SNAICC
National Voice for our Children

Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework for Early Childhood Education

Phase 1 Final Report

13 October 2022

About SNAICC

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) is the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

SNAICC works for the fulfilment of the rights of our children, to ensure their safety, development, and well-being.

The SNAICC vision is an Australian society in which the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are protected; our communities are empowered to determine their own futures; and our cultural identity is valued.

SNAICC was formally established in 1981 and today represents a core membership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations providing child and family welfare and early childhood education and care services.

SNAICC advocates for the rights and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and provides resources and training to support the capacity of communities and organisations working with our families.

SNAICC was commissioned by the New South Wales Department of Education to conduct Phase 1: Consultation for ECE Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework project, 2022.

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Acronyms

ACCO – Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

QARS – Quality Audit Reporting System

ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care

The Department – NSW Department of Education

NQS – National Quality Standards

NQF – National Quality Framework

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.[1]

Historically, the Australian curriculum has failed to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. A lack of truth telling and failure to recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience of colonisation as one of invasion and dispossession of land, sea and sky has resulted in a curriculum that focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as artefacts of the past rather than the world's oldest continuing culture with sophisticated political, economic, and social organisation systems. [2] The failure to adequately appreciate the breadth and depth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' contributions to contemporary Australia has resulted in a curriculum that is culturally unsafe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

In New South Wales 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.[3]

Aiming to address this disparity in outcomes, the New South Wales Department of Education (the Department) has contracted SNAICC – National Voice for our Children to undertake phase 1 consultations to develop a new state-wide *Early Childhood Education Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework*.

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[1] Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2020. *Aboriginal Early Childhood Cultural Protocols*. Available at: www.vaeai.org.au/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2020/06/2020Cutural_Protocols_VAEAI-1.pdf

[2] Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. 2020. *Cross-Curriculum Priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*. Available at: www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/7137/ccp_atsi_histories_and_cultures_consultation.pdf

[3] Commonwealth of Australia (2021) *Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan* National Indigenous Australians Agency, Editor: Canberra p. 1-199.

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The Department regulates, monitors, and supports over 5,800 ECEC services, including out-of-school hours care in New South Wales. Through *First Steps – the New South Wales 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.

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children were engaged and contracted to prepare and develop Phase 1 consultations, capturing outcomes 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 ECEC services in New South Wales, and online surveys.

The findings in this Phase 1 report aim to inform the next phase of co-designing the Cultural Safety Framework for the Department. It will offer opportunities to identify priorities for the Department to increase cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families accessing ECEC services in New South Wales and will accurately describe where the framework intersects with the National Quality Framework.

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 New South Wales, with **48 participants in total**. The local government areas selected were:

- Campbelltown
- Brewarrina
- Shoalhaven
- Lightning Ridge.

Online surveys were developed and administered to allow more extensive consultation and engagement across the state. A total number of 355 online surveys responses were received and consisted of the following:

- Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families and communities accessing ECEC services across New South Wales (**145 surveys completed**)

- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations administering ECEC services across New South Wales (**20 surveys completed**)

- New South Wales Department of Education – Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate (**108 surveys completed**)

- Mainstream ECEC services across New South Wales (**82 surveys completed**).

Some of 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.
- acknowledgment and appreciation for positive examples of effort to change the racist paradigm, further supporting the need for such processes as this work being commission by the Department to help address these concerns and find solutions and ways forward.
- 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.

SNAICC acknowledges, and is grateful for the shared experiences, insights and wisdom of the local Aboriginal families, communities, and services to this process.

Introduction

The New South Wales Department of Education (the Department) regulates, monitors, and supports over 5,800 early childhood education and care services, including out-of-school hours care. Through *First Steps – the New South Wales 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.

This report presents the 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 New South Wales 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 New South Wales Department of Education (the Department) – Early Childhood Education and Schools Policy Directorate staff.

The findings in this report aim to inform the next phase of co-designing the Cultural Safety Framework for the Department. It will offer opportunities to identify priorities for the Department to increase cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families accessing ECEC services in New South Wales and will accurately describe where the framework intersects with the National Quality Framework (NQF). Furthermore, this report will capture the voices of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander families and communities on what cultural safety needs to look and feel like in an ECEC service.

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. A search of major academic research

databases using a clearly defined and repeatable keyword search methodology was applied together with an integrative review methodology. Recognising that assessing the quality and relative value of literature from such diverse sources is a complex process, the application of different criteria to different types of sources was required, ensuring the criteria appropriately captured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on 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[4].

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 Torres Strait Islander populations across New South Wales, with 48 participants in total. The local government areas selected were:

- Campbelltown
- Brewarrina
- Shoalhaven
- Lightning Ridge

Participation was capped at 20 people per site to observe current COVID-19 health advice at the time, and to align with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodology of sharing knowledge in a yarning circle setting. All participants were provided a gift voucher for their participation and sharing of knowledge. Participants were then supported with wellbeing packages, debriefing and follow up by SNAICC's trauma informed trained facilitators. This approach ensured the cultural safety protocols for triggering 'yarns' were valued, and participants were nurtured during the process and subsequent days.

Online surveys

Survey questions were developed from the literature review findings utilising the cultural safety continuum[5]. Families and communities were asked to articulate what cultural safety felt and looked like, and to identify how this was demonstrated by key aspects of their child's service. Further

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[4] Commonwealth of Australia Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.2020. *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Available from: https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap.

