



Stronger Smarter Institute Research & Impact Footprinting Reading Review

“ACER – Early Years Transitions”

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 looks at work by Jacynta Krakouer and others regarding supporting transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Early Years. Jacynta Krakouer is a Noongar Aboriginal researcher employed as an Indigenous Graduate Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). In this Review we look at two literature reviews. The first literature review (2016) looks specifically at Indigenous students' transition to school, and the second (2017) looks at Early Years Transitions for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability. A blog article by Krakouer from 2016 provides a summary of why relationships are paramount to Indigenous children's transition, and the two literature reviews provide further in-depth analysis.

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Literature Review

Krakouer's 2016 literature review was undertaken as part of an evaluation of the School Readiness Initiative Television Series (SRI TV) supported by the Dusseldorp Forum. The SRI TV series aims to provide insight into mainstream schooling culture to help prepare Aboriginal children for commencing primary school.

The 2016 literature review discusses the concept of school readiness and investigates the current discourse concerning transition programs

The 2016 literature review includes a discussion of the influence of television on child development and Indigenous school readiness. This aspect is not discussed in this Reading Review.

The 2017 literature review focuses on the support needs of children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in the early years' transitions.

Findings

In the Institute's Reading Review on Footprints in Time, we describe how studies have shown concerns about school readiness and resilience factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Krakouer's reviews also found that the literature often described Indigenous children as 'less ready' for school compared to their non-Indigenous peers, with Indigenous children performing lower in cognitive and language tasks.

A western view of school readiness

Krakouer notes that school readiness (see summary in Figure 1) is generally defined from a mainstream, often Caucasian, middle-class worldview. These mainstream indicators have the potential to stereotype Indigenous children as less capable and less ready for school, which in turn increases the chance of Aboriginal children holding negative associations with school.' Krakouer explains this as follows:

Arguably, there is an inherent assumption within the literature that school readiness includes the capacity or preparedness of Indigenous children to adapt to, and fit in with, the Western, non-Indigenous school system. Yet, it is equally important that non-Indigenous schools operating within the Western schooling context also need to be prepared to accommodate Aboriginal cultural practices and worldviews, thus ensuring that school readiness is a holistic two-way process that supports diversity (2016, p.11).

School readiness

Krakouer's findings on school readiness are that

- ▶ there is no clear-cut definition
- ▶ school readiness is generally defined as a holistic concept that encompasses cognitive, socio-emotional and physical components
- ▶ a broader definition recognises the influence of family, community, school and services on school readiness.

Transition

Krakouer summarises the literature (2016) to describe transition as a

- ▶ a highly interconnected, relational and holistic process
- ▶ a process that occurs over time, beginning before school and continuing after the first day of school,
- ▶ a holistic concept that situates the child within an ecological framework surrounded by the support of their family, community and school.
- ▶ involving multiple stakeholders including family, community teachers and schools

A broader definition of transition

Krakouer goes on to suggest that a broader definition of transition may be more relevant in Indigenous contexts. If transition is defined entirely around the need for Indigenous children to adapt to the mainstream educational system, this misses the need to address the cultural mismatch between the school's expectations for behavioural, social and prior knowledge and those of the home context. In the 2017 literature review, the authors explain that children are better able to learn and develop when educators take a strength-based approach to transition that moves away from considering the child as the 'problem' and recognise the strengths of the child.

Relationships at the heart of successful transitions

As Krakouer (2016a) says, every child is unique and when it comes to supporting transitions, there is no single best practice approach. Both literature reviews conclude, however, that genuine communication and trusting relationships built on respect and honesty will be at the heart of any transition program. The 2017 review (p.34) notes that the families at risk are those least likely to see the services and supports they need, and therefore the ones most in need of honest and trusting relationships.

Krakouer emphasises the plural ‘relationships’ – Jarjums forming relationships with teachers, with the school, with the peers, parents forming relationships with teachers and other parents, and the relationships with other services in the transition process. Krakouer (2016a) explains that relationships are particularly important for Indigenous Australians.

We are relational, family-oriented people who come from a strong oral tradition where learning is passed on to young people from their Elders, parents and wider community. In effect, our culture has always valued relationships and essentially required that young children have respect for the people that are teaching them.

