school and who can be accompanied by a parent.
- There is a buddy program in which children in Year 5 meet and engage in activities with children starting school during Term 4 of their pre-school year and during their Kindergarten year.
- All children starting school are given a library bag of information during the orientation program. One thing this contains is the Public School Starting School Book. This book is written for the children and contains the photographs of important people and places in the school.

Perceived strengths and challenges of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Strengths

- The trust and ease that there are between parents and school staff.
- The school has the interests of all of the children at heart.
- Inclusiveness of the transition program.
- I started school when I went to pre-school. (This was a very common perception among the children.) All adult participants were very clear about the excellent communication the school had with its community.
- The on-site DET pre-school—and, in particular, its long-standing teacher—was seen as a major asset in the community.
- This school is one of the best for that family feeling. Everyone knows you.

General comments

All involved in the transition program expressed satisfaction with the process. The close communication and respect between staff of the school and pre-school was seen as one of the key factors underlying this positive response. It was noticeable that parents and educators often discussed issues in general terms, indicating that many families in the area experienced similar problems and issues, and that these were not necessarily concerns that applied only to Aboriginal children and families. Indeed, it was a very clear message from families that they did not want or expect a specific transition program for their children – they wanted to fit in and be treated like everyone else.

Case Study H

Background demographic data

Case Study H is situated in an urban area near one of the largest cities in NSW.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- the school is one of the four government/Catholic primary schools in the area;
- the families in the local area are a mix of middle and lower socio-economic status;
- the school has a small enrolment, around 200 students, with only about 7% Aboriginal population. The intake for 2004 of Aboriginal children was only 2 children;
- a close link has been made with the DET Aboriginal Education Consultant; and
- teaching staff at the school has remained stable over a number of years.

Key features of site

- The links developed between the preschool and the primary school. In particular the health and transport support at the preschool benefits the families.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- An orientation night was held at the primary school for parents. Information packages were distributed to families.
- Teachers from the school visited a number of preschools to talk to parents about school and the style of teaching their children would meet.
- A comprehensive PowerPoint presentation was developed to share with parents.
- Children attended the primary school during Term 4 in the mornings and experienced songs, stories, craft and other hands on activities.
- Children attending the school were accompanied by a teacher from the preschool during Term 1.

Perceived strengths of the transition program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- A pleasing level of connection was made with parents of children commencing school.
- The children who had participated in the transition program were perceived to have developed a pleasing readiness for primary school.
- Special classes were offered to parents who wanted to learn about literacy/numeracy assistance for their children.
- Parents were also given a short orientation of the primary school.
- Preschool children were linked with Year 5 buddies.

General Comments

Evidence of success of the program

Evaluation of the program at the school is fairly informal but there is a review at the end of the Kindergarten year against test results and attendance. The major measure of success was how quickly the children, “especially the loud ones”, settled in.

Discussions were also held with parents and the involvement of parents is an indicator of their relationship with the school.

Case Study J

Background demographic data

Case Study J is in a farming community south of Sydney.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- it is one of the two public primary schools in the town;
- the school population is declining – by over 200 children in the last five years;
- the school is adjacent to a public housing area whose population is aging;
- there is a Defence Force station locally, however, a limited number of children come from these families;
- the school is a Priority Schools Funding school;
- support for the school is also given by Families First and from a Premier's Department Initiative (Community First); and
- the school includes a pre-school of twenty students and four special education classes.

Key features of site

- The school being linked with its own preschool and are both under the auspices of the NSW Department of Education and Training.
- The low cost for attendance at the preschool promoted attendance.
- The large degree of Aboriginal identity and cultural support at the pre-school.
- A Community Room, located near the primary school's staff room including an Office and kitchen has been supplied and is beneficial in drawing together the school staff, students and parents.
- There are a number of parents involved with both the pre-school and the school.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- The transition program was seen as the major asset of the preschool.
- Parents were invited to participate for 3-4 weeks in Term 4 in the transition program.
- Tailor made sessions were planned for parents including topics such as:
 - school routines;
 - people on the staff at school;
 - K-6 club;
 - Literacy; and,
 - Numeracy.
- As the preschool is situated within the school grounds, the children had had a year long association with the school.
- An information pack and booklet on school requirements is given to parents.
- Part of the transition program includes swapping preschoolers with Kindergarten children for 1.5 hours for 4 weeks. A buddy system is set up between the 2 age groups.
- The transition program is supported by an AEA who works with the children during the final preschool year and Term 1 of Kindergarten.

Perceived strengths of the transition program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- The community atmosphere developed with the inclusion of the elders coming into talk to parents and children.
- The competent work of the AEAs in assisting the children in preschool.

- The location of the preschool within the school grounds permits an early familiarity with the school for the children.
- The high level of support of the preschool staff by the parents.
- The development and forwarding of Link Up Assessment forms which detailed academic ability, social skills and personality information.
- A comprehensive component of Aboriginal content in the pre-school program.

General Comments

The preschool had a warm, friendly atmosphere which encouraged parents to be part of the children's Aboriginal heritage was celebrated and taught. The children enjoyed the challenges of preschool and the opportunity to be part of a transition program. The transition program involved preschool and Kindergarten children as well as parents and encourage their participation. The transition program included the issues relating to school readiness and considered the need for children to be comfortable, secure, safe and trusting and the need to follow routines and school behaviours.

Case Study K

Background demographic data

Case Study K is a public school situated in the suburbs of a large regional city in NSW.

Distinctive features of the school are:

- growing Aboriginal student population;
- stable core of staff;
- 52% of student population are Aboriginal;
- 66% of children entering Kindergarten are Aboriginal;
- the established Emotionally Disabled Class;
- new principal appointed in 2005;
- the local industries are listed as primary and secondary food production, education, transport and aviation; and,
- at the end of 2005, the school had 357 students which was a decrease of 37 students from 2004.

Key features of site

- Many of the teaching staff have been at the school for a number of years.
- Some of these teachers have been previously involved with the transition program.
- There is an increasing number of Aboriginal children attending the school.
- During 2004-2005, 9% of school staff were Aboriginal – this included both Aboriginal Education Assistants and classroom teachers.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- The availability of NIELNS funding altered the transition program available to children beginning primary school.
- A Support Teacher Learning Difficulties teacher and an Aboriginal Education Worker were employed to run the transition program.
- The AEW joined the children in Kindergarten in 2005 and so there was continuity for the children.
- The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children joined for all the activities related to transition.
- For four weeks Aboriginal children participated in Kindergarten sessions 3 times a week for 2¼ hours a session.
- The sessions run by the teacher and AEW focussed on skill based activities. These included name recognition, identifying colours and shapes, counting, classroom behaviour and personal hygiene.
- In the final week of the transition program the ‘new’ Kindergartens were introduced to a Year 5 buddy who would remain a buddy in Term 1 for 5 weeks. Children assigned in this role were pleased to be part of the program.
- Included in the transition program were orientation sessions. The orientations included introductions to parts of the school and meeting the Kindergarten teachers.
- A range of sessions were available for parents to attend whilst their child participated in the transition program,
- Parents had a chance to develop a better understanding of issues such as:
 - numeracy and literacy at home;
 - healthy school lunches;

- Otitis media and its affects
- attendance requirements.

