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Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education – Paper #16 – Engaging in the broader policy discussion

October 2021

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CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

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Extended Abstract

the aim of this paper is to consider empirically the link that might exist between 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education' and 'reconciliation in education', and the positionality of the Narragunnawali program within diverse Indigenous Education policy frameworks. To do this, the paper provides some updated summary statistics on the level of engagement with reconciliation in education in Australian schools and early learning services. This is followed by a discussion of the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young adults in Australia, including some new analysis of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and literacy and numeracy measurement. The section that follows then discusses some other policy frameworks of relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, and reconciliation in education, with the final section providing some concluding comments and implications for the Narragunnawali program.

The paper documents how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth and their families engage in education at high rates at all levels of education. However, detailed analysis of NAPLAN data shows that not only do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students start school with measured literacy and numeracy levels that are lower than for the non-Indigenous population, but that these outcomes do not increase by as much between Year 3 and 5 or Years 5 and 7 for an otherwise equivalent non-Indigenous student (based on observable characteristics). The main policy framework in Australia that incorporates education outcomes is the Closing the Gap framework. This paper has discussed how the current version of the framework has more substantially incorporated input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations than previous versions. However it has also documented where there are a number of gaps in the framework, particularly that there are no targets set for the school years, and that there is no focus on the attitudes or outcomes of non-Indigenous students, with no attempt within the framework to increase knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, culture or history, nor any focus on reducing the level of discrimination perpetuated by predominantly non-Indigenous Australians on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

While the focus of Narragunnawali is on reconciliation in education, more so than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education more specifically, such programs also have the potential to facilitate educational environments that are conducive to improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly when delivered alongside some of the other community-driven and informed interventions discussed in this paper. This is in addition to the core role of Narragunnawali to improve the ability of educators to deliver evidence-based programs that focus on and are informed by Indigenous perspectives, cultures, languages and histories.

Acknowledgements

The analysis presented in this paper was supported by funds and data from Reconciliation Australia as part of an evaluation of the program. Reconciliation Australia's support and comments on an earlier version of this paper were greatly appreciated. The results presented should be attributed to the named authors only.

1 Introduction and overview of Narragunnawali

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have achieved remarkable education outcomes in Australia. Despite barriers of location, cost, discrimination, and poor policy decisions, thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children engage in early childhood education, learn new skills and knowledge as they progress through infants, primary and high school, and engage in post-school education across a range of disciplines and levels. This is, of course, in addition to some of the cultural/wider learning that a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children engage in in community (outside of formal educational institutions, but in ways that are nonetheless important to their educational, cultural and socio-emotional development)

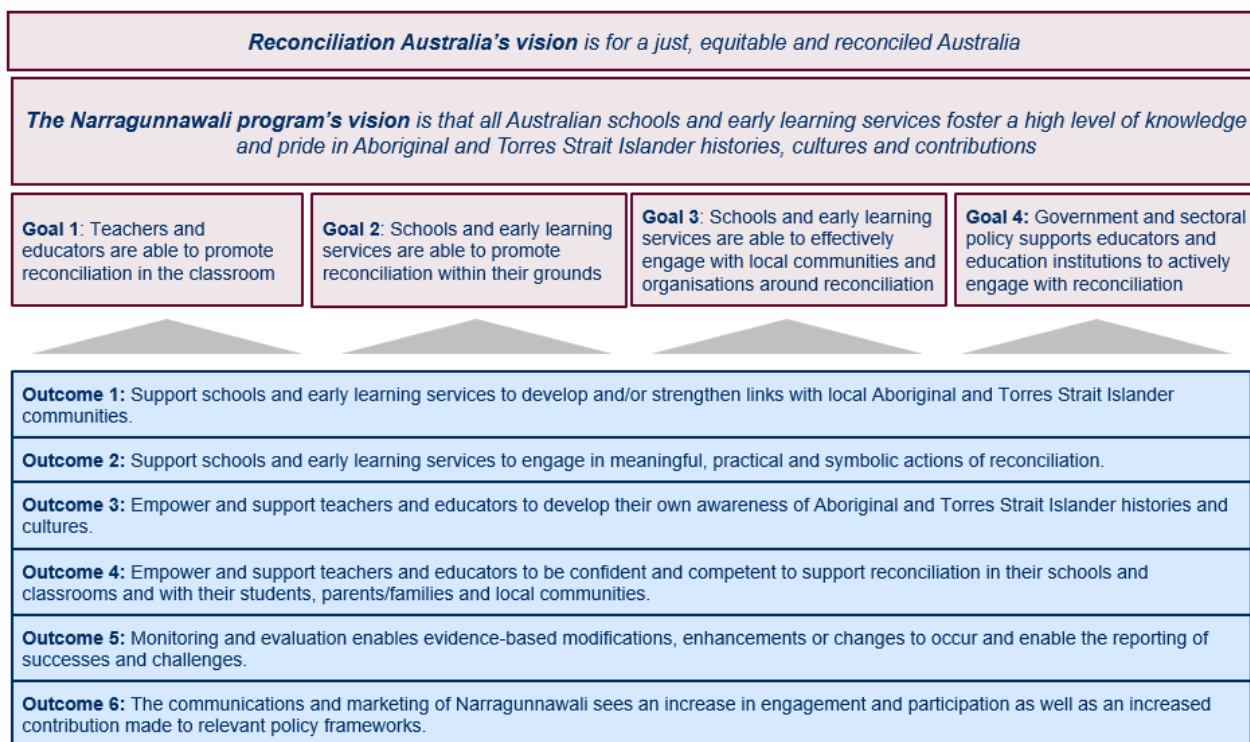
Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians do struggle with formal education and, more importantly, the formal education and training system in Australia struggles to deliver on the education needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families.

