



Stronger Smarter Institute Research & Impact Footprinting Reading Review

“Footprints in Time”

Stronger Smarter Meta-Strategy links:

1. Acknowledging, embracing and developing a positive sense of identity in schools → 2. →3. High Expectations Relationships → 4. Innovative and Dynamic School Models →5. Innovative and dynamic school staffing models

This Reading Review considers the Footprints in Time report, which looks at the role of ‘resilience’ in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early learning context, drawing on both a review of the literature and on data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC). The focus of this Reading Review is the finding from this study that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be supported when the Early Years education takes a strength-based approach and builds a positive sense of student identity in the classroom. The LSIC was initiated by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The Footprints in Time report was prepared by a joint project team from ACER and FaHCSIA.

In this review we also consider data from the 2015 Australian Early Development Census that shows the importance of gaining a better understanding of the factors that contribute to and predict school readiness, social and emotional wellbeing and pro-social behaviour.

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Introduction

The Footprints in Time report (p.26, and p.29) states that the LSIC data shows several themes that indicate what may or may not impact on school readiness.

- ▶ Age, health, parental educational level and socio-economic status all had an impact on at least one of the tests and were therefore predictors of school readiness.
- ▶ Children with higher levels of pro-social behaviour (i.e. lower levels of difficult behaviour) performed better in the Who am I test.
- ▶ The frequency with which English was spoken at home was not a significant predictor (although the authors noted that this was the third time that LSIC children had completed the Renfrew test and that might impact on this finding).

When the authors looked at what predicted pro-social behaviour (p.26, 27) they found that pro-social behaviour was associated with higher levels of

- ▶ health and socio-economic status
- ▶ instances of having people reading to them, telling a story and/or drawing with them
- ▶ participating in activities such as reading, storytelling or drawing
- ▶ primary carers who placed greater importance on their Indigenous identity.

The authors highlight the importance of this last finding regarding Indigenous identity, stating that it confirms findings in the literature that a strong sense of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity can act as a protective factor against the development of difficult behaviour (p.30).

Footprints in Time

The LSIC research follows two age groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from 11 urban, regional and remote sites across Australia as they grow up.

The LSIC study uses two indicators of school readiness:

- The Renfrew score assesses children's expressive vocabulary by asking them to name pictures of objects.
- The 'Who am I?' score requires a child to write their name, copy shapes, write letters etc.

The LSIC has 3 waves of data collection (2008, 2009 and 2010). The data considered in the report is primarily from the Wave 3 data collection, looking at the cohort of children who began their participation in 2008 (ages 3 ½ to 4 ½) and were then 5 ½ to 6 ½ in 2010 when the Wave 3 data collection occurred.

Why is this important?

Indicators in the Early Years such as social competence, emotional maturity, and cognitive and communication skills have been shown to be predictors of children's later outcomes in health, wellbeing and academic success (AEDC, 2015). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these AEDC Early Years indicators show concerns. For instance, 2 in 5 Indigenous children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the domains compared to 1 in 5 non-Indigenous children. For children in Very Remote Australia, this rises again – with children up to 3 times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on some scales compared to those in Major Cities (see Figure 1).

While the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children is starting to close for some measures, over the period 2009 to 2015, the gap between the proportion of developmentally vulnerable children in the most disadvantaged areas, relative to the least disadvantaged areas, widened across all five domains.

This data shows the importance of the finding that a strong sense of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity can act as a protective factor and support social and emotional wellbeing and pro-social behaviour. This has significant implications for how Early Years transition programs are designed.

A strengths-based approach to transition

If a strong sense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is an important factor, the question for Early Years educators then becomes one of understanding how best to promote this within the Early Years learning spaces. Resilience is about a strong sense of identity, knowing about your own history, and knowing the beliefs, values and practices of your culture (see Figure 2). These are factors that increase well-being and connectedness and belonging, and Aboriginal children starting school already have this resilience from their home life. In an educational setting, however, resilience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is about participating in two worlds. If Aboriginal children find themselves in a situation at school that doesn't support their own sense of history and identity and undermines their confidence, they may lose that resilience that they have in their home life.