The sessions also gave parents a chance to socialise with each other.

- The parents were provided with a package of information.

Perceived strengths of the transition program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

- The availability of funding (NIELNS) to support the transition program.
- The development of skills and knowledge by the children.
- Connections with parents were established.
- Children perceived school as a safe, happy and healthy place which was really positive.
- The team of a teacher and a AEW who developed a caring and accepting approach to the children and families.
- Teachers receiving the new Kindergarten children reported that children who had been part of the transition program had settled quickly into the school and its routines.

General Comments

The transition program offered over a number of weeks gave time for both children and parents to develop an understanding of formal school. The program brought together a range of families giving parents a chance to socialise as well as learn about school. Children were given both a transition program with elements of an orientation to the school. The development of a buddy scheme with Year 5 students gave the young children a connection with the school for the following year.

Appendix 1 Trial Site Reports

Trial Site Report: Site A

Background demographic data

The site is located on the North Coast of NSW on the traditional land of the Bundjalung people.

The main town servicing the site has a population of approximately 18 000 including a high proportion of retirees and unemployed people living and a relatively high proportion of single parent families.

Key features of site

The main primary school in the site has a total enrolment of approximately 325, with a Kindergarten intake of about 45, approximately 12 of whom are Aboriginal. Fifteen teachers and 20 other staff work in the school. There is one Aboriginal casual teacher who is employed by the school. The teaching staff is generally very experienced with a number of them having held roles such as consultants and school principals before arriving in the town. There is one AEA in the school.

The school has a strong link to the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP), with at least 7 CDEP workers at the school at any one time. Some of these are parents of children in the first years of school.

The *Kids Excel* program is relevant to this site. This program “aims to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in communities where there are significant issues in early school disengagement and poor school outcomes” (NSW Department of Education and Training, n.d.). One of the key objectives for Kids Excel is to assist with transitions of Aboriginal children into primary school. The *Kids Excel* program has had a major impact on the transition approaches used at the school.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The following features were evident in the specific transition to school program implemented by the school for Aboriginal students in 2005. This program is titled *Ready, Set, Go*.

- The program runs for all of Term 4, initially for 2 half-days per week but building to 5 half-days per week after Week 3 of term. In previous years, the program had run for 3 or 4 weeks only but the extra funds provided by *Kids Excel* enabled the lengthening of the program. Some children are taken to preschool each day after the *Ready, Set, Go* program has finished.
- Two experienced Kindergarten teachers who are no longer teaching full-time run *Ready, Set, Go*, on a job-share basis.
- The program is run in a designated classroom that is not near the mainstream classes in the school. The room is well equipped and looks for all intents and purposes like a Kindergarten classroom.

- The *Ready, Set, Go* children are introduced to the current and future Kindergarten teachers near the end of the program.
- *Ready, Set, Go* is a skills-based program in which children are presented with opportunities to develop physical, cognitive and social skills seen to be important in getting them ready for school.
- There is an Aboriginal worker employed during the *Ready, Set, Go* program to work alongside the teachers with the children. That worker then works in the Kindergarten classrooms for the first term of the children's schooling, to assist them in settling in to the class.
- There are at least five different prior-to-school services from which Aboriginal children arrive at the School. However, one of these provides more than half of the Aboriginal enrolments in Kindergarten.
- The *Ready, Set, Go* program has not been very successful in involving parents of children starting school, except where parents have been employed by the school although some strategies have been tried as a result of the school being involved in the *Successful Transition from Prior-to-School to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- **Length of *Ready, Set Go***
The advent of *Kids Excel* funds and its focus on successful transition to school has meant that the school has taken the opportunity to extend its previous program to cover almost the complete Term 4. This is seen as a very strong commitment to transition to school for Aboriginal children and has been successful in attracting almost all of these children who started school in 2006. The longer time will, no doubt, assist in the children building up the relationships that are so vital at this time of change.
- **Experienced teachers**
To be in a situation where the school can call on two experienced Kindergarten teachers for their *Ready, Set, Go* program is a luxury many schools would love to have. As well, giving the children in the program the opportunity to meet two different teachers means that they see a variety of teacher styles and do not become attached to any one teacher.
- **Designated classroom**
The *Ready, Set, Go* classroom is a very well equipped, pleasant space that does provide a stimulating environment in which the children can work productively. It is organised like a Kindergarten classroom might be and is situated in the school in a way which is non-threatening for the transition to school children.
- **Skills based focus**
A key emphasis of *Ready, Set, Go* is the development of skills that the children have been deemed to not have but will need in Kindergarten. "I think that the challenge for the *Ready, Set, Go* teachers is to expose the children to what they will get when they come as a Kindergarten child. They're going to be sitting on the floor, they're going to be reading as well and we're going to be talking about the weather and the days of the week and colours and seasons. So they're getting a running

start to know that when they come into the school, this is what it is going to look like.” (Principal)

Other *Ready, Set, Go* experiences that were seen to be important by one of the Kindergarten teachers included cutting, holding a pencil, sitting down in a chair. This teacher suggested that the *Ready, Set, Go* children benefited a great deal from the program, some to such an extent that there were many (non-Aboriginal) others who were indeed behind the *Ready, Set, Go* children at the start of Kindergarten.

- Employment of Aboriginal worker
Having an Aboriginal person – in 2005/2006, this was the Dad of one of the children starting school – to provide continuity of personnel between the *Ready, Set, Go* program in Term 4 of the year before school starts and Term 1 of Kindergarten is a great strength for the overall transition to school program as it allows children to develop a key relationship and maintain it throughout the period of change.
- Links between prior-to-school and school settings
The school has quite strong links with the preschool that supplies most of the Aboriginal enrolments each year. There seem to be cordial professional relationships between the assistant principal and the preschool director and information is handed on to the school through a face-to-face meeting between them each year.
- Parental involvement
A number of the CDEP workers are parents at the school, including some with children in Kindergarten or *Ready, Set, Go*. This forms the basis of a group of parents who are very committed to their children’s schooling and the schooling of other Aboriginal children in the community.