There have been many policy interventions that have attempted to improve the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Some of these have been successful, whereas others have had little impact or even led to negative unintended consequences. There are some principles that make success more likely – being well resourced; engaging with and reflecting the actual needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth, adults, and their families; and having significant ownership and control by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community.

One intervention that has the potential to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young adults is Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program. *Narragunnawali* (pronounced narra-gunna-wally) is a word from the language of the Ngunnawal people meaning alive, wellbeing coming together and peace (the Ngunnawal people are the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands in and around Canberra, where Reconciliation Australia's head office is located). The word *narragunnawali* is used with the permission of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.

The program is designed primarily to support all Australian schools and early learning services in developing a high level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions. While it is intended that this knowledge and pride be held by all students and educators in Australia, regardless of their Indigenous status, it is also intended that there will be flow-on benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.

The following diagram captures the Goals and Projected Outcomes of the Narragunnawali program:



The Narragunnawali program consists of four key areas (Reconciliation Action Plans, Professional Learning, Curriculum Resources and Awards), each of which are simultaneously underpinned by dedicated foci on Research and Evaluation, Stakeholder Engagement, and both Education Sector and Regional Engagement. The program comprises an online platform which is free to access and provides practical ways to introduce meaningful reconciliation initiatives in the classroom, around the school/service and with the community. While the platform can be accessed by any individual interested in reconciliation in education, it also provides a framework and aligned resources for driving reconciliation at the whole school or early learning service level. Through the Narragunnawali platform, schools and early learning services can develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), and teachers and educators can access professional learning and curriculum resources to support the implementation of reconciliation initiatives.

The program and RAP actions are designed to address the five interrelated and interdependent dimensions of reconciliation that Reconciliation Australia has identified. These are: Race Relations, Equality and Equity, Institutional Integrity, Unity, and Historical Acceptance. Specifically:

- Within the Race Relations dimension all Australians understand and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures, rights, and experiences. This, in turn, fosters stronger relationships based on trust and respect and that are free of racism.
- Equality and Equity recognises the need for equal participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a range of life opportunities. Further, that the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and upheld.
- The Institutional Integrity dimension acknowledges that active support for reconciliation from our nation's political, business and community structures is needed.
- Unity is reflected through an Australian society which values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of our shared national identity.

- Lastly, the Historical Acceptance dimension documents the importance of all Australians understanding and accepting the wrongs of the past and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Additionally, that Australia makes amends for these past policies and practices, and ensures that they are never repeated.

Despite the considerable overlap, there are some distinctions between ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education’ and ‘reconciliation in education.’ That is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is focused primarily on supporting educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Reconciliation in education can encompass pedagogies and practices for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student’s learning, but is primarily focused on engaging all students, staff, and indeed all members of the educational community with the importance of reconciliation, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories and cultures.

