



SNAICC

National Voice for our Children

**ABORIGINAL CULTURAL SAFETY FRAMEWORK
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT

27 JANUARY 2023

CONTENTS

Reflection by the Department	3
Executive summary	4
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Literature Review	5
Consultations	5
Online surveys	5
Understanding the Cultural Competence Continuum	6
Family and community consultation narrative on the elements of the Continuum	7
Cultural destructiveness	7
Cultural incapacity, cultural blindness and cultural pre-contemplation	7
Cultural responsiveness	8
Online surveys, data and consultation results	9
Family and community online survey results	9
Aboriginal community-controlled organisation online survey results	10
Mainstream EC provider consultations results	11
Summarising key themes from the consultations	12
National Quality Standards for ECEC services	13
National Quality Standards that ACCOs felt could be improved for cultural safety	13
Concluding remarks	14

REFLECTION BY THE DEPARTMENT

SNAICC and the Department would like to thank Aboriginal families and communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, mainstream services, and Departmental staff that participated in the consultation phase. The information and insights gained from the consultation is immensely valuable and provide the Department a good platform to further engage with the sector to develop the Cultural Safety Framework.

As identified by SNAICC in the [Phase 1 Final Report](#), the Cultural Safety Framework is a significant piece of work. The Framework will be the first of its kind in the early childhood education and care sector in NSW, and aligned to important government policies and strategies, including the Department's Aboriginal Children's Early Childhood Education Strategy 2021-2025, First Steps, and with the Department's response to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The [Report](#) submitted by SNAICC reflects a variety of perspectives from Aboriginal families and communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, mainstream services, and Departmental staff. Some perspectives reflect well on the sector and what we are currently doing in relation to broad concepts of cultural safety. Other perspectives were not so good, confirming the need to do more and achieve culturally safe settings. The variety of these perspectives also reflects the differences and diversity of circumstances and environment experienced by stakeholders. The Cultural Safety Framework, once developed, will be adaptable to support the variety of early childhood providers and services, so they can enhance cultural safety for Aboriginal children and their families, and the Aboriginal community.

It is without any doubt that SNAICC have succeeded in capturing a range of voices from the sector and what they have told us is important and relevant in shaping and developing the Cultural Safety Framework.

SNAICC's report highlights that there is still more that all of us, as sector stakeholders, need to do to learn, understand and champion Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. We also need to reflect to identify and address our own individual biases and change our behaviours to be more supportive and nurturing of Aboriginal children and families, and their identity and culture.

If we work collaboratively and do this, then together, we will be educating and caring for all of our children, to give them all a great start to lifelong learning and a foundational knowledge about Aboriginal culture.

**Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services,
NSW Department of Education**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Experiences in early childhood have the greatest impact on children’s school readiness, educational engagement and longer-term health, social and wellbeing outcomes. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) that promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s sense of identity and belonging, as well as promoting a culture of understanding and respect towards cultural diversity for all children. Culturally safe early childhood education and care supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to thrive from the start.

In NSW and across Australia, ECEC services that fail to address cultural safety concerns have resulted in lower engagement levels, a greater proportion of developmentally vulnerable children, and poorer educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than their non-indigenous peers.

Aiming to address this disparity in outcomes, the NSW Department of Education (the Department) contracted SNAICC – National Voice for our Children to undertake phase 1 consultations to inform the development of a first ever state-wide Early Childhood Education Cultural Safety Framework.

Through First Steps – the NSW Aboriginal Children’s Early Childhood Education Strategy 2021-2025, the Department has committed to enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s education from the very beginning of their educational journey and ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for children and families. The strategy seeks to ensure this safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families by developing and implementing an Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework for all ECEC services regulated by the Department.

The findings in the Phase 1 report aim to inform the next phase of co-designing the Cultural Safety Framework for the Department.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the summary findings of the Phase 1 consultation from a variety of sources including: a desktop literature review, face-to-face community consultations across a variety of geographic settings, illustrations and comments from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in NSW and online surveys with:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) ECEC services staff
- Mainstream ECEC services (including long day care, out-of-school hours care, pre-school, family day care, and out-of-scope services) staff
- The NSW Department of Education (the Department) – Early Childhood Education and Schools Policy Directorate staff

The findings in the report aim to inform the next phase of co-designing the Cultural Safety Framework for the Department.