Summary of children’s comments:

During each of the visits, the researchers were able to talk with small groups of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in Kindergarten and, on one occasion with a group of children undertaking the *Ready, Set, Go* program. The Kindergarten children were generally very happy to be at school and could recall their *Ready, Set, Go* program clearly. They said that they felt ready to start school after the program but when they did finally start Kindergarten, they were still “a little bit worried about what was going to happen”.

The children undertaking the *Ready, Set, Go* program were able to tell the researchers that they were looking forward to being in “big school” and being at school with their brothers / sisters / cousins. They thought that the school was exciting and a little scary but were glad to be there.

General comments:

Evidence of the success of the program

The Kindergarten teachers were adamant that the *Ready, Set, Go* program had worked wonders with the group of Aboriginal children who started school in 2006.

“Well, I have to say it’s a great success. Absolutely. There were 12 children that went through the program and towards the end of the program, they were integrated into the current Kindergarten rooms. So they got to see the classes working, only for a short time and then back to their safe place. And this year we’ve not had problems with children from the *Ready, Set, Go* program being

unsettled. They know what school is about. They know how to sit at a desk. They know how to listen. They don't always do it but the routine has really helped a lot of those children. They're learning well. They know what to expect and it's been good. Yes, absolutely."

This was reiterated by the principal who saw the *Ready, Set, Go* program as successful both in terms of how the children had settled but also in terms of other measures such as attendance of the Kindergarten children. In summary, "The ATSI students are more ready for the more formal constraints and expectations of school."

The *Ready, Set, Go* program does seem to have met a particular need for the Aboriginal children. It would be good to see more of the families involved but the fact that some are involved is a good start.

Trial Site Report: Site B

Background demographic data

This site is in a low socio-economic community situated in a suburb of a south coast city. The community is characterised by low priced rental housing and public housing. Near the public school is a collection of Aboriginal housing, commonly referred to as the Mish, a light industrial area and a large shopping centre. The community has a high multicultural mix with Italian, Macedonian, Croatian, Serbian, Portuguese, Spanish and Asian families as well as many Indigenous family groups.

The public school has an effective enrolment of about 100 students, plus around 30 in the on-site Department of Education and Training preschool, although there are some fluctuations throughout the year in terms of how many are actually attending school. About 30 of the school students are Aboriginal. There are five teachers along with the principal and one Aboriginal Education Assistant. None of the teachers is Aboriginal. In the two-unit preschool, 6 places have been identified for Aboriginal children. The preschool supplies a hot meal for children, for which it charges \$12 per day. In 2005, the preschool did not have a full enrolment but was apparently unable to attract Aboriginal children from the local community. Some of these children attended an Aboriginal Childcare Centre in a nearby suburb. The childcare centre's service includes a bus that collects children in the morning and returns them in the afternoon. The subsidised cost of the childcare centre is less than the cost of the DET preschool because of the hot lunch charge.

The Kindergarten teacher at the school has a long history of engagement with Aboriginal children and is well respected in the community. He has, for example, produced a number of music CDs on which children from the school perform, including some songs about starting school.

Most of the school buildings are new, having been rebuilt after much of the school was lost in a fire about 5 years ago. There are many obvious connections to the Aboriginal heritage of the site and the community, including artwork, artefacts and a memorial garden.

A supported playgroup has been functioning through the school since 2004 when it began for three terms in the community hall at the Mish. Since 2005, it has attracted Families First funding. In Term 1, it was held in the preschool and since then has been functioning in the school hall. This playgroup meets the aim of the school to establish: 'A locally based play group for both ATSI and other children and their families that socialises and teaches early stage foundation skills reflective of the NSW curriculum. Teachers and staff can go to the playgroup to break down the school/community divide. In turn the group could have many visits to the school so that the children and families know what to expect [when they start school].'

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The following features were evident in the transition program offered in 2005/2006 at the school.

- Improved access of Aboriginal children and families to the DET preschool.
- Centrality of the supported playgroup in the transition to school of many children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.
- Key community members and their relationship with the school.
- An extensive transition to school program beyond the playgroup and preschool inputs.
- A stimulus pack of 'goodies', including a book, drawing and colouring materials, starting school booklet and poster and library bag.
- Commitment of staff to the transition to school program.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Supported playgroup
The supported playgroup has played a key role in engaging with the community over the last 3 years. It is funded until the end of 2007 through Families First. In terms of transition to school, the supported playgroup introduces many children to the school from an early age and allows them and their families to become known to the school. Relationships built up during interactions on playgroup days seem to last into children's schooling.

The playgroup runs for one morning per week and is overseen by a small group consisting of a teacher, the AEA and a community member. It has an attendance of between 6 and 15 children and their families. The playgroup not only provides an introduction to the school but also to the preschool – in 2005, 6 children moved from playgroup to the preschool with another 2 making this transition in 2006.

- The importance of key community members
If the Aboriginal community is to become engaged with the school, it is important that the school be advanced by key members of the community. At the site, during 2005, the AEA was also the Chair of the local AECG and, thus, held an important and respected role within the community. She was able to use this role and respect to build up the image of the school in the eyes of the community. However, there was another important member of the community whose work was critical to the relationship between the community and the school. This person is a young Aboriginal woman who has taken a lead, within the structures of the community in which she lives, to ensure that all eligible Aboriginal children access both the playgroup and the community transition program run for all children starting school. She has even gone to the extent of going to people's homes both to ensure that they know about the programs but also to transport children and parents to the events. Her efforts have resulted in a much greater involvement of Aboriginal families in the activities run by the school. This woman is now the school's AEA.
- Extensive transition to school program
The aims of the school's transition to school program are "to make the Kindergarten year more welcoming, easier, and softer in the first few weeks so

that they were familiar with their surroundings. That was the whole aim, just to make them familiar with the surroundings before they actually started so that it wasn't a frightening experience for them."

The structure of the transition program is interesting, particularly given that there were only 7 children who started school in 2006, 2 of whom were Aboriginal. The transition to school program ran over Term 4 for 2 hours per week. Five of the seven families, including the 2 Aboriginal families, accessed the program regularly but only 2 families accessed the entire program. Session times were varied across the weeks of the program in an effort to ensure that all families could access at least part of the program. Each child was given a stimulus pack. The children who were regular attendees of the transition to school program settled very well into Kindergarten.

- Stimulus pack

The stimulus pack was seen by the transition team and by some of the parents as being a wonderful way of the school welcoming children about to start school. The inclusion of a library bag and book not only signalled the importance of reading to the children and their families but also ensured that all the children would have one piece of the necessary school equipment at the start of the year.

- Commitment of staff

One of the advantages of being a staff member in a small school is that you can be involved in almost everything that happens in the school. One of the disadvantages is that you have to be involved in these things. The staff on the transition team, including the principal, are committed to the success of the transition to school program because they can see the benefits of children having a smooth start to school.