[5] *Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (2008). Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Available at: https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/VAC.0001.002.0001.pdf

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 New South Wales (20 surveys completed)
- New South Wales Department of Education – Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate (108 surveys completed)
- Mainstream ECEC services across New South Wales (82 surveys completed)
- Children's illustrations and narrative captured across New South Wales

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 cultural competence standards have been introduced.
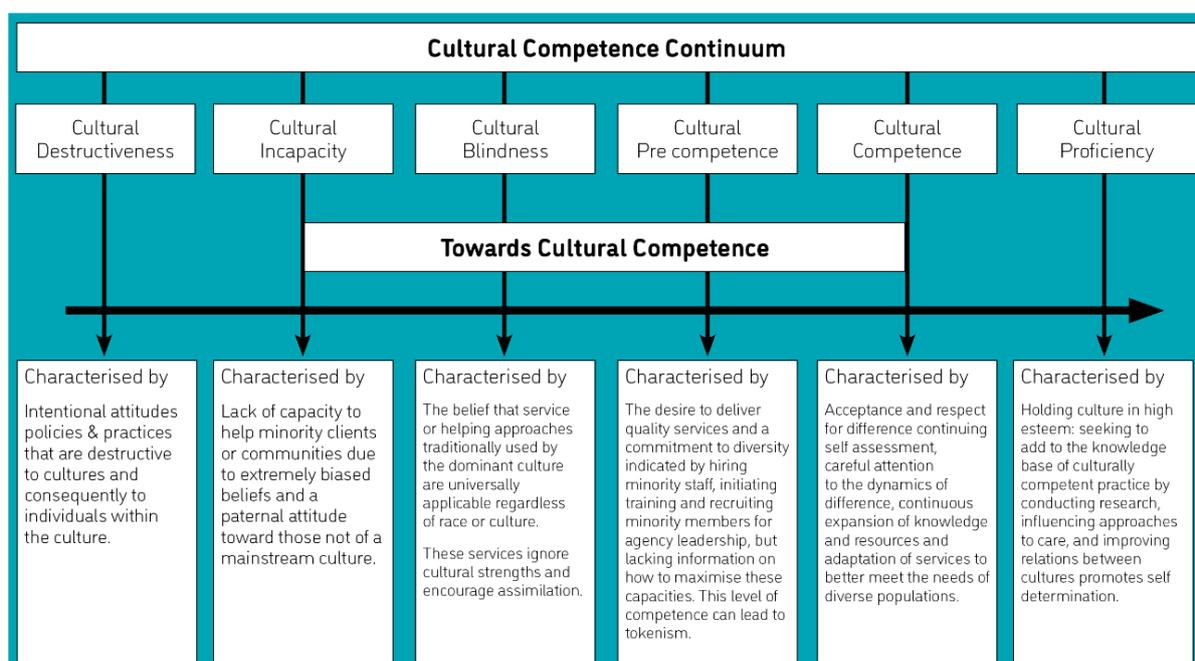
Source: Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework October 2008. p.24

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It should be noted that 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 responsivity' to allow better context and understanding.

Family and community consultation narrative

SNAICC's THRYVE NSW team were welcomed into communities by the carers, parents, nans, aunts, fathers, uncles, brothers, and sisters. Being present, holding space and facilitating the conversations and stories, we acknowledge the courage and strength of all who actively engaged in the sessions and contributed their understanding of what cultural safety is, how it currently feels and what it looks like in their community, what is working well, identifying gaps and other areas for improvement in the early learning space.

THRYVE NSW 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.

Each community consultation adhered to local cultural protocol, and commenced with a Welcome or Acknowledgement of Country, including one minute's silence in respect of any recent community mourning and/or sorry business, and ended with a wellbeing social and emotional check-in before departure. Each community consultation was unique and diverse, and powerful key themes emerged from the conversations which have been collated as community voices within this report.

Cultural Destructiveness

An Elder shared that in her local community, she had observed an ECEC service, at times contribute unknowingly and unintentionally, to cultural destructiveness within their community. She believed that this was due to several complex reasons, including under-skilled, 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. This contributes to the ECEC service programing and environment, and flows down to service delivery on the ground, creating an unsafe space, and being viewed as sitting within "culturally destructiveness" on the continuum.

Further articulated, were that dire consequences result from culturally destructive services, including "racism, white privilege, marginalisation, culturally unsafe practices, cultural blindness, including the "non-verbal engagement and communication interactions", and lateral violence, (which) contributes to the continuation of unsafe spaces, poor community relationships, disconnect and lack of understanding of key issues impacting Aboriginal children and their families, and communities".

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

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?"

Cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, and cultural pre-contemplation

We heard that collective positions of white privilege held by non-Aboriginal staff and educators within ECEC services are a significant factor impacting their ability to move beyond cultural blindness and creating cultural incapacity. There is a sense among Aboriginal community service users that this incapacity consequently sees parents/carers forced to disengage and withdraw their children from the service. One community member added that they are also aware that the governing bodies, conditions, frameworks, and regulations that underpin the centres create an additional barrier and contribute to cultural incapacity and blindness. They added that their children become further oppressed as it is their right to have access to a culturally safe and inclusive education.

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 "- Aboriginal people have innate intuition and ways of knowing and understanding the feeling of being culturally safe, and culturally unsafe".

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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 evidenced 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, playgrounds and holistically included in all activities, not just on significant cultural calendar dates throughout the year or to comply or satisfy regulatory requirements or governing bodies.