METHODOLOGY

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken, reviewing existing cultural frameworks, national agreements, plans, strategies and, policies identifying the common themes, strengths, and gaps in the provision of culturally safe ECEC services. The review identifies existing barriers to culturally safe ECEC as well as recommendations for actions to address them.

The application of different types of criteria according to stakeholder groups ensured that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives were captured, particularly their specific needs for cultural safety. This is in alignment with the new approach outlined under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise provides central guidance to shape and implement reforms.

CONSULTATIONS

Community consultations were carried out in four locations, selected according to current census data. The data informed a mix of regional, remote, and urban settings with higher-than-average Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across NSW, with 48 participants in total.

The local government areas selected were:

- Campbelltown
- Brewarrina
- Shoalhaven
- Lightning Ridge

The community consultations were conducted to align with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodology of sharing knowledge in a yarning circle setting.

ONLINE SURVEYS

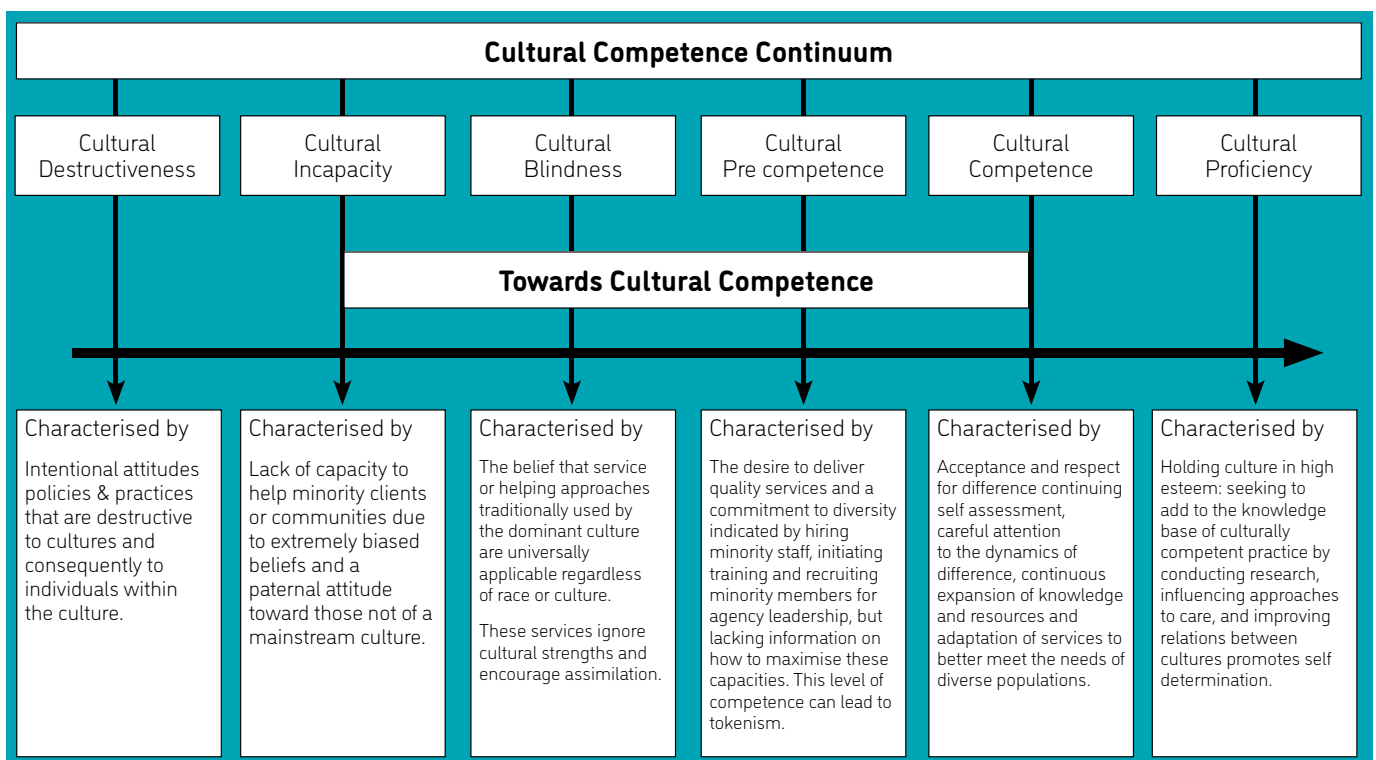
Survey questions were developed from the literature review findings utilising the [cultural safety continuum](#). Families and communities were asked to articulate what cultural safety felt like and looked like, and to identify how this was demonstrated by key aspects of their child's service. Further questions for the Department and ECEC sector relating to the National Quality Standards (NQS) were included to identify training and development needs and priorities. The surveys were targeted to:

- Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families and communities accessing ECEC services across New South Wales (145 surveys completed)
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) administering ECEC services across NSW (20 surveys completed)
- NSW Department of Education – Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate (108 surveys completed)
- Mainstream ECEC services across NSW (82 surveys completed)
- Children's illustrations and narrative captured across NSW

This report will present the data, summarise the key points, and provide a narrative that is conducive to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. The voices of families and community will be prominent throughout this report and provide key opportunities for the Department to begin the next phase of its own cultural safety journey in the ECEC sector.

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL COMPETENCE CONTINUUM

Adapted from original materials developed by Terry Cross, the following table provides the continuum for cultural competence used in some American states where they have introduced cultural competence standards.



Source: *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework* October 2008. p.24

It should be noted that a further adaptation of the above continuum was required to better suit the need of local community and its diversity and acknowledges the need for ongoing reciprocal learning experiences. The term 'cultural proficiency' was replaced with 'cultural responsiveness' to allow better context and understanding.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONSULTATION NARRATIVE ON THE ELEMENTS OF THE CONTINUUM

SNAICC travelled between four communities starting from the South Coast, up to metropolitan Sydney and then out to Western rural/remote country. Sitting in community hearing and capturing these important shared and lived experiences from grassroots community members was encouraging.

Some of the conversations were interpersonal about lived experiences, stories about authentic and positive experiences that strengthen cultural safety, as well as some heavier conversations, unearthing and exposing negative truths which evoked a range of mixed emotions.

CULTURAL DESTRUCTIVENESS

An Elder shared that in her local community she has seen an ECEC service at times contribute unknowingly and unintentionally to cultural destructiveness within community. She believed that this was because of several complex reasons, including under-skilled and culturally unsafe practices of staff and management, and governance practices.

This is suggestive of Western confinements, culturally unsafe frameworks, and lack of understanding of the socio-political history of Aboriginal peoples in this country. Subsequently this contributes to the ECEC service programming and environment, and flows down to service delivery on the ground, creating an unsafe space and being viewed as sitting under "culturally destructive".

A parent added that you may walk into a "culturally appropriate early learning service - they will have the flags and the dot paintings and ticked the boxes - but if the relationships and unspoken communication in collaboration with understanding and cultural responsiveness is not there, then it is unsafe and can often contribute to destructiveness".

CULTURAL INCAPACITY, CULTURAL BLINDNESS AND CULTURAL PRE- CONTEMPLATION

One community member added that they are also aware that the governing bodies, conditions, frameworks and regulations that underpin the centres creates an additional barrier and contributes to cultural incapacity and blindness.

One grandmother fed back that "mainstream services operate predominantly from a white Western structure, which creates barriers and in turn does not create a place of 'cultural safety'".

CULTURAL RESPONSIVITY

Most parents/carers acknowledged that despite mainstream ECEC services sitting in the space of being culturally destructive or culturally blind, and experiencing setbacks and challenges with a deficit of Aboriginal staff, that there has been genuine effort, acknowledgement, and awareness, which has seen some mainstream ECEC services shift to working towards and striving to see their service evolve into a place of belonging, a place that offers cultural safety to Aboriginal children and their families and community.