A multi-faceted approach

In summary, the 2016 literature review suggests that the components of successful transition programs for Indigenous will be a multi-faceted approach that incorporate the aspects shown below.

Educators and schools	Strength-based programs	Relationships
<p>Educators who</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ can reflect on the barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing their programs, and ▶ are willing to cooperate and learn from the local community <p>Schools who</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ employ Indigenous staff from the local community 	<p>Educators and programs that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ build on the strengths of the child, family and community and view every child as a capable learner ▶ have high expectations for Aboriginal children ▶ promote a positive sense of Aboriginal Identity ▶ recognise that Aboriginal children's potential to learn is more important than the specific knowledge they bring to the classroom ▶ view each child ecologically in the context of their family and community ▶ work holistically and flexibly to meet the needs of individual students and their families 	<p>Educators who</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ build familiarity and relationships between the school and children, parents and family ▶ foster true engagement and involvement with the school for family and children. ▶ promote collaboration between all stakeholders

Stronger Smarter Provocations and Discussion

Positive cultural identity

The evidence shows that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums are falling behind when it comes to the indicators of future success such as social competence, emotional maturity, and cognitive and communication skills. When we look at what is needed to turn this around, it is clear that the protective factors of participation and belonging will only happen for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums when the Early Years Learning spaces promote a positive sense of cultural identity for all Jarjums, not just those from a western background.

Krakouer emphasises the importance of student identity in the classroom in the Early Years and describes the need for a broader definition of transition which moves away from considering the child as the ‘problem’ and recognise the strengths of the child. If we think of transition as supporting students to ‘fit in’, students will lose that sense of identity. The role of the Early Years educator then, rather than building transitions programs around supporting students to ‘fit in’ to the system, is to look at where the system can change to support this positive sense of student identity.

The Institute’s Stronger Smarter Jarjums program includes discussion of an Early Years Transition Framework that changes this thinking around to take a strength-based approach to transitions (See Bobongie & Jackson, 2019, 2021).

Relationships at the heart of transition

For the education system to support positive cultural identity, building relationships will be at the heart of every successful transition program. These relationships need to start from a strength-based approach. The relationship will not work unless it comes from this frame of thinking. A relationship that starts with the idea that the educator holds the knowledge, and transition is about making sure our Jarjums have the knowledge and skills to ‘fit in’ to the western system will fail to address the sense of belonging and positive cultural identity.

Relationships with Jarjums and their families need to start from understanding the strengths Jarjums bring to the classroom so that educators can create a learning space where those strengths are recognised and valued. This involves the educator approaching the relationship from a point of view of ‘what can we do for you’, putting themselves in the place of the learner and ensuring deep listening to the needs and aspirations of families. This establishes the equal power relationships where all voices are heard, and families feel part of a system that values their culture and will listen to their desires for their children’s education. The differences in approach are subtle, but the results are significant.

The Institute’s ‘Stronger Smarter Jarjums’ program and the Stronger Smarter Institute’s position paper, *A mesh of High-Expectations Relationships across transitions in the Early Years*, describe how educators can develop these strength-based relationships (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2019) High-Expectations Relationships pulls apart what these relationships need to look like. It starts with self-reflection, which, as Krakouer’s 2017 review notes, is important for

educators to critically reflect on what they do and to identify and challenge preconceived ideas. The Institute's Stronger Smarter Jarjums program allows the space for self-reflection in a safe space where educators can recognise what they personally need to do to take a strength-based approach, uncover underlying assumptions and reject deficit thinking.

Across all the sectors

The second aspect of a successful transition program is that it needs to extend beyond Jarjums and their families, to work with all stakeholders across the Early Years sector. The Early Years Transition Framework (Bobongie & Jackson, 2019, 2021; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2019) describes how a smooth transition can occur using Indigenous Knowledges and ways of learning to build the smooth, seamless transition process. If sectors work together, they can use processes of using familiar examples and gradually building knowledge and ensuring deeper learning across the sectors than starting anew each time. This builds familiarity of the rules and routines of the next space before the Jarjums move up to that new level.

References

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