Most parents/carers shared their preference, and the most culturally safe space for their child/ren was to attend ACCO ECEC services such as a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) and/or Aboriginal Child and Family Centre (ACFC). However, due to these services being at capacity and having waitlists, they have been restricted to accessing mainstream ECEC services.

The overwhelming majority of parents and carers felt that ACCOs provided optimal cultural safety and responsivity daily. The ways that ACCOs embed cultural safety in their ECEC services include:

- cultural reciprocity and humility, and positive meaningful relationships and regard to their child/ren
- Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing holistically embedded into the centre in every aspect including programming inclusive of language, resources, environment, philosophies, and values, which subsequently instils and inspires children to be proud of their identity and culture, strengthening their capacity for learning
- understanding and compassion and cultural awareness from educators and staff creating atmospheres of welcoming environments and a strong sense of belonging - "a sense of feeling like home", one aunt added

- offerings of additional integrated wrap around services within ACFCs, that added additional support for children and families experiencing a significant disadvantage in areas of health and wellbeing
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags being flown, or present within the centre
- Higher rates of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander staff employed as educators and other positions within the service
- strong governance (Board) and staff and management
- inclusiveness of all of community, children and their families, strong values of kinship.

Cultural safety strongly demonstrated by ACCO ECEC services involves a sense, of belonging, spiritual safety, acceptance, "feels like home", and extended version of kinship, being inclusive, language, culture, family/mob. "It's not just koori t-shirts or other tokenistic efforts". ACCO ECEC services are culturally safe because Aboriginal protocols, song lines, culture, language, responsibilities, Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing are at the forefront of everything. The community attitude is that the ECEC service "is our centre" and belongs to the community, not the centre managers or organisation.

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"; and then 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".

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Online surveys and data snapshot

Family and community online survey statistics

Overview

- 34% of participants were Aboriginal, 28% were Torres Strait Islander, 34% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 4% were non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 54% of participants were in urban New South Wales, 45% in regional New South Wales and 1% in remote New South Wales
- 57% of participants were fathers, 37% were mothers, 4% were grandparents and 2% were an extended family relative
- 67% of children attend pre-school, 37% of children attend a long day care centre, 26% of children attend out-of-school-hours centre, 8% attend family day care and 2% attend another form of early learning centre.
- 77% of participants had heard the term 'cultural safety'.
- 90% of participants feel culturally safe when they enter/visit their child/ren's early education service.

Culturally safe services

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. One participant said their service "makes everyone feel like family", while others explained that "the children at school talk about our culture", and "the staff are so welcoming and respectful and even children get excited with anything to do around culture". However, other participants felt culturally unsafe, describing that "I feel that I am not valued because of my identity" and "staff at the service greet me politely but they do not engage with me as they do other staff and carers". One participant empathised with those in an unsafe environment, stating that while they are "strong in my identity and not afraid to say how I feel, I can understand how people would feel unsafe with judgemental staff", while another simply said "there is room for improvement".

Service and program support

74% of participants agreed that their child's early learning centre or school provides support or programs that promote cultural learning and participation, including:

- Food, language, dance, making music, painting, art, reading, learning about Aboriginal ways, cultural celebrations.

68% of families participate, engage, or attend with cultural activities at their child/ren's ECEC service, for example:

- join NAIDOC week celebrations
- are included in the development of the Reconciliation Action Plan
- participate in creating diversity policies for the centre
- participate in a dance group
- reading stories
- sourcing local bush tucker plants.

When asked if their child/ren's early learning centre or school provide support or programs that promote cultural learning and participation, one respondent said, "just the usual NAIDOC activities". Others had more positive feedback, stating "teachers regularly take students to the library to learn about culture", and "Indigenous educators help educate the children, staff and families learning about Aboriginal ways". Participants were also asked if they participate, engage in or attend cultural activities at their early learning service. One respondent demonstrated the centre's lack of cultural awareness when stating "they sometimes ask me to do a Welcome to Country, but this is not my Country". Another participant said, "I don't like my kids to be paraded as the token Aboriginal children". Other responses included "I am usually busy, so I have little time to attend", "no one invited us", they "attend cultural celebrations when they are held" and "I don't feel welcome or valued".

How families placed their child/ren's early learning service on the cultural safety continuum

- 41% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally responsive
- 32% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally contemplative
- 16% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally pre-contemplative
- 4% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally blind
- 6% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally incapable
- 0.69% believe the ECE service their child/ren attend is culturally destructive

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. One participant stated their service has a "principal who is racist and biased against alternate family structures and cultures" and another claimed "staff only undertake action regarding Aboriginal culture as far as being able to tick

the box and no further. They don't listen to families or hold appropriate intentions behind activities". 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".

Participants also had suggestions for ways to improve cultural safety in ECEC services. "Creating policies that reflect on diversity and inclusion" and "the government should foster an atmosphere of protecting cultural security in the whole society" were some of the recommendations for systemic change, while others identified curriculum-based opportunities to improve cultural safety. "Strengthen cultural learning", "celebration of Aboriginal culture and history should be taught to all children on a regular basis, not just during NAIDOC", "for educators to do professional development in cultural awareness" and "families and kindergartens should interact and cooperate with each other so that children can receive education better" were some of the responses aimed at ECEC curriculum reform. A final theme that emerged from the responses was aimed at ECEC staff. Suggestions including "understand that all families are different", "listen and take your time to form relationships", "do not give the child too much pressure, free to learn" and "teachers should strengthen their study and improve their own quality to meet the needs" highlighted the need for quality cultural safety training for staff at all levels.