Some of the key determinations in identifying the shift towards being culturally responsive in mainstream ECEC services were evidence by educators and staff engaging in genuine, respectful, and reciprocal relationships with parents, carers, elders and community, participation in local Aboriginal community events, having Aboriginal paintings, artefacts and Acknowledgement of Country displayed within the physical environment, and staff wearing Aboriginal shirts as uniforms. Continuous quality improvement has been seen around culture being embedded into programming inclusive of language, resources, playground and holistically, and not just on significant cultural calendar dates throughout the year or needing to comply or satisfy regulatory requirements or governing bodies.

Lastly, but most importantly, the voices of the children were captured through a series of drawings undertaken at some of the local ECEC services. When they were asked about feeling strong and safe as Aboriginal children or “koori kids”, their responses centred around:

- having strong sense of identities at home and school and building on them through culture, language, cultural customs/traditions, embracing their Aboriginality by

“yarning with dad and catching yabbies and cooking them on the fire at home”;

“eating fish around the campfire”;

- being supported in their culture and encouraged to share that yarn at school, free from shame, exclusion, and being “othered”;
- local cultural stories of the land and country and all its livings things, the animals, dreaming stories, “drawing and identifying footprints of different local birds in the sand on Country”.

When discussing feedback with educators on what they observe with children on the floor at their ECEC service, there was a consensus that children really enjoy cultural activities, seeing their family and cousins at the ECEC service, learning language, and playing games.

One family member observed when their child “runs in to his centre into the arms of his educator and plays with his friends all day long, we know he feels safe because he is smiling, happy and content”.

When one child was asked what makes them feel happy, black, and deadly at school, she said, “I like making Boomerangs” and another said, “I feel deadly when Uncle Tyrell comes in and teaches us dance and language”.

ONLINE SURVEYS, DATA AND CONSULTATION RESULTS

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

As mentioned in the Methodology section of this report, 145 surveys were completed by Aboriginal families and communities.

When asked to place their child/ren's service on the Cultural Competence Continuum the following results were recorded.

41% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally responsive;

32% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally contemplative;

16% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally pre-contemplative;

4% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally blind;

6% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally incapable;

0.69% believe the ECE service their child/ren attends is culturally destructive.

When asked if they felt culturally safe entering or visiting their child/ren's early education service, participants responded with a wide variety of experiences.

"makes everyone feel like family"

"the staff are so welcoming and respectful and even children get excited with anything to do around culture"

"I feel that I am not valued because of my identity"

"staff at the service greet me politely but they do not engage with me as they do other staff and carers"

In another community a grandmother shared her story of the "impacts of past doings and policies of government and the ongoing impacts and trauma legacies of suppression, and how it's still felt in some mainstream centres to this day, and the outcome is that these historical impacts still impede on our children's sense of belonging today. If there is no opportunity in supporting, or provision of culture for our kids, then this is being destructive to their identity, to their spirit, and if these two things aren't strong how can they be expected to thrive and learn in the Western world?"

Survey participants were asked to explain why they chose to place their early learning service where they did on the cultural safety continuum. Those whose answers placed their service at the lower end of the continuum, between culturally destructive and culturally blind, claimed their services had a long way to go to create a culturally safe space for children and families.