General comments:

Evidence of the success of the program

In the transition to school program at the school, 7 children, including 2 Aboriginal children, were involved. Those children who attended the transition to school program and accessed the on-site DET preschool started school smoothly. The transition team leader said "If the kids haven't been to preschool, they haven't been to any playgroups or to the transition program, then it's very difficult when they come in".

The numbers are small, but the impact of the transition to school program was certainly seen by the staff involved. This impact was felt by all the teachers in the school:

"In the end we all benefit. I have the other end [Years 5/6], I have the oldest kids but I will benefit. The person who has the oldest kids will benefit because of all the hard work that has been done beforehand. All the kids have been eased into school and they're not finding it difficult as the years go by." (Stage 3 teacher)

Trial Site Report: Site C

Background demographic data

This site is located in the far west of NSW. The town in this site has an official population of approximately 980. In addition, a great many seasonal workers are attracted to the town.

Historically, the site has been associated with the Barkindji people. More recently, people from the Nyampa language group have settled in the site and have taken up some leadership roles in groups such as the Lands Council. Relationships between the Barkindji and Nyampa people have not always been cordial.

The town has a one-unit community based preschool which provides service for children aged 3 years to school age. The sessions provided vary from year to year based on funding. The preschool is run by a TAFE-trained Director who is currently upgrading her qualifications to Bachelor of Education and two assistants. Four year-old children can attend up to 4.5 days per week, three year-olds can attend up to five half days per week.

Access to health services is coordinated through a new community health facility. Medical, dental and therapy services are provided on a weekly/fortnightly/monthly basis depending on need and staff availability.

The central school in the town caters for students across years K-12, with Year 11 and 12 students working through the Access Program. The school has an enrolment of 118 students of which 70 are in the K-6 years. The majority of these 70 students (45) are male. Fifty-eight percent of the primary students and 62% of the current Kindergarten are Aboriginal. There are 24 teachers in the school, including the principal. One of these teachers is Aboriginal. As well, there is one AEA and 4 AEWs. The school was recently chosen to participate in the Schools in Partnership (SiP) program, which promotes schools and communities working together to enhance learning outcomes for Aboriginal students. Substantial funding has been allocated to each SiP school. The school has also participated in the *Paint the West Read* initiative.

The Schools in Partnership program is expected to have a major impact on a number of areas of school education for Aboriginal children. One of these areas is transition to school. SiP funds have been used to employ an early childhood educator to a full-time position as project coordinator and community support person. The coordinator has made strong links with the preschool director and with the Aboriginal families in the community.

Summary of issues about transition to school

- Getting all children into preschool, especially getting families to see importance of preschool, be willing to transport children and being able to afford fees.
- Educating the community about the role of wellness, wellbeing and education from conception on into the school years.
- Introducing a notion of transition to school beyond orientation for both educators and the community.

- Involving children and community members as active participants not just recipients of any transition to school program.
- Facilitating families to become actively involved in the school.
- Broadening the ownership of the transition to school program from the school to the community.
- Developing a clear focus on improving educational outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal children.
- Stimulating the interest of parents/carers of 0-3 year-olds to attend the one day per week playgroup.
- Accommodating the transition to school initiatives within the larger SiP program.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Although the focus of SiP funding is the improvement of outcomes for Aboriginal children and the transition to school program at the school is embedded in SiP, there is no clear distinction made between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in terms of approach to their transition to school programs.
- The transition to school program is clearly seen as the province of the SiP project coordinator with the result that, to a large extent, other teachers in the school have little to do with it, even though there are quite strong personal relationships between the staff at the preschool and some school teachers.
- The transition to school ‘program’ is not really conceived as a coherent program. Rather, it is articulated by the project coordinator and school principal as a series of initiatives controlled by the school through the SiP project coordinator.
- Key initiatives around transition to school which have been implemented include:
 - ❖ home visits from the project coordinator to families: these visits commence before the birth of the child and are planned to continue at least until the child starts school;
 - ❖ playgroup run by the SiP project coordinator in conjunction with *Good Beginnings*: this initiative also includes the use of the school bus to pick up the child and parent/carer from their home and transport them to the playgroup;
 - ❖ enrolment in the community preschool of all the Aboriginal children who will commence Kindergarten at the school in 2007;
 - ❖ regular visits between the preschool and school with children from one site attending specific functions at the other;
 - ❖ an early reading project through which books are presented to mothers of newborns in the hope that they will be read to the child from an early age; and
 - ❖ support from professionals for dental and other health aspects.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Schools in Partnership
SiP provides a clear opportunity to make some visions reality.
- Role of community in planning, implementation and evaluation of the different aspects of the transition initiative
Currently the community plays a consumer role for the transition initiative but it is hoped that the community will begin to play a more central and sustainable role.
- Communication across the community
The small community means that the word can be spread easily.
- SiP project coordinator
The coordinator role and the incumbent is well accepted in the school, preschool and wider community.
- Role of school staff
Initially, the school staff were involved in the planning of the SiP program and are committed to a positive approach to transition.
- Perceptions of change
The community acknowledges the worth of initiatives such as the home visiting program and the playgroup.
- Knowledge of transition practices
There is a great deal of knowledge about the broader notions of transition to school, particularly in the preschool director and the SiP coordinator.
- Role of preschool
The preschool is providing a relevant early childhood experience that could lead to a successful first year of school.
- Quality preschool
There is a positive recognition of the community preschool staff and the quality of their program.
- Schools as leaders in transition programs
The community sees that the school values an effective individual approach to early childhood education and transition.
- Role of early childhood professionals
There is a strong group of early childhood professionals in both health and education who are involved in the transition initiatives.

General comments:

Evidence of the success of the program

The program is just beginning to be implemented. There are signs that the home visiting and the playgroup components of the initiatives are beginning to work in terms of child and parental involvement with the school. The AEA and classroom teacher have suggested that as the transition program grows, it will require many more staff, space at the school and resources. There is a possibility that the lack of such resources at the school may impact on the overall effectiveness of the initiatives, even though there are ample resources in the community for the planned activities such as parent meetings and dads' gatherings to be implemented.

Further, longer-term data will need to be collected before the level of success for the overall program can be measured.

Trial Site Report: Site D

Background demographic data

Site D is located approximately in central western NSW. The Wiradjuri people are traditional custodians of the area. The town has a population of 3500. Wheat growing and many other agricultural pursuits are features of the district around the town. The town gives an air of quiet prosperity, is pleasantly established with many well kept parks and other public spaces. There seems to be a positive community spirit in the town with little overt racism being reported.