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes are not a direct focus of the Narragunnawali program, the program should and does take into account the barriers to education faced by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young adults. Furthermore, a positive spillover from the program may be a reduction in these barriers, and therefore an improvement in education opportunities and outcomes.

1.1 Evaluation of Narragunnawali

Since early 2015, the Australian National University (ANU) has been involved in the evaluation and monitoring of Narragunnawali. One of the principles of the evaluation was a genuine collaboration between the ANU project team and Reconciliation Australia (RA). In addition to a collaborative approach, four further principles were followed as part of the methodology. Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Use a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analytical techniques;
- Provide information to Reconciliation Australia at regular intervals in order to ensure lessons learned can be incorporated as the program is developed;
- Collect information where possible from those who are directly involved in Narragunnawali; and
- Make use of available data where possible and data collected as part of the program.

For Phase 1 of the evaluation (2015-2018), the methodological approach was structured around a set of questions. Given the voluntary nature of the program, there are a set of main questions guiding the analysis:

- **Process:**
 - Why are certain schools and early learning services participating and others not?
 - For those who are participating, what are the strengths, weaknesses and suggested improvements for the program?
- **Outcomes:**
 - For those who are participating, what is the effect of the program on four main outcomes, namely does Narragunnawali lead to:
 - A higher level of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage?
 - A higher level of pride in our shared national identity?
 - Increased trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the rest of the Australian population?
 - Reduced prejudice experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teachers?

For Phase 2 of the evaluation, a more expansive set of research questions were used to guide the analysis. These questions were structured around 7 themes or areas as outlined below. While Phase 2 originally included for research from January 2018 to June 2020, the questions were designed to support a longer-term research agenda that aligned with Reconciliation Australia's 2017-2022 Research Agenda. These were

1. Growth, uptake and usage
2. Information sharing and within-institution knowledge
3. Effectiveness of resources
4. Teacher knowledge and confidence
5. Community interaction and engagement
6. Student experience
7. Expansion of Narragunnawali

During phase 2 of the evaluation, there was unprecedented disruption to Australian schools and early learning services. These disruptions have been primarily caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season (known now as the Black Summer bushfires).

As well as being aligned with the methodological principles outlined below, the aims and objectives of Phase 3 of the Narragunnawali Evaluation (2020 to 2022) will align closely with the Goals and Vision of the Narragunnawali Strategic Plan:

With this in mind the overarching line of inquiry for Phase 3 of the Evaluation of Narragunnawali is:

To what extent, and to what effect, do the Narragunnawali program's strategic priorities and enabling initiatives – and the resources and activities that these encompass – meet the program's goals and intended outcomes, in alignment with the five dimensions of reconciliation and Reconciliation Australia's wider organisational vision and strategic goals?

Key evaluation questions for Phase 3 are:

- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali support schools and early learning services to develop and/or strengthen links with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali support schools and early learning services to engage in meaningful, practical and symbolic actions of reconciliation?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali empower and support teachers and educators to develop their own awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali empower and support teachers and educators to be confident to support reconciliation in their schools and classrooms, their students, and their students' families?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does the communications and marketing of Narragunnawali see an increase in engagement and participation in the program and wider reconciliation-in-education initiatives, as well as increased contribution made to relevant made to relevant policy frameworks?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does or could monitoring and evaluation enable evidence-based modifications, enhancements or changes to the Narragunnawali

program to occur, and enable the reporting of programmatic successes and challenges?