Positive examples of culturally safe behaviour in ECE services:

Some of the positive responses about culturally safe behaviour in ECEC services include "asking the local community… to get in touch and learn about Indigenous culture of the land they are on", "children dance and paint and express themselves culturally" and "Acknowledgement of Country in every room is done daily".

Negative or culturally destructive behaviours in ECE services:

Negative experiences have included "lower case i for Indigenous", "they provided culturally insensitive reading material" and "thinking all black people are the same. Putting us all in one box".

Activities families rate as important to them and their child/ren's early learning and education needs

Families and communities indicated the three most important activities in ECEC services for their own child/ren's early learning and education needs:

- identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander without fear of retribution or questioning
- receive an education that strengthens their culture and identity

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- maintain connection to their community (mob) and Country.
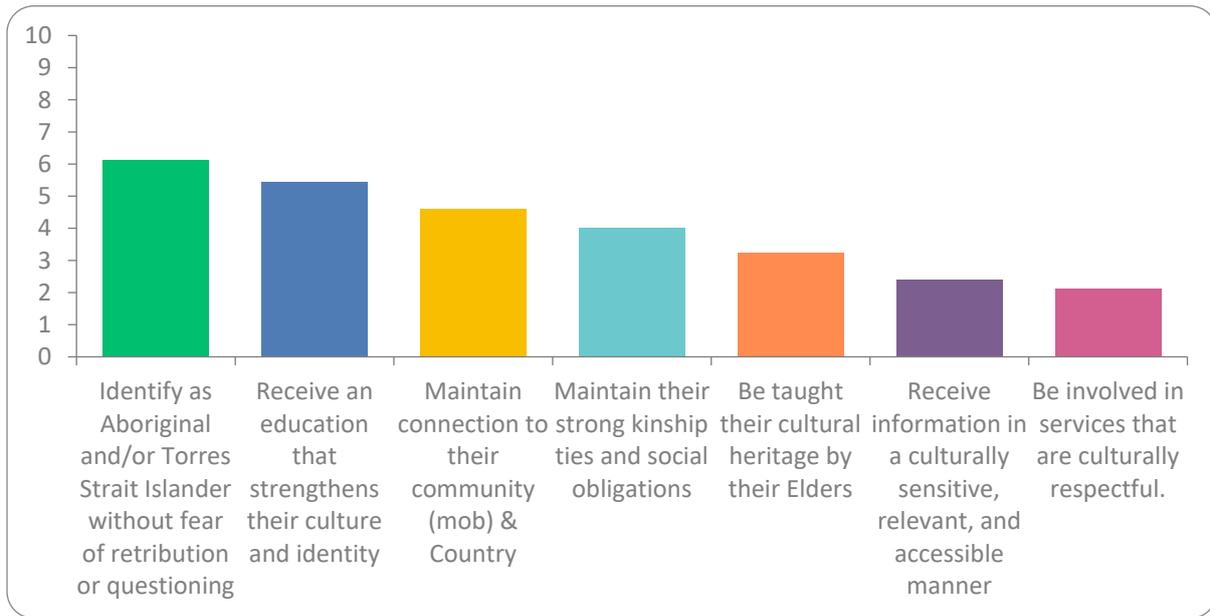
Aboriginal community-controlled organisation online surveys statistics

Overview

- 45% of 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 New South Wales, 25 % were urban and 10% were remote

- 75% of services were long day care, 55% preschool, 5% out-of-school hours care and 5% family day care

- 90% of participants stated they experienced / observed positive culturally responsive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months

- 35% of participants stated they experienced / observed negative culturally destructive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months

How ACCOs placed their ECEC service on the cultural safety continuum

- 60% believed they were culturally responsive

- 30% believed they were culturally contemplative

- 10% believed they were culturally pre-contemplative

ACCOs know what is best for their communities, working with them to deliver community led, culturally safe wrap around services. When asked to explain why they chose to place their early learning service where they did on the cultural safety continuum, ACCOs 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 "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".

How ACCOs rated the New South Wales Department of Education Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services (QARS) Early Childhood Directorate on the cultural safety continuum

- 35 % believed they were culturally responsive
- 20% believed they were culturally contemplative
- 25% believed they were culturally pre- contemplative
- 15% believed they were culturally blind
- 5% believed they were culturally incapable

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families face a broad range of barriers to accessing quality ECEC services. ACCOs aim to address these barriers and deliver integrated and Aboriginal-led ECEC services that centre the needs of children and families; however, this work requires a collaborative approach from the Department. The survey captured the experiences of ACCOs working with the Department, and found staff, families and children have faced a lack of cultural understanding, including being subject to culturally insensitive actions. Responses included "governing bodies still have some space to grow in terms of becoming culturally responsive in regard to regulations", "(the Department) staff have no idea, assessment and rating policies and procedures do not take Aboriginal cultural beliefs and behaviours into account" and "it's hard to have these true connections in relationships when there is always so much documentation done rather than creating a sense of belonging, being and becoming".

Culturally responsive or culturally destructive behaviour and interactions ACCO service staff have experienced in their role in the last 6 months

Participants responded that others are "more culturally aware of Indigenous heritage and how to have it underpin our service's core practice" and that "local community connections are strong, and

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we connect with local Elders". They also said "non-Indigenous educators are willing to learn about Aboriginal customs and culture", although one respondent reported that "ignorance is quite large".

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.

- The three NQS that ACCOs rated as most important to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families include relationships with children, children's health and safety and collaborative partnerships with families and community.
- Staffing arrangements, governance / leadership and physical environment were seen as the three least important NQS standards in relation to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families.

