

EARLY LEARNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT KEY FINDINGS REPORT



Prepared for Ngarrngga and Early Childhood Management Services by the Assessment and Evaluation Research Centre (AERC).

7 May 2024



Ngarrngga
to know, to hear, to understand







Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country/ place throughout Australia and recognise the continuing connections of First Peoples to lands, waters, cultures and communities.

We pay deep respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories and cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Assessment and Evaluation Research Centre (AERC) was commissioned by Ngarrngga to conduct a study of the early childhood sector's needs for showcasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories and cultures, specifically the staff employed by the Early Childhood Management Services (ECMS).

The Early Learning Needs Assessment (ELNA) was conducted from July 2023 to April 2024. It aimed to investigate ECMS staff's current level of knowledge and practice embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in early childhood education to detail their professional learning needs, and thus what professional development and resources would be beneficial through Ngarrngga.

This summary report outlines the key findings of the needs assessment under three key themes, current understanding, current practice, and needs.

**“I hope I can
learn more so
that children
are exposed
to Aboriginal
and Torres
Strait Islander
perspectives”
[Educator]**

Ngarrngga

Ngarrngga is an exciting, nation-building program led by First Nations educators. Ngarrngga's vision is for all Australian students to have the opportunity to deeply connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge systems, histories and cultures. To achieve that, we are creating high-quality, innovative curriculum resources for educators, complemented by the delivery of masterclass-style Professional Development, as well as leading education sector advocacy.

Ngarrngga goes beyond the production of curricula resources by diving deep into the Australian Curriculum to draw out and illustrate how Indigenous Knowledge complements and deepens our understanding of the world and our relationships with one another. Ngarrngga is informed by a design-based research methodology and centres Indigenous peoples, Knowledge systems, histories and cultures alongside western pedagogies and practices.



ECMS

ECMS is a for-purpose organisation fostering lifelong learning through the provision of high-quality early learning and care for children, families and communities across Victoria. ECMS operates 58 kindergartens and eight early learning centres, predominantly located across Greater Melbourne.

ECMS is engaged in a multi-year organisational journey to understand and address the root causes of inequity through a sustained commitment to anti-bias practice. This work has focused on building the threshold conditions for meaningful change, supporting educators, support services and leaders to critically reflect on identity, power, and bias, and to actively challenge racism and inequality in everyday practice.

Within this, ECMS is in the early stages of its reconciliation journey through a formalised Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), reflecting the decision to intentionally invest in the foundational conditions required for a RAP to be authentic, informed, and impactful. ECMS has prioritised building shared understanding, reflective capability, and organisational readiness to ensure that future actions are grounded in deep, sustained change.

ECMS provided in-kind support to Ngarrngga, including access to all staff (N=736), promotion of the needs assessment, and participation in the Expert Advisory Panel.



CURRENT UNDERSTANDING

While staff believe they have some understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, and how to embed these in practice, there is an opportunity to further develop these understandings.

The majority of ECMS staff (92%) believed they had little to a fair amount of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

However, of the staff who reported they had some understanding of 1) how to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching practice/work, 2) the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and 3) the diversity of perspectives, most believed they only had limited understanding. Therefore, there is opportunity to support ECMS staff in further developing their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

ECMS staff feel confident they can grow their knowledge to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching practice/work. However, Leadership staff show more commitment than Educators.

ECMS staff feel confident that they can grow their knowledge and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching practice/work (92%). They feel confident in their ability to consider cultural identity to support inclusive learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (88%) and understand their needs (86%).

There were some differences in staff attitudes based on their role. Leadership staff including Staff Services were more committed and positive than Educators towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching practice/work.



CURRENT PRACTICE

There is a slight gap between staff's self-reflection and translation into practice. Staff need opportunities for deeper engagement with growing their knowledge and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. There is room for improvement in the quality and reach of curriculum resources and professional development that is intended to support staff to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their practice.

Almost all staff reported using anti-bias approaches, and believed they communicated effectively, sensitively, and respected diversity to create culturally safe places.