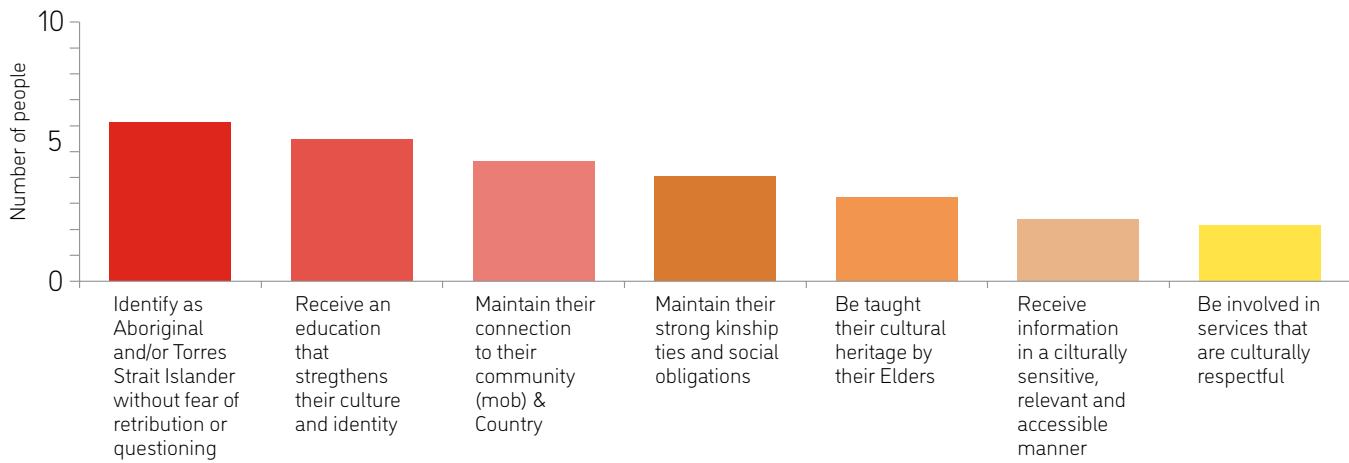
Other respondents had more positive experiences, placing their services at the higher end of the continuum. One said their service "incorporate(s) Indigenous culture within the centre as well as explore(s) events that occur... they also incorporate bush tucker recipes within the menu", and another said, "when you walk into the centre, it's a warm welcome to our Aboriginal culture".

Aboriginal families and communities rated the following elements as being important to them, and their child/ren's early learning and educational needs:

- identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander without fear of retribution or questioning;
- receive an education that strengthens their culture and identity;
- maintain connection to their community (mob) and Country.

The following survey participation statistics are of interest:

- 96% of survey participants were either Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;
- 54% of survey participants were in urban NSW, 45% in regional NSW and 1% in remote NSW;
- 57% of survey participants were fathers, 37% were mothers, 4% were grandparents and 2% were an extended family relative.



ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED ORGANISATION ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations (ACCO) in the ECEC sector are best placed to understand and practice cultural safety because of the lived experiences of their workers and management, the continual cultural practices of kinship and reciprocity, and because of their practice of sharing and the Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

A total of 20 surveys were completed by ACCOs.

When ACCOs were asked to place their own EC service on the Cultural Competence Continuum the following results were recorded.

- 60% believed they were culturally responsive;
- 30% believed they were culturally contemplative;
- 10% believed they were pre-contemplative.

When ACCOs were asked to explain why they chose to place their EC service where they did on the cultural safety continuum, they responded with comments such as:

“We certainly celebrate culture and embed it in the service daily”

“Family, community and connection are at the forefront of our program”,

and

“We are aware of the social issues impacting our Aboriginal community and we are here to support them and their children in the best possible way”.

Other ACCOs acknowledged cultural safety was not always easy to embed, including comments such as:

“We should be ensuring all our policies etc are written with a cultural lens”

and

“There is so much compliance stuff that we never get to the additional things that define who we are and formally set us apart from mainstream services”.

ACCOs rated the following Departmental activities (or functions) as being useful for supporting the EC sector to improve cultural safety for children and families.

- Funding aligned with and to cultural needs;
- Cultural awareness and local protocol training;
- Mentoring from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector professional.

The following survey participation statistics are of interest:

- 45% of survey participants were Aboriginal, 5% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 50% were non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander;
- 45% participants were service managers or directors, 45% were service teachers or educators and a small portion were provider management / administration;
- 65% of services were in regional locations in NSW, 25% were urban and 10% were remote.

MAINSTREAM EC PROVIDER CONSULTATIONS RESULTS

A total of 82 surveys were completed by mainstream EC services in NSW.

When mainstream EC services were asked to place their own EC service on the Cultural Competence Continuum the following results were recorded.

- 26% believe they are culturally responsive;
- 44% believe they are culturally contemplative;
- 22% believe they are culturally pre-contemplative;
- 7% believe they are culturally blind; and
- 1% believe they are culturally incapable.

