

Success in the early years for remote Indigenous children



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Georgie Nutton is an experienced early years' practitioner and program manager whose work includes applied research for policy development, program development and delivery, particularly in the Northern Territory. She has successfully managed and led major early childhood education and care (ECEC) projects for the Northern Territory Government, including a review of the age of entry to schooling policy, whole of government early years framework, curriculum and pedagogy resources and professional learning, and a public campaign to promote early literacy. She represented the Northern Territory as a member of the Task force to develop the COAG Indigenous Early Childhood National Partnership. Since 2008 she has led the design and development of a successful two-year NHMRC project grant to evaluate the mobile preschool program across the Northern Territory.

Abstract

The factors most likely to impact on human growth and development and learning are well understood across populations, including the long reach of early childhood experiences and their interplay on adult health and socioeconomic outcomes. The effectiveness of interventions to address risk factors and promote protective factors is also well understood, in particular contexts with particular populations. So what do we mean by 'success in the early years for remote Indigenous children?' How is it measured? And what do we really know about the context of remote communities and the population of remote Indigenous children? The work of Menzies School of Health Research and many other organisations has helped to develop much clearer understandings of these questions in the interest of more thoroughly understanding how particular interventions can make a difference to specific outcomes in certain contexts. This presentation aims to highlight key distinctions about working in remote Indigenous contexts and the key lessons from a number of interventions that will enhance success for remote Indigenous children.

Presentation summary

This presentation is underpinned by an ecological model of child growth, development and learning that contributes to school readiness and success in the early years of school engagement. Investment in the early years is underpinned by an increasing understanding from four convergent areas of research evidence:

- 1 the overwhelming empirical evidence from the neuro, behavioural and social sciences for maximising human capability potential

- 2 longitudinal and ecologically based studies of the outcomes across the life course
- 3 intervention studies of proven and promising programs or strategies
- 4 economic or cost-benefit studies of implementing programs or strategies.

This evidence base for the effectiveness of early childhood investment in reducing inter-generational disadvantage and improving social inclusion and participation is particularly relevant to remote Indigenous children.

This presentation will build a narrative in four parts for participants to reflect on their own as well as the general body of evidence about policy, programs and practice that promote success in the early years for remote Indigenous children. The presentation is structured to address the following:

- 1 What do we know about remote Indigenous children and the contexts in which they live?
- 2 What are the measures of success, relevance and baselines?
- 3 How do we measure the success of interventions? And what are some interventions that promote success?
- 4 What are the key lessons from the convergence of evidence?

The presentation is paced to appropriately engage participants in some dialogue and reflection, including some challenge to assumptions and biases that prevail in popular and professional media.

Each of these parts or elements are summarised below.

1 What do we know about remote Indigenous children?

Over recent years the major reforms and subsequent investment in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-

Indigenous Australians has drawn on high-level aggregations of indicators such as infant mortality, three national literacy and numeracy assessments and employment. When it comes to researching the impact of policy, programs and practice in remote and very remote communities, there are a number of challenges. These challenges are relevant and perennial to all disciplines and include establishing a denominator for study populations, small and very widely dispersed communities, and the data collections systems available.

The presentation will review who we see (who gets counted, weighed and measured) and who don't we see in a range of data collections relevant to 0–8-year-olds. The assumptions and limitations of a range of data sources now commonly used for baselines in impact studies will be discussed. These will include the importance of going beyond simplistic measures such as community or school size, and Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) to understand the diversity of remote contexts in which remote Indigenous children live. The presentation will feature a pilot study comparing 60 Western Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory Indigenous communities.

2 How is success measured? What are the baselines and characteristics of Indigenous children in remote contexts? Are these the best measures with the right calibrations?

Most definitions of success in the early years are biased toward what the educational systems value most, literacy and numeracy. There has been work over the last two decades to shift the balance to incorporate measures of the competencies in early years known to contribute to school engagement, retention and success. This element of the presentation will compare some

of the current assessment activities for when, what and how measures are undertaken. There will be some discussion of appropriateness and the level to which these assessments are applied to addressing the needs of learners in the remote Indigenous contexts, including the prevalence of English as an additional or foreign language.

3 What interventions have achieved or appear to be achieving success? How is the success of these interventions measured? What can be learnt about the standards of evidence?

A selection of programs in each of three key stages in the early years will be outlined and their evidence base explored. This presentation will give emphases to the standards of evidence provided by these programs, in particular, study design, sufficient description of what children and families experience, understanding of context, and the use of valid and reliable measures. Programs discussed may include:

- 0–3 years: Care for Child Development, Strong Women Strong Babies Strong Culture, Walk to School, Families as First Teachers
- 3–5 years: Mobile Preschool Program, ABRACADABRA, Let's Start
- 5–8 years: Families and Schools Together, Indigenous Language Speaking Students, Accelerated Literacy, Art Stories.

The ever-increasing demand for interdisciplinary approaches, particularly for interventions with populations experiencing multiple and complex disadvantage has resulted in a methodological paradigm stand-off. This presentation will briefly acknowledge the relevance and importance of improving awareness across diverse

disciplines of the benefits and limitations of a range of methodologies beyond just the randomised control trial through to case studies continuum. Applying lessons from intervention or program research requires the standards of evidence to be interrogated for efficacy, effectiveness and dissemination of findings. In critiquing the evidence from a range of interventions for remote Indigenous children's success in development and learning, we have used health and medical, preventative science and educational standards with varying success.

4 What are the key lessons about achieving success from the convergence of evidence?

The major challenges facing most remote Indigenous children in achieving success in readiness for school, academic engagement and life outcomes are multiple and complex, for each child, their family and the communities in which they live. While there is still a paucity of rigorous research evidence, there are some key and indicative lessons for policy, programs and practice in how to maximise success for remote Indigenous children.

Building the evidence base across this dispersed and diverse population will take considerable attention and effort to methodologies, even if testing out a proven, let alone promising, program or practice from another context with another population. Further, collaboration across sectors and disciplines is critical to research findings more successfully being transferred to policy, programs and practice directly impacting remote Indigenous children.