The Footprints in Time report describes strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may have, suggesting that these factors are conducive to resilience and laying the foundations for early learning. In other words, many children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background start school with a great deal of resilience. However, if these skills and strengths are not recognised in the school, and their sense of cultural identity which is what makes them strong is not recognised, then in this setting they may not be resilient.



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Physical Health and Wellbeing	Social Competence	Emotional maturity	Language and cognitive skills	Communication skills and general knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Percentage of Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable twice as high as non-Indigenous children.▶ Overall, this domain has worsened by 0.4% between 2009 and 2015.▶ Very remote areas have 23.4% of developmentally vulnerable children while major cities have only 8.9%.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Percentage of Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable twice as high as non-Indigenous children.▶ Overall, this domain has worsened by 0.6% between 2009 and 2015.▶ Very remote areas have 24.4% developmentally vulnerable children – 2.5 times higher than Major cities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Percentage of Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable twice as high as non-Indigenous children.▶ Overall, this domain has improved by 0.5% between 2009 and 2015.▶ Very remote areas have 22.1% developmentally vulnerable children, almost three times higher than major cities, 7.8%.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Percentage of Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable 3x times as high as non-Indigenous children.▶ Overall, this domain has improved by 2.4% between 2009 and 2015.▶ Very remote areas have 26.9%, developmentally vulnerable children almost five times as high as major cities 5.6%.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Percentage of Indigenous children developmentally vulnerable 2.5 times as high as non-Indigenous children.▶ Overall, this domain has improved by 0.7% between 2009 and 2015.▶ Very remote areas, have 21.8% of developmentally vulnerable children compared 8.3% in major cities.

Figure 1: Findings from the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The Footprints in Time report describes the need to approach transition from a ‘a philosophical stance and daily practice’ that takes a strength-based approach (p.9 and p.31; Lopez and Louis, 2009). A strength-based approach turns the thinking around from the deficit of seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as underperforming, needing to catch up or as ‘empty vessels ready to be filled with Western knowledge’. This is recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children arrive as school with their own strengths and prior learning, that they already have resilience and that they are able, capable and have agency.

Resilience

A theory that identifies the importance of protective factors and competencies and

- ▶ involves a child having social competence, problem-solving skills, mastery, autonomy and optimism (p.10)
- ▶ is a dynamic process rather than a fixed state or individual traits
- ▶ is the ability to adapt to challenging circumstances and the students who have not been exposed to high levels of adversity may not be resilient.

A strength-based approach

The practical application of the theory which also encompasses other broad ideas such as empowerment, healing and wellness and

- ▶ focuses on abilities, knowledge and capacities rather than on what people do not know or cannot do
- ▶ recognises that the community is a rich source of resources
- ▶ assumes that people are able to learn, grow, and change
- ▶ assumes that children are already learners, and encourages positive expectations of children as learners

Figure 2: A summary of the author’s descriptions of what constitutes resilience and a strength-based approach.

Stronger Smarter Provocations and Discussion

Footprints in Time

The Footprints in Time report suggest (p.11) that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students often have the following strengths

- **Autonomy** – they are encouraged to be independent from an early age – children are seen as little adults with cultural responsibilities.
- They are seen as **naturally strong** and positioned as equal members of the community.
- Well-developed **visual-spatial and motor skills**
- The capacity to **self-judge and assess risks**.
- Strong **sibling and peer solidarity** – they are encouraged to help their siblings, and objects are freely shared with little concept of individual ownership
- A strong sense of **relationships, belonging and connectedness** within families with many shared activities.