The trial site in a public school on which this report was based, has an enrolment of approximately 380 students. In 2005, an estimated 50% of the 42 children starting Kindergarten were Aboriginal, and approximately 36% of the total school enrolment was Aboriginal. The school community noted increasing numbers of Aboriginal children attending the school, increasing involvement of Aboriginal families with the school, and an active ASSPA committee before it was disbanded in 2005. The school does not receive priority schools funding. In 2006, the school reported an increase in overall enrolment to 395 students, 39% of whom were Aboriginal. Of the 70 students who started Kindergarten in 2006, 44% were Aboriginal.

The school has been actively involved in developing the site's Community Indigenous Education Program, which has as one of its core components a focus on transition to school. This plan has been jointly constructed with other local educational settings and services including the pre-school Kindergarten, childcare centre, high school, Catholic primary School and the Aboriginal community.

The following information has been drawn from the Concept Plan 2005 - 2007 of the Community Indigenous Education Program.

"The town and surrounding district has a population of 7084, with the Aboriginal population being 963, 14% of the population. The total number of young Aboriginal people (0 – 22) is 593, including 248 enrolled at the schools in town. The town has a stable core of Aboriginal families, as well as an increasing number of transient families, the numbers of which fluctuate at different times of the year."

There is an active birth to Kindergarten group which contains a high proportion of Aboriginal people. They meet regularly to discuss parenting and other aspects of family life in the town.

The schools – public, high and Catholic – are seen as integral parts of the community and are given a lot of support by the community. During the time in which the project was visiting the site, a local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group was established. In fact, project team members were honoured to be asked to present at the launch and inaugural meeting of the group.

Up until 2004, there had been an extensive home visiting program run by the school as a way of preparing families for their children starting school. Loss of funding has curtailed this activity.

Summary of issues about transition to school

Through the site's Community Indigenous Education Program, a number of issues have been identified as pertinent to transition to school.

- Facilitating families to become actively involved in the school through becoming involved in the transition to school program
- Increasing attendance in school, and particularly Kindergarten.
- Enhancing Aboriginal children's literacy and numeracy skills when they commence school.
- Developing parenting skills among Aboriginal parents and care givers.
- Developing greater community awareness of the importance of transition to school.
- Finding ways in which the schools and prior-to-school settings can better work together.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The following features were evident in the transition program offered in 2005.

- There is no extra funding available to the program.
- Program is jointly accessed by prospective students for both the public and the Catholic school.
- Program is run on one day per week for ten weeks.
- Twenty children were catered for in two groups of ten – one in the morning, one in the afternoon.
- Program is resourced by the two schools and the childcare centre.
 - ❖ Teacher is supplied by the childcare centre.
 - ❖ Public school supplies the time of two Aboriginal Education Assistants.
 - ❖ Catholic school supplies the time of an Aboriginal Education Worker.
 - ❖ Program is held at the public school in an extra classroom.
 - ❖ Resources come from both schools and the childcare centre.
- Program is aimed at supporting students who have not accessed preschool or childcare with skills that will assist them in Kindergarten.
- While the program is not only for Aboriginal children, the majority of the children attending are Aboriginal.
- There is a social story booklet prepared by one of the parents that introduces the children and their families to the important people and places in the public school.
- There is a parent component in the transition program.
 - ❖ Morning teas and other informal sessions to discuss concerns of parents and carers.
 - ❖ General support for parents and carers to make them feel welcome.
 - ❖ Encouragement for the parents / carers to become part of the program.
 - ❖ Encouragement of parents / carers to attend and ensure their children attend as a model for what will be expected in Kindergarten and later years of school.
- Development of strong networks with other agencies such as health and cultural agencies.

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Lack of funding
The lack of funding has meant that the community as a whole has had to be quite resourceful in the ways in which it has undertaken the program. The manner in which the schools and prior-to-school services have banded together is very impressive.
- Community transition to school program
The recognition that transition to school is a community endeavour not just the province of given schools separately.
- Duration of program
The commitment being made by the people involved in planning and implementing the program is feasible when the program runs for only one day per week in Term 4. The financial commitment of the childcare centre in supplying the teacher for one day per week is substantial but could not be expanded on a voluntary basis.

- **Children**
The targeted children are those who have had little or no prior-to-school centre experience with the aim of providing for these children and their parents / carers some support to learn the things they will need to know before they start Kindergarten. The social interactions had by the children in the program will be important once they arrive in school.
- **Personnel involved**
The involvement of an experienced early childhood teacher, AEAs and AEWs is important to ensure that appropriate activities are designed and implemented and that cultural aspects of Aboriginal children's learning are considered.
- **Parent / carer involvement**
The involvement of parents at this early stage of their children's school career is important in setting the baseline for such involvement. Parents are able to find out what they can do in the school and then can link into some parts of this right from the start of their child's schooling.

Summary of children's comments:

Members of the project team were unable to access children for sufficient lengths of time to allow for in-depth discussions. However, informal discussions with children in the transition to school program in October, 2005 suggested that they were really quite excited about the prospect of the transition program and, later, school itself. There was, as is common with most groups of children at this stage of their transition, some anxiety around what was going to happen and how they would fit in, especially in terms of how they would go about making friends. This is particularly pertinent to this group, many of whom had not accessed prior-to-school settings before this program.

General comments:*Evidence of the success of the program*

In 2006, the project team was able to discuss the success or otherwise of the transition to school program with some parents / carers of children who had experienced it in 2005. Some direct comments are pertinent here:

"I think it's an excellent program because there's no fear of school. Like my little one came in and was like "Catch ya later Mum, I've been here". She knew people, she knew the staff, especially the AEAs and that was really good. She was just like a regular, so the first day of Kindergarten wasn't a big drama for her because she'd been here doing the transition.

I've actually found just looking at a few of them [children who had attended the community transition to school program] and they seem to be the leaders, they've always got a group of three or four around with them. So I think it was great for their confidence.

Actually that was great with the transition because we brought our kids here and we could stay for however long we wanted, like we weren't pushed out the door to go and you could just go when your little one was comfortable and when you were comfortable."

Clearly, these parents see the program as successful. Similarly, the school staff – teachers, AEAs, principal – all feel that the program helps the children for whom it is targeted prepare for school.

Concrete evidence of the success of the program is available through the Kindergarten teachers' observations of the ways in which the children who have attended the community transition to school program have settled into school. They were pleased to report that these children were at least at the same levels in terms of settling as were other children coming to the school from prior-to-school settings.

Areas for future development of the transition to school program

As part of the site's Community Indigenous Education Program, a funding submission has recently been made to the Australian Government's *Parent School Partnerships Initiative*. The outcome of this submission is not yet known. However, the plans of the group to build on what they already have can be seen from the following summary of the submission.