When mainstream EC providers were asked to explain why they chose to place their EC service where they did on the cultural safety continuum, they responded with comments such as:

“We are trying so hard, but lack of support, time, money and expertise is holding us back”

“Not all staff in my service are confident to discuss issues of loss of land, culture, language and mob for fear of saying the wrong thing, offending parents or upsetting children”

“Differences in educator ages, backgrounds, abilities, knowledge and skills, and the remoteness of their work from the leadership team presents challenges”

“(we are) addressing our own biases and attitudes (to ensure) we are being inclusive in our program and organisation”

“As non-Aboriginal educators we are on a continuous journey of learning and listening” and “(we are) open to sharing and challenging values and beliefs”

There was a collective sense of importance for connecting with families and seeking input from local Aboriginal communities as a pathway to being a culturally safe and responsive mainstream ECEC service.

Mainstream services provided information on the work and activities that they are doing to improve cultural safety in their service, including:

- completing cultural awareness training;
- developing Reconciliation Action Plans;
- implementing policies and procedures (e.g. adapting programs and teaching styles to cater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children);
- employing Aboriginal staff;
- ensuring they had Aboriginal committee members;
- facilitating involvement with local Elders.

Furthermore, the reinvigoration of cultural language programs facilitated by Elders for parents and educators has increased knowledge and cultural safety in their services as well as taking staff on a cultural safety journey of their own. Some services are embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to a higher level. They are working within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Learning Framework or working with Elders to implement a localised cultural curriculum that harmonises with Aboriginal systems of knowing, being and doing.

Mainstream EC providers rated the following Departmental activities (or functions) as being useful for supporting the EC sector to improve cultural safety for children and families.

- training and professional development;
- curriculum resources, materials, and content;
- providing guidance and support resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols and considerations whilst working with community.

SUMMARISING KEY THEMES FROM THE CONSULTATIONS

The key themes identified and highlighted from the various consultation methods outlined above include:

- Ongoing concerns about the Western confinements, culturally unsafe frameworks, and lack of understanding of the socio-political history of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. These all have implications for access, support, and service delivery on the ground.
- Racism and discrimination at both societal and systems levels. This compounds the ongoing burden of trauma that many families and community members experience.
- Cultural blindness in many settings across the state, underpinned by perceived and actual white privilege, resulting in an inability to remove these biases and blindness and preventing the delivery of culturally safe services.
- Overwhelming evidence and support from local families and communities for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations over mainstream ECEC services, combined with a lack of ACCOs across the state to cater for demand and need.
- Acknowledgment and appreciation for positive examples of effort to change the racist paradigm, further supporting the need for such processes as this work being commissioned by the Department to help address these concerns and find solutions and ways forward.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS FOR ECEC SERVICES

The guiding principles that support the National Quality Standards (NQS) state, simply but powerfully, that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is valued. The NQS aim to ensure all ECEC services understand and teach children about the history, culture, and contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ACCOs, mainstream service providers and the Department responses to the question on priorities for the NQS in relation to cultural safety were almost identical, indicating that collaborative partnerships with families and community, relationships with children, and children's health and safety were rated as the most important of the NQS in relation to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS THAT ACCOS FELT COULD BE IMPROVED FOR CULTURAL SAFETY

ACCOs are considered to be best placed of all the stakeholders to understand and readily practice cultural safety because of the lived experiences of their workers and management, and because of the continual cultural practice of kinship and reciprocity.

ACCO survey participants indicated that there were 3 NQS that could be most improved for cultural safety. These are:

- NQS 1 – Education and program practice;
- NQS 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities;
- NQS 3 – Physical environment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The information and summary of outcomes from the community consultations, and responses from the online surveys, provide an in-depth insight and guide to the NSW Department of Education for their further work and progress towards its position and development of an Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework for Early Childhood Education. The shared experiences and wisdom from the local Aboriginal community members and families provide guidance of what aspects of a 'framework' need to be considered, as well as taking heed of both negative and positive accounts of the reality and transparency on the ground.

In completing phase 1 consultation for the Cultural Safety Framework, SNAICC provides this report to the Department and looks forward to seeing the next phase of design and development for this ground-breaking initiative that aims to achieve positive change for Aboriginal children and families across NSW.