NQS that ACCOs felt could be improved for cultural safety

Participants indicated that there were 3 NQS that could be most improved for cultural safety:

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

Activities of the Department that ACCOs rated as useful for supporting the ECEC sector to improve cultural safety for families and children

Participants indicated the three most useful ways for the DoE to improve cultural safety for families and children in the ECE sector were:

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

Participants indicated these were the least three useful ways for DoE to improve cultural safety for families and children in the ECE sector:

- Reduction of reporting requirements for cultural programming
- Cultural audit engagement tool
- Induction processes for all staff at local centres.

ACCOs aim to provide extensive and essential support for families, however, do so without adequate remuneration. They are faced with the choice of providing reduced services to the community or risk organisational viability by providing services for which they receive no funding to provide or report against. For ACCOs to deliver best practice culturally safe services, they need a funding model that enables and supports them to do the work necessary within their local community. One Aboriginal educator summed this up by saying "Self-determination is about having the ability to truly decide how we will do things, but we are still trying to function under rules and guidelines that do not fit our model of service delivery."

Mainstream ECEC services online survey statistics

Overview

- 95% of participants were non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- The majority of survey participants (62%) were service managers or directors, 25% were service teachers or educators and a small portion were non-education support staff or provider management / administration
- 51% of services were in regional locations in NSW, 47% were urban and 1% were remote
- 46% of services were long day care services, 35% were preschools, 7% out-of-school-hours care and 3% family day care. A small portion provided a combination of care types or a mobile / early intervention preschool program
- 96% of participants stated they experienced / observed culturally responsive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months
- 22% of participants stated they experienced / observed culturally destructive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months

How mainstream service staff placed their ECEC service on the cultural safety continuum

- 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
- 1% believe they are culturally incapable

There was a collective sense of urgency to connect with families and seek input from local Aboriginal communities as a pathway to being a culturally safe and responsive for mainstream ECEC services. A number of participants justified their service's position on the continuum on the basis of professional development, including completing cultural awareness training, and service practices,

including 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, and 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.

However, staff comments suggest there is still much to be done to ensure mainstream service are culturally safe. Participants have stated "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" and "differences in educator ages, backgrounds, abilities, knowledge and skills, and the remoteness of their work from the leadership team presents challenges". There were also comments that reflected the above statistics, including "(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".

How mainstream services rated the New South Wales Department of Education Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services on the cultural safety continuum

- 30% believe they are culturally responsive
- 35% believe they are culturally contemplative
- 23% believe they are culturally pre-contemplative
- 7% believe they are culturally blind
- 2% believe they are culturally incapable
- 1% believe they are culturally destructive

When asked to rate the Department on the cultural safety continuum, the survey produced varied results. Some participants felt they lack support from the Department in their efforts to be more culturally competent, and that the Department is still tokenistic in its move towards cultural safety. Comments include "departmental systems do not align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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ways of teaching/learning", "(the Department is) still not leading the way", "it feels the information is provided and then left for services to unpack themselves" and "the Department say a lot about culture without providing resources and practical assistance to centres". Others believe the Department is proactive and empowering services to make changes and has cultural safety at the forefront of what they are doing. These participants commented "(the Department) is very proactive in providing resources on Indigenous culture and how we can actively incorporate this into our centre", "cultural responsiveness is at the forefront of the Early Childhood Directorate" and "the Department has supported cultural competence and has included this in our curriculum".

While most participants appeared to agree the Department is on a journey to improve its cultural safety, the experiences of services varied greatly. There was consensus, however, that the Department must employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in positions of leadership in order to increase its ability to move through the cultural continuum and become more culturally responsive.

Culturally responsive or culturally destructive behaviour and interactions mainstream service staff have experienced in their role in the last 6 months

Some participants had positive experiences with culturally safe behaviour and commented that "we strive to better our understanding of cultural safety and ways to embed this at our service so do not experience any cultural destructiveness", "educators are working towards building on their knowledge of First Nations people history and culture and using this to continue to teach the children in meaningful ways" and "all children are treated with the same love, respect and nurturing". However other participants had more negative behaviour or interactions to report, stating "some families still are very racist in their comments about our Aboriginal families", "some educators have done tokenistic things in their programs that expose ignorance and lack of reflection" and they have heard "disrespectful comments".

National Quality Standards for ECEC services

- Collaborative partnerships with families and community, relationships with children and children's health and safety were rated as the most important NQS standards in relation to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families.

- Staffing arrangements, physical environment, and governance / leadership were seen as the least important NQS standards in relation to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families.

Activities from the Department that ACCOs rated as useful for supporting the ECEC sector to improve cultural safety for families and children

Participants indicated the three most useful ways the Department can improve cultural safety for families and children in the ECE sector are:

- 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.