The Community Transition Program will have as its main goals improved attendance and participation by Aboriginal students. It will focus clearly on early numeracy, literacy, social and cultural skills.

The project will build on and further widen the involvement of the local community. Networks developed with many local agencies will support both students and their families.

The program will have an Aboriginal perspective and will employ an Aboriginal teacher with many volunteers coming from within the local Aboriginal community.

Towards the latter part of Term 3 enrolments will be actively sought from the community by the teacher and both of the schools' AEAs. This time will be used to gather enrolment forms, plan the program, set up the room, etc.

Students who are not involved with any Early Childhood Centre will be given first priority. The Pre-School and Childcare Centre will be consulted regarding the days that the session will operate as we will not clash with the days on which students already attend other centres.

The program will operate on two days in Term 4 to allow for the participation of up to 40 students. Each session will accommodate 20 students. A very detailed program with an Aboriginal perspective will be implemented.

Numerous Parent Information sessions will be held during this term. The Start Right for School Screening will operate during this time.

Predevelopment assessments will be undertaken early in the term so achievement of outcomes can be measured against a post session conducted at the end of Term 1, 2007.

In Term 1, 2007 the Aboriginal students will be supported in their transition to school by the teacher and the AEAs.

Communication with parents will continue to be maintained and strong networks will be conducted and the post developmental assessment will be completed.

We are firmly committed to improving individual Aboriginal student learning outcomes and believe that this program would assist greatly in achieving this for all students.

Trial Site Report: Site E

Background demographic data

Site E is located in central western NSW. It is based on a town that has a population of approximately 5000. The wheat industry remains a prominent focus of the town and surrounding areas.

The town is situated on the land of the Wiradjuri people. In 1995, the Common Agreement for the land was the first to be mediated in Australia under the *Native Title Act* (1993). Under the Common Agreement, the responsibilities of the Wiradjuri people to speak for and protect their land (the common) was acknowledged, as was the desire to promote harmonious relations across the community through mutual respect between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Such respect was not always evident in the past.

The town has a very mixed population in terms of socio-economic status and this is reflected in the enrolment of the public school. One member of the school community described the community in these words:

“I think the town has lots of myths and legends about it, but I think it’s pretty similar to most country towns in this part of the world. The biggest challenge here is the racial divide in town. I think it’s pretty significant. We’ve got people from all walks of life and I think that’s what makes it such a typical country town.”

Site E is a centre for the Australian government funded *Communities for Children* program. As part of this program, the local council has just employed an early childhood community worker.

Just out of town is the former Aboriginal mission site on which there is a small public school and a preschool which is utilised by 62 children, only 5 of whom live in the former mission settlement itself. Approximately 80% of these children are Aboriginal and many of them travel from town to attend the preschool.

The public school at Site E has an enrolment in 2006 of approximately 482 students, 198 of whom are Aboriginal. The school has 30 teachers, including the principal. One of these teachers is a local Aboriginal person. There are 6 Aboriginal staff at the school including this teacher and 2 AEAAs. Of the 80 children who enrolled in Kindergarten in 2006, 30 (37.5%) are Aboriginal. A new 20-place DET preschool was constructed on the school site, opening in 2005. The preschool employs one teacher, an AEW, a teachers’ aide and clerical assistant. Of the 20 children attending the preschool, 13 (65%) are Aboriginal. The preschool program operates over 4 days per week, with an additional program for children with additional needs operating on the other day.

Summary of issues about transition to school

- The relationship between the DET preschool and the public school in terms of transition to school.
- The relationships between the DET public school and preschool and the other prior-to-school services in town.

- How can the positive preparation of children for school occurring at the preschool on the former mission site be transferred to the public school?
- Space and resourcing issues exacerbated by the large numbers of children starting school in 2006.
- Expectations held by stakeholders of young Aboriginal children's school trajectories.
- Family and community involvement in the DET preschool and the public school, especially for Aboriginal families.

Key features of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The transition program at the public school consists of a week-long series of sessions with the following features:

- daily sessions (9.00 – 1.00) for the children about to start school running over a week in early December;
- the sessions are held in a Kindergarten classroom and are led by the Assistant Principal, assisted by the DET preschool staff and specifically employed assistants;
- there is no special program for Aboriginal children and their families;
- the new children are given a tour and introduced to various aspects of the school including toilets, canteen, etc;
- there is also an educational program introduced including the 'literacy' program *Jolly Phonics*;
- children enrolled in the DET Preschool attend the school for a variety of events, including Monday assemblies with the whole school, Kindergarten assemblies, special shows, and library;
- the *Beginning Well* program has been implemented in the school for children with particular needs as they start school;
- once every two weeks, children from the preschool on the former mission site visit one of the Year 1 classes – the one with an Aboriginal teacher – so that they could interact with a reading buddy;
- on one evening during the orientation week in December, a parents' meeting is held with the Principal and Assistant Principal explaining various aspects of the school organisation to families.

In 2005, there had been a large increase in the number of children wanting to start school and the transition program struggled to cope with this increase. Some 80 children attended the transition week and they were broken into just three groups, each in a Kindergarten classroom. One of the assistants described the scene as "crowd control for a week". This lack of space is a real issue for many schools with increasing enrolments.

When asked whether being involved in the current project had had much impact on the school's transition program, the principal of the public school suggested that: "I think it has really because I think a number of the things that [the Assistant Principal] put in place have produced a result. Like these little things and little stories that you've spoken about, little practical things that you could do have been really helpful."

However, the principal did see that there was still some way to go before he could claim an exemplary transition to school program. He suggested:

“I still don’t think we have a transition program. I think our program at the moment is based around familiarising families with what we can offer in the year before their kids start school and then our resourcing goes mostly into putting some extra staffing, in terms of teachers aides, into Kindergarten during that first term. It provides some opportunities for families to have a talk about what their needs might be. But I suppose my whole view, especially being involved in discussion like this, is to start beefing it up and giving it more legs in terms of starting earlier in the year and then carrying it through.”