The authors note that in this report, they seek to stimulate thinking and identify areas for further research rather than providing practical steps for a strength-based approach. Krakouer's 2017 literature review found that this was a common theme – that there that there is minimal recent literature or programs specific to the strategies shown to be effective in supporting children and families at risk of vulnerability (Krakouer, 2017). Studies describe what needs to be done, but seldom provide the strategies to support educators to achieve this. The Stronger Smarter Jarjums Program fills this gap by providing educators with a 'dilly bag' of strategies to take a different approach to transition.

A positive sense of student identity

A key finding from the Footprints in Time study is that participation and a sense of belonging will help with school readiness. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students this involves a positive sense of cultural identity. This is the key point of the first Stronger Smarter Metastrategy, and the Stronger Smarter Approach provides practical ways to build cultural identity in the classroom (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Jarjums, this can only happen when educators create a third cultural space

(Nakata, 2007) where the cultural backgrounds of all Jarjums are embraced, acknowledged and celebrated.

This means every Early Years educator needs to have a holistic view of the Jarjum, their family and community to ensure the Early Years learning space is one where all students feel they belong, their strengths and values that encompass their cultural identity are recognised and valued. This is a key underlying approach to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will maintain their resilience and gain a better start to their education that will see improved results later in life.

A broader definition of transition

The danger is that when an education system is built on western values and the majority of educators are non-Indigenous, this automatically provides a learning environment that supports a sense of identity for children from a western background. If a positive sense of identity is important to resilience and well-being in the Early Years, and our education system fails to recognise the existence of a third cultural space, then from the moment our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter the education system, they are not being given the same opportunities as non-Indigenous children.

This has significant implications for Early Years transitions programs. As Krakouer (2016) says there may be a need for a broader definition of 'transition' in the Early Years that addresses the cultural mismatch between home and schooling expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (see the Institute's Reading Review on Early Years Transitions).

The Stronger Smarter Jarjums program uses an Early Years Transition Framework (Bobongie & Jackson, 2019, 2021) which describes how a strength-based approach changes the transition process. Educators have a responsibility to both recognise the impact of the third cultural space for Jarjums and to understand their personal role in this space. Rather than building transitions programs around supporting students to 'fit in' to the system, transition becomes a process to look at where the system can change in a way that might, in fact, benefit all students.

High-expectations relationships

The challenge for Early Years educators is then to develop an awareness of, and an appreciation for, alternative worldviews towards learning, family, community, wellbeing, the land. High-Expectations Relationships provide the strategies for strong relationships with both students and their families that start from a strength-based approach. High-Expectations Relationships describes the processes of building relationships to learn about families, understand the third cultural space, avoid making assumptions and recognising strengths.

The list of possible strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students provided by the Footprints in Time study is a starting point. However High-Expectations Relationships warn of

the importance of not thinking that by ‘knowing’ the types of strengths Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may have, we can automatically make assumptions about individual students (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014).

Every child is different, every community is different, and local approaches will always be needed. There will never be any single best practice or one-size-fits-all approach. High-Expectations Relationships describes how deep listening and providing spaces for open dialogue will place educators in a position where they can start to understand the approach needed for their local context. Once these understandings are in place, educators are better placed to understand how to build a classroom and curriculum and pedagogies that continue to scaffold individual and communal strengths and knowledge and honour and celebrate cultural identity and diversity. When transitions are considered from this strength-based approach, the differences are often subtle, but can have a significant effect on supporting resilience and school readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums.

For more information about the Early Years Transition Framework see

Bobongie, F. & Jackson, C. (2018). Stronger Smarter Jarjums: High-Expectations Relationships in the Early Years. *Pedagogy+* , 3, 42-44.’

Bobongie, F. & Jackson, C. (2019) Stronger Smarter - transformational change for Australian schools with rock-solid foundations in the Early Years. In Allan, J, Harwood, V., & Rubner Jorgensen, C. (Eds). *World Yearbook of Education 2020: Schooling, Governance and Inequalities*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Ltd.

Bobongie, F. & Jackson, C. (2021). Understanding cultural artefacts to ensure seamless transitions in the Early Years. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Online publication 2 December 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391211055864>

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