Participants indicated the three least useful ways for the Department to improve cultural safety for families and children in the ECE sector are:

- guidance on the design of physical environments
- communications to the sector that are culturally responsive to the needs of community
- governance and decision making on cultural matters to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

New South Wales Department of Education online survey statistics

Overview

- 93% of participants were non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Majority of survey participants (52%) were regulatory field staff, but also had managers, directors, senior leadership and policy and program officers participating in the survey
- 81% were Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services staff, only 18% were from the ECEC and Schools Policy or Early Learning units
- 89% of participants stated they experienced/observed positive culturally responsive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months
- 16% of participants stated they experienced/observed negative culturally destructive behaviour or interaction within their role in the last 12 months

Individual reflections on cultural safety continuum

Continuum	Department Staff	Mainstream ECEC service staff
Culturally responsive	20.37%	36.59%
Culturally contemplative	53.7%	40.24%
Culturally pre-contemplative	25%	21.95%
Culturally blind	0%	1.22%
Culturally incapable	0.93%	0%
Culturally destructive	0%	0%

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Rationale from the Department – Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate staff on their individual reflections for their chosen position on the continuum demonstrated a desire and openness to be learning and doing more to broaden thinking and viewing cultural safety as an ongoing journey. A selection of participants indicated a greater sense of concerted effort being made on their part through connecting and collaborating with local Aboriginal community, learning about culture and history, actively unlearning biases, reading and researching. There was some feedback on the professional courage of staff speaking up and calling people out for inappropriate behaviour. Further comments included escalating complaints and writing to Members of Parliament about issues, whilst others reported actively donating to and supporting Aboriginal businesses and ACCOs. A portion of the Department participants indicated they genuinely lacked confidence and knowledge in the area of cultural safety. Some of the participant responses were self-aware, with participants saying "due to lack of confidence, I often fall back into 'am I doing this wrong? Am I going to offend?'" and "I seek to expand my knowledge in this area at every opportunity and believe that Aboriginal children deserve to understand and celebrate who they are in every setting".

In comparison to the Department, mainstream ECEC service providers felt their chosen position and reflections as a genuine shift from tokenism to embedding cultural safety into systems within their service. Many staff feel they are in a space of reflective practice around cultural safety and the ways this can be improved to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Staff are generally feeling that they are shifting away from tokenism and are genuinely committed to cultural safety and wellbeing being embedded into systems within their service. The survey revealed a collective sense of the importance of connecting with families and seeking input from local Aboriginal communities as a pathway to being culturally safe and responsive. A commitment to education and learning more about culturally safe practices and ways to improve services to embed cultural safety and wellbeing was also apparent. Respondents said, "cultural safety has become embedded into service provision through ongoing consultation with Elders, knowledge-holders and families in community", "we have been consciously seeking input from local Aboriginal community members around increasing our cultural safety and competence" and "we have a genuine respect and acceptance for difference".

Some centres were aware of how much there is still to do to create culturally safe spaces, however. "There is a desire to be more culturally responsive however we are limited in our understanding of knowing how to do so and are often concerned that the things we implement may come across as tokenistic rather than meaningful", "I feel that our service could be more responsive, however the

views and opinions of the staff is very hard to change" and "I still believe I have a lot to learn" were a few of the comments that highlighted the need for ongoing education in mainstream ECEC services.

The New South Wales Department of Education rating on cultural safety continuum

The Department – Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate staff, mainstream ECEC services and ACCO ECEC services were all asked where they felt where the Department sits on the cultural safety continuum.

Continuum	ACCOs	Mainstream ECECs	Department staff
Culturally responsive	35%	30.49%	23.15%
Culturally contemplative	20%	35.37%	33.33%
Culturally pre-contemplative	25%	23.17%	40.74%
Culturally blind	15%	7.32%	2.78%
Culturally incapable	5%	2.44%	0%
Culturally destructive	0%	1.22%	0%

Rationale for chosen position of the Department on continuum

The ACCO ECEC services felt the Department lacks understanding on Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being. The importance and understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being applies in all areas of their service provision and should always be considered. There was consensus that some field staff do not understand basic Aboriginal protocols, history, and community needs. Furthermore, they cited a lack of resources and professional development to improve the cultural safety of their staff. Many felt that the Department's key focus is on data, regulation, and documentation rather than the relationships, knowledge and understanding of communities and their services.

There was a very mixed response from mainstream services on how culturally safe the Department is in their practices. Some felt the Department does not support them to improving and embedding cultural safety and cited a tokenistic approach and tangled forms of racism. Some services believe the Department is proactive and is empowering services to have cultural safety at the forefront of what they are doing. However, most mainstream service providers agree the Department is at an early stage on the journey to improve its cultural safety. Some services felt that an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, particularly in leadership roles, would assist in improving cultural safety.

Staff within the Department felt that the approach to cultural safety processes is quite tokenistic and that "Aboriginal people are still experiencing institutionalised racism". The consensus from Department participants was that the journey had begun towards good and well-placed intentions around cultural safety. However, most participants overwhelmingly cited a significant amount of work was required, beyond cultural safety training, to embed this into practice.

When asked to explain why they chose to place the Department where they did on the cultural safety continuum, the Department staff responses ranged from cynical- "mostly (cultural safety training) just seems to be a tick and flick exercise" and "I still hear staff groan when we speak about cultural safety and question why do we have to do this" to slightly more optimistic- "there are still many improvements that need to happen across the Department…. changes are underway but I am not seeing the desired result – yet". Some of the Department staff appreciated the Department's initial efforts but were cautious about the future, saying "good effort and commitment has been made, yet I feel that there is work to do to fully embed", "the desire is there but there is a lack of direction" and "governing bodies still have some space to grow in terms of becoming culturally responsive in regard to regulations".

Other Department staff were unimpressed with the lack of progress the Department has made on its cultural safety journey, claiming "I believe some approaches within the Department can be tokenistic", "it's hard to have these true connections in relationships when there is always so much documentation to be done rather than creating a sense of belonging, being and becoming" and "mostly just seems to be tick and flick exercise". A few Department staff openly criticised the Department's lack of cultural safety, revealing "people who identify as Aboriginal are still experiencing racism and a lack of cultural safety" and "(the Department) staff have no idea. Assessment and rating policies and procedures do not take Aboriginal cultural beliefs and behaviours into account".