Perceived strengths of the transition program(s) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- **Daily sessions for children over one week in December**
The continuous nature of the orientation program gives the children and the families the experience of having to keep with the organisation required to get the children to school over a realistic timeframe.
- **Sessions conducted in the Kindergarten classroom**
The children and their families get first hand experience of what the classroom will be like when the children do start school. The orientation teachers can see how the new children function in the classroom context.
- **No special program for Aboriginal children and families**
All children starting school together are treated equally. The whole group starting school has a chance to meet before they start with the potential that they may make friends.
One program for all is a relatively cheap alternative to separate programs and can be funded from the school’s ongoing resources.
- **The children are taken on a tour of the school**
The children get to know about the school and where important aspects are located in the school grounds. They also get to interact with some of the older children as the tour is being conducted.
- **Educational program, including *Jolly Phonics***
It is deemed that some of the children need to ‘catch up’ before they enter school so that they will know as much about academic areas, especially literacy and numeracy, as might be required for them to start the Kindergarten program. By concentrating parts of the program on these areas, not only will the children learn but the teachers will have a chance to observe the academic levels of the children. *Jolly Phonics* is a popular ‘literacy’ program which has taken hold in many western NSW schools, so introducing it into the orientation program provides a good way for the children to experience what Kindergarten might be like.
- **Children from DET Preschool are involved in many school activities**
For the children in the DET Preschool, this interaction with the school and its children will bring familiarity and knowledge that will take away a lot of the mystery surrounding the transition to school. The children will learn some of the things that might be part of their own future schooling and will meet many of the people with whom they will interact during this schooling.

- *Beginning Well*
This program is specifically designed for children for whom it is predicted that starting school may cause anxiety and become a challenge. The program is offered in many sites across NSW and has been greeted positively by these schools.
- Visits from the former mission site preschool children and staff
The children from the former mission site preschool are visiting a classroom in which there is a strong Aboriginal perspective because of the presence of a capable Aboriginal teacher. By interacting with the Year 1 children in their reading activities the preschool children are not only building a relationship with these children but also having their sights lifted in terms of the expectations that they might have for school.
- Parents meeting
Such parents meetings provide an opportunity for parents who are able to attend or who are empowered enough to attend to have many of their questions answered. They also provide an opportunity for the school to get to know the parents. The principal was pleased with the number (about 45) of parents who did attend the meeting.

General comments:

Evidence of the success of the program

In the principal's own words "I still don't think we have a transition program". The orientation program is very much about the school finding out about the children planning to start school in the following year and making as sure as possible that these children were 'ready to start school'. There was evidence that the school teachers we spoke to and the DET Preschool teacher wanted to influence decisions about whether or not children should start school and that sometimes this was based on stereotypes around age and cultural group.

On the other hand, teacher aides were employed for the first few weeks of the year to assist the Kindergarten teachers in the settling period. As these aides were also involved with the orientation week activities, they were familiar to the children and were able to provide strong support for the teachers.

The work of the AEAs and AEWs in bringing together as much as they can the school and the Aboriginal community is acknowledged.

Areas for future development of the transition to school program

It is recognised in the school that there need to be real efforts made to engage the Aboriginal community in the school, and, particularly, in the transition to school program. The employment of an active AEW in the DET preschool who sees it as her role to ensure that Aboriginal children attend a prior-to-school setting will assist in this aim. However, much more needs to be done including making it easier for those families who are not accessing the orientation program or the parents' evening to become part of the overall thrust for better outcomes for their children. The *Communities for Children* initiatives may address this need.

The overall orientation program is built on a belief that Aboriginal children (and 'young' children) are generally deficient in terms of their academic skills and, so, need to be 'upskilled' before they will be 'ready' to start school. This approach denies

the many capabilities of these children and does not recognise the culturally specific knowledge that they already have. The philosophical shift needed to rectify this approach is one of the most important areas for future development of the transition to school program in Site E.

The program is very much skills-based and it would be useful to see if this emphasis might be adjusted so that the importance of building strong relationships among all of the stakeholders could be recognised and acted upon.

Appendix 3. Information for dissemination to communities

Starting school is an important time for children, families, communities and schools. Over the past 3 years, a team of researchers, working with community members, families, children and educators across NSW have identified some of the things that make for a good start to school.

Many of these things involve working together – children, families, communities and educators working together and supporting each other. To do this, all of these people have to form relationships – get to know and trust each other. This research project has found that when there are positive relationships among children, families, communities and educators:

- ✚ children look forward to going to school;
- ✚ families and communities know and trust people at school; and
- ✚ educators look forward to meeting new groups of children.

We also found that Aboriginal children and families feel comfortable about school and about their place at school when there is a strong and positive Aboriginal presence at the school. This can involve Aboriginal staff at the school – teachers, Aboriginal Education Aides, or Aboriginal Education Workers, support staff, general staff, CDEP workers, volunteers, parent tutors. It can also involve the presence of Aboriginal artwork, native gardens, artefacts and materials placed respectfully around the school and treated with respect by those at the school. In some schools, a great deal of effort was made to show the successes of all their students – including Aboriginal students – around the school. This was not just academic success, but success in trying to achieve certain goals, interacting with others and sporting efforts. In these schools, children talked about feeling proud and were positive about being at school.

Families and communities have important roles to play in helping children get a positive start to school. If families and communities value school and education, children will be aware of this and will act in ways that respect this. Families and communities support children by offering them access to people, places and events that are important. When families and communities celebrate the start of school, children feel special and valued.

Some of the things communities and families can do to help children get off to a positive start are:

Find out what happens in your local area about transition to school

- ✚ look for advertising material or signs
- ✚ ask people with children already at school about what happens and when
- ✚ talk with preschool or child care teachers
- ✚ talk with staff at the school
- ✚ ask playground leaders or staff in other community services about transition

Once you have found out what happens, you can get involved in transition activities

- ✚ attend an information meeting
- ✚ visit the preschool or child care centre and talk with the staff
- ✚ go to visit the school
- ✚ talk with other parents and families

Sometimes families feel uncomfortable about visiting schools and talking to teachers. It may feel more comfortable if someone goes with you, or you make your first contact with the school through the Aboriginal Education Assistant, or other Aboriginal staff who work at the school.

There are many things you can do with your children to help them feel comfortable about starting school:

- ✚ talk about school. Aim to be positive about the move to school and what they will do there
- ✚ read books about school
- ✚ talk with other children who already go to school
- ✚ find out about the uniform
- ✚ attend the transition to school program. Many programs have times for parents to attend and be involved
- ✚ visit the school and walk around
- ✚ visit the Kindergarten classroom

Educators in preschools, childcare centres and schools also have major roles to play in making the start to school as positive as possible. Many educators plan transition programs to help children and families become familiar with school and for them to become familiar with children and families. Wherever possible, it is important to join in such programs, get to know the teachers and other staff at school and show your child that you think school is important. When children see you at school, they feel your support and know that you think school is important.

Families and communities can also have important roles in transition programs.

Things you can do include:

- ✚ talking with school teacher, preschool or child care teacher about what you can do to support your child
- ✚ sharing your experiences about transition
- ✚ sharing information about your child with relevant people to help inform the planning of transition programs
- ✚ attending meetings to help plan transition programs
- ✚ sharing information about transition programs with other families and within the community
- ✚ becoming part of the transition team organising transition programs.

However you decide to become involved, family support and community support is very important as children start school, as well as in their future school experiences.