Staff reported high engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander celebrations, but this dropped off when asked about their knowledge of local communities. Staff also reported that they are responsive to children in ways that affirm their cultural identity, however there was less agreement when asked whether they incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's diverse cultural identities to facilitate learning.

Staff need opportunities for deeper engagement with growing their knowledge and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Learning more about local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories and cultures may help to improve staff ability to recognise diverse identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and use these as a basis to facilitate learning opportunities.

“I’ve really reflected on the way I’m embedding, for example, Aboriginal science. And if I’m using any words, are they really from the local language, or they’re just googled and it’s from some place in Northern Territory.”
[Early Childhood Teacher]

About half the staff reported they used resources and engaged in professional development to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, however overall satisfaction of these resources and professional development opportunities was not high.

There are a wide variety of enablers and barriers to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into services including time, funding, curriculum resources, professional development and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Time to develop or source resources/materials was identified as a key barrier, as was a lack of time to implement resources/materials or create learning opportunities in class. Educators and Early Childhood Teachers felt they often had more pressing tasks to complete, which left them little time to consider how to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their practice.

Staff identified access to quality resources and professional development as a barrier but saw resources and professional development that had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander endorsement as an enabler.

While staff reported high confidence in the survey, in the focus groups staff expressed concern they might do the wrong thing or that they were unsure about where to turn to for support, reiterating the potential for peer learning, as many connect internally with ECMS staff.

**“I am willing to embrace it
but am worried I will
do something wrong and
end up being offensive
to the culture.”
[Educator]**

The mentoring and peer learning systems ECMS has in place act as an enabler. For instance, staff discussed how Nominated Supervisors provided resources and accountability, while others mentioned the importance of advice from Practice Coaches. Peer learning formed a key link between strategy and staff. However, this can result in the burden falling on individual staff as opposed to direction from ECMS.

NEEDS

Perceived needs overlapped with the enablers and barriers identified, and included time, funding, curriculum resources, professional development, mentoring and peer learning, and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community.

Staff need more dedicated time to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the classroom, and to ensure consistency across services. They need access to quality non-tokenistic resources through a central trusted repository to address their limited time and fears of doing the wrong thing. Getting staff buy-in was seen as crucial.

Mentoring and peer learning was seen as an efficient way to share and learn about embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in teaching practice/workplace, specifically Learning Circles and network meetings. Collaboration with other educators and visiting other services would also create learning opportunities.

Staff thought ECMS should lead by example, create a designated role, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and create an organisation RAP that staff could look to guidance for their own RAPs.

The early childhood education sector has a key role to play supporting the needs of staff and services/workplaces. Funding and curriculum resources are aspects the early childhood sector could assist with, however most crucial is better early childhood education courses as part of initial teacher education.

The lack of adequate and in-depth attention to developing knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in early childhood initial teacher education courses has had a flow on effect leaving educators with a low level of confidence. The sector provides support through pedagogical and curriculum frameworks and standards, but it could do more by expanding the quality of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in early childhood education courses, with a particular focus on how to incorporate in the classroom, as opposed to what not to do.

Staff suggested there should be a continuous connection from early childhood education to primary and secondary school by incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the current project developing a national outcome measure for early childhood education and incorporating into transition statements.



CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

It is clear from the results of this needs assessment that ECMS staff, and ECMS as an organisation, want to improve and develop their practice in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. It is also clear that staff are looking for guidance about how to improve their practice, be it from their peers, ECMS, and the early childhood sector. Peer learning and engagement with curriculum resources were identified behaviours that had positive associations with greater understanding, greater commitment and practices that showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Regarding need, professional development, age-appropriate curriculum resources and a greater clarity of structural supports from within ECMS and the sector, and improvements to initial teacher education were all identified as important. In addition, there is a need for the sector to ensure continuity of learning for children into primary and secondary school.

The findings of the needs assessment verify the importance and need for Ngarrngga to support the early childhood sector in this work. There is (at least in the case of ECMS) a foundation of commitment, awareness and knowledge, and leadership support to build upon and continue to work towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across all services, such that it is a consistent part of practice for all staff irrespective of role.