Professional development activities for Department staff (see annexure 3)

The professional development activity rated as most important for the Department staff was "culturally contextualised compliance and regulatory changes through updates/fact sheets/hints and tips to apply a cultural lens to policy and regulation (rated 4.25 / 5). This was very closely followed by "localised community information (pertinent to sites you visit and interact with in your role)" (rated 4.24 / 5). This indicates a willingness and desire to receive training and development in these areas. Cultural support through programming and trauma informed training were also activities the

Department staff showed interest in, demonstrating a willingness to increase their individual cultural safety learning journeys.

Summary on feedback

The feedback on training and development opportunities for the Department staff demonstrated a desire and willingness to learn, and a great deal of the language used was related to "authentic" efforts and a shift from tokenism to "embedding" training into practice. Time was mentioned as a priority to ensure connections and relationships could be established and nurtured. Staff indicated that Increasing Aboriginal employment within the Department and engagement with communities and the Aboriginal community-controlled sector in strategy and decision making should also be a part of the journey towards cultural safety. Furthermore, a desire for guides, tools and resources was mentioned in the feedback to assist individuals in their roles within the Department to progress their learning and cultural safety journey.

Survey responses to a question asking the Department staff to tell us what they could do in their role to contribute to the cultural safety of Aboriginal children, families, and staff in ECEC services ranged from constructive to defeated. One respondent said it is "very difficult to achieve anything in this role" and another stated "there is not time for relationship building or ensuring a connection is made. If there was a true desire from (the Department) to contribute to cultural safety and higher learning outcomes for First Nations children, there would be more time… for connecting with/supporting services". Some of the ideas participants contributed were to "speak with Aboriginal representatives in the community to inform policy and procedure", "provide more and broader opportunities for my Aboriginal co-workers to engage with policy and strategy planning" and the need to start "breaking down barriers between government departments and Aboriginal communities and building better relationships".

NQS priorities

NQS rating 7 areas (1 = most important, 7 = least important)

NQS	ACCOs (Q12)	Mainstream ECEs (Q15)	Dept Ed Staff (Q14)
Education program and practice	3.40	4.18	4.41
Children's health and safety	5.05	3.87	3.91
Physical environment	2.95	2.54	2.38
Staffing arrangements	2.55	2.45	3.04

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Relationships with children	5.85	5.65	5.47
Collaborative partnerships with families and communities	5.30	6.01	5.64

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. Physical environment, staffing arrangements, and governance / leadership were seen as the least important NQS in relation to cultural safety in an ECEC setting for children and families. One significant difference in responses came from the Department, with staff selecting education, program and practice as higher priority than ACCOs and mainstream ECEC services providers did when comparing the selections for this question.

Useful activities to support the ECEC sector

Activities	Mainstream ECEs (Q14) rated out of 9 (1=most important)	Dept Ed Staff (Q13) Rated out of 5 (5=most useful)
Training and professional development	7.10	4.62
Curriculum resources, material, and content	5.82	4.49
Providing guidance and support resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols and considerations whilst working in community	6.56	4.64
Support to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and leadership	4.96	4.56
Guidance on the design of physical environments	2.68	3.95
Language programs	4.76	4.37
Governance and decision making on cultural matters to	4.59	4.63

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|		
include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities		
Policy development that consults with and is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and ECEC stakeholders	4.78	4.60
Communication to the sector that is culturally responsive to the needs of community	3.76	4.65

The Department's Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate staff indicated 3 key priority areas to support the ECEC sector:

- providing guidance and support resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols and considerations whilst working in community
- communication to the sector that is culturally responsive to the needs of the community
- governance and decision making on cultural matters to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

These priorities were closely followed by:

- training and professional development
- policy development that consults with and is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and ECEC stakeholders
- support to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and leadership

Development activities the Department staff would like the Department to provide to assist in raising capability around cultural safety
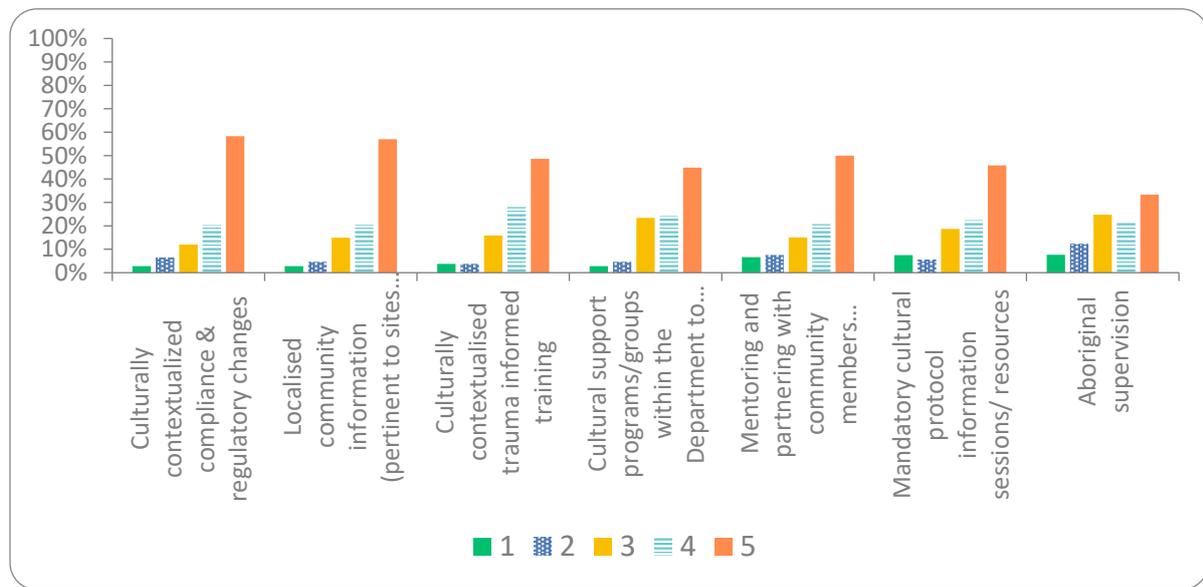
Activities from the Department that Department staff rated as useful for supporting the ECEC sector to improve cultural safety for families and children