Families know their children particularly well. Children learn a great deal in families and in communities. When families and communities work together with educators on schools, a positive start to school is well on the way.

Appendix 4. Information for dissemination to educators

From 2004-2006, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) has facilitated a research project entitled *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-To-School to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*. This project was funded by the National Fund for Education Research (NFER).

The findings of this research project are reported below.









1. What are the features of successful programs of transition from prior-to-school to school that lead to improved student learning outcomes for Aboriginal children?

The findings indicate that improved student learning outcomes are linked to positive relationships – on all levels. Where children feel connected with school, through the relationships they have with their teachers and peers, they are more likely to engage with the life of school, including the educational curriculum. When families and school personnel work together, with the involvement of other community groups or agencies as appropriate, they can work together to promote children's wellbeing and educational attainment. Educators too, benefit from positive relationships and interactions with their peers, be they in school or prior-to-school settings, or both.

Positive relationships are critical to the success of transition to school programs. What happens in transition programs also has an impact on how children, families, communities and teachers engage and the messages they promote about expectations and belonging. Transition programs that are successful focus on more than academic or school organisational skills (such as children learning to out up their hand in order to speak). Successful programs are multi-faceted and provide opportunities to build upon the strengths of children, educators families and communities as they work towards promoting positive educational outcomes.

Programs supporting a successful transition from prior-to-school to school settings have the following characteristics:








a) High quality programs and experiences that:

-  actively involve children and families;
-  utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities;
-  focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved;
-  facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy;
-  engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations;
-  are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school;
-  promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school; and
-  promote the general wellbeing of children and families.

b) Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.

c) Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders.

Successful transition to school programs build relationships between:

-  families and school
-  children and school
-  communities and school
-  educators in different settings
-  children
-  educators and families
-  other stakeholders as appropriate

d) Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.

This can involve tapping into existing programs or drawing upon the close connections many Aboriginal educators have with their communities. The significance of Aboriginal educators and other professionals, as well as staff in Schools as Community Centres (SaCCs) and other outreach programs is particularly important.

e) Recognition of the complexity of transition and respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

2. To what extent are these features transferable to other contexts and to what extent might these features be unique to any one particular site?

This project utilised the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* (Dockett & Perry, 2001) that have been developed, implemented and evaluated by two of the chief investigators. These Guidelines hold that effective transition to school programs:

- establish positive relationships between children, parents and educators;
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner;
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs;
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources;
- involve a range of stakeholders;
- are well planned and effectively evaluated;
- are flexible and responsive;
- are based on mutual trust and respect;
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants;
- take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

Each of these guidelines reflects broad approaches that together, work to create an integrated transition program that is shaped towards the community in which it operates.

The relevance and importance of these Guidelines were reinforced by this project. For example, in each site the issue of relationships was central to the development of an effective transition to school program. However, in each site, the nature of those relationships, the people and communities involved, differed.

The recommendations relating to this section of the report emphasise: the importance of the underlying principles identified in the Guidelines; the significance of developing contextually and community-relevant transition programs, which means that no two programs across NSW will be exactly the same; and the importance of all those interested and involved in transition programs having opportunities to learn from others, share ideas and develop networks. While there is no expectation that the same approach will be effective in different contexts, much is to be gained by opportunities to develop networks and share ideas, and to consider how variations or adaptations of approaches can be implemented in local contexts. The building of such networks also has much to contribute to the building of relationships among educators, families and communities.

3. In what ways can linkages between schools, early childhood services and Aboriginal communities be improved to increase the educational attainment of Aboriginal children?

Linkages between prior-to-school settings and schools were promoted when staff in different services had opportunities to network. Important elements of this interaction included:

- getting to know educators in other contexts;
- recognising educators in different settings as professionals and developing a sense of professional trust and respect;
- establishing professional rapport;
- visiting different educational settings;
- discussing educational programs and approaches across settings;
- collaborative projects; and
- ongoing professional development.

When educators in prior-to-school and schools were seen to work well together, families were likely to transfer some of the trust they had built up with the prior-to-school educator to school educators, on the basis that someone they already trusted (the prior-to-school educator) also trusted the other (school educator).

In some communities, strong links exist between some parts of local Aboriginal communities and schools as well as early childhood services. In several of the research sites for this project it was evident that there was no 'one' local community. Like all communities, Aboriginal communities are characterised as much by their diversity as by their homogeneity.

Across the sites, there were several communities in which AECG, Lands Council and Community Working Party groups were actively engaged with educational settings and issues. In some instances, this was related to the employment of Aboriginal people from the local community in schools and early childhood settings.

Strong links between educational services and communities were often facilitated by specific staff – such as the SaCC co-ordinator, AEA, AEW, HSLO or preschool

director. The individual contacts made through these personnel were often critical to promoting community engagement with schools. The outreach programs delivered by some SaCC co-ordinators and involving getting out into local communities, presenting a non-threatening and supportive presence for families and providing access to services such as playgroups and toy libraries, were described as particularly important by participants in this project.

Once established it is important that these links are maintained. Families who feel supported at the prior-to-school service but who then move to a school where there is little connection with families, feel isolated and vulnerable in the new context.

Transition to school programs can provide a focus for community collaboration. When community members are engaged in collaborative projects, such as transition to school programs, there are opportunities for community members to develop their own skills and confidence, as well as contribute to a program that benefits others.

Linking with families and communities is largely dependent on effective and authentic communication. Family and community members in several sites relied on communication from prior-to-school services and schools to make judgements about the transition to school and about how children were progressing when children started school.

4. What strategies are successful in engaging families who don't readily engage with early childhood services and schools?

A major challenge for all transition programs observed throughout this project was accessing children and families who did not attend prior-to-school settings and inviting them, or convincing them, to participate in transition programs. In several cases, contact with these families was achieved through the ongoing work of the AEAs, AEWs, HSLOs, and SaCC co-ordinators. In other communities, there remained large numbers of Aboriginal children and families who accessed neither early childhood services nor transition to school programs. Developing appropriate strategies to reach these members of local communities remains a challenge.

Effective strategies to reach these members of local communities include many of the same strategies identified in the preceding section. These strategies hinge on families making connections with trusted and respected people (often Aboriginal people) who facilitate their connection with other services, including schools. Ongoing personal contact is the key to forming such connections.

Connections between families who do not readily engage with early childhood services and schools can only be built in the context of respectful relationships, where the strengths of individuals and families are recognised, even when challenges and other difficulties may also be evident. Family and community members will avoid interactions where they expect to be blamed, shamed, judged negatively, or their expertise and knowledge ignored. They are much more likely to engage in interactions that acknowledge their strengths, respond to their challenges and respect their knowledge.