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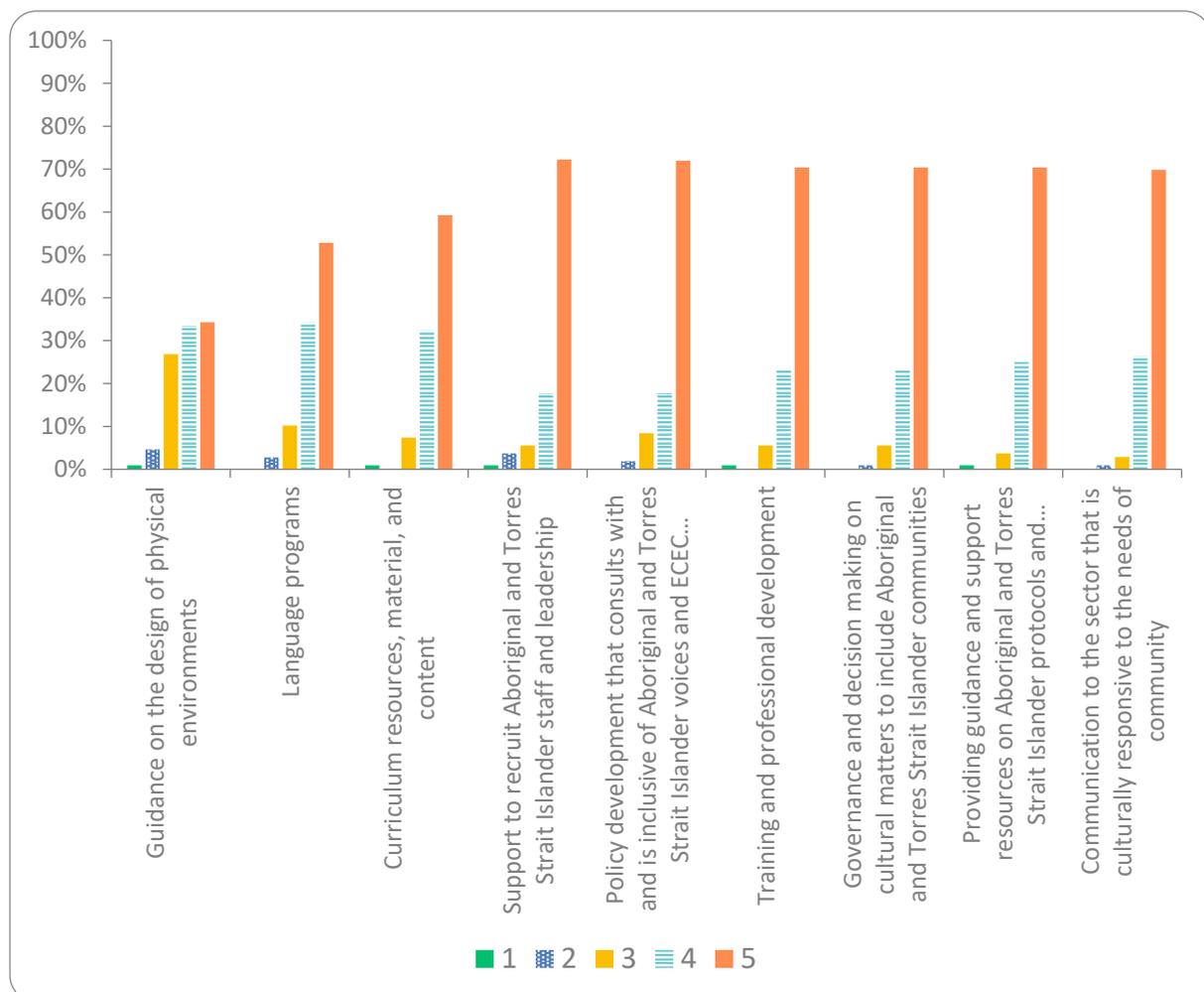
Final Department comments

- "Cultural safety is important but certain language can place us in a disempowered position where we are placed as unsafe, disadvantaged or helpless without external support"
- "We need more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff"
- "Educators at ground level [who] would be implementing the program, they should be engaged in it (cultural safety training)"
- "The voices of Aboriginal children, families and services must decide if the Department is succeeding in this project rather than relying on internal measures of success"
- "I would like to see this delivered in a non-hierarchical manner between the Department, services, community and ECE staff"

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.

Opportunities were also provided for the voices and experiences of local services (ACCOs and NGOs) and government officers to relate their experiences and suggested constructive and proactive approaches to address needs to better support and deliver quality early childhood education and care for Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

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