1.2 Outline of the remainder of the paper

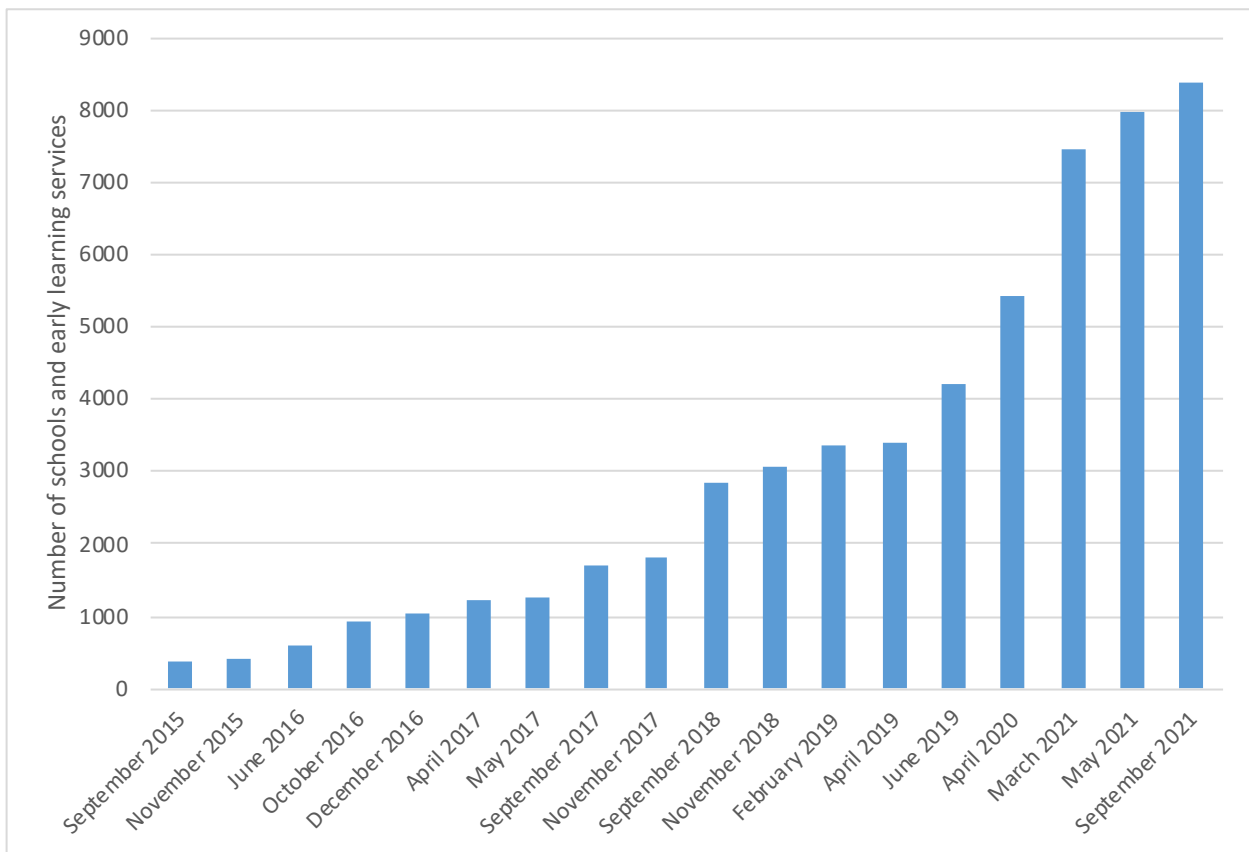
While acknowledging the distinction between ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education’ and ‘reconciliation in education’ (as outlined above), the aim of this paper is to consider empirically the link that might exist between the two, and the positionality of the Narragunnawali program within diverse Indigenous Education policy frameworks. Section 2 provides some updated summary statistics on the level of engagement with reconciliation in education in Australian schools and early learning services. This is followed by a discussion of the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young adults in Australia, including some new analysis of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and literacy and numeracy measurement. The section that follows then discusses some other policy frameworks of relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, and reconciliation in education, with the final section providing some concluding comments and implications for the Narragunnawali program.

2 Engagement with reconciliation in education

As of the 30th September 2021, there were approximately 8,361 Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP) on the Narragunnawali platform schools across 8,814 schools and early learning services. There were also approximately 100,211 registered Narragunnawali platform Users, of which 45,737 (approximately 45.6%) were associated with one or more Narragunnawali RAP Working Groups

Although there are some challenges in identifying an accurate denominator of schools and early learning services, approximately one-third of all institutions in scope of the program have or have had a RAP. This represents a large, and continued engagement by schools and early learning services with reconciliation in education since the program commenced in 2015 when there were less than 500 schools and early learning services that had commenced the RAP process (Figure 1), as well as since April 2020 at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when there were a little under five-and-a-half thousand schools and early learning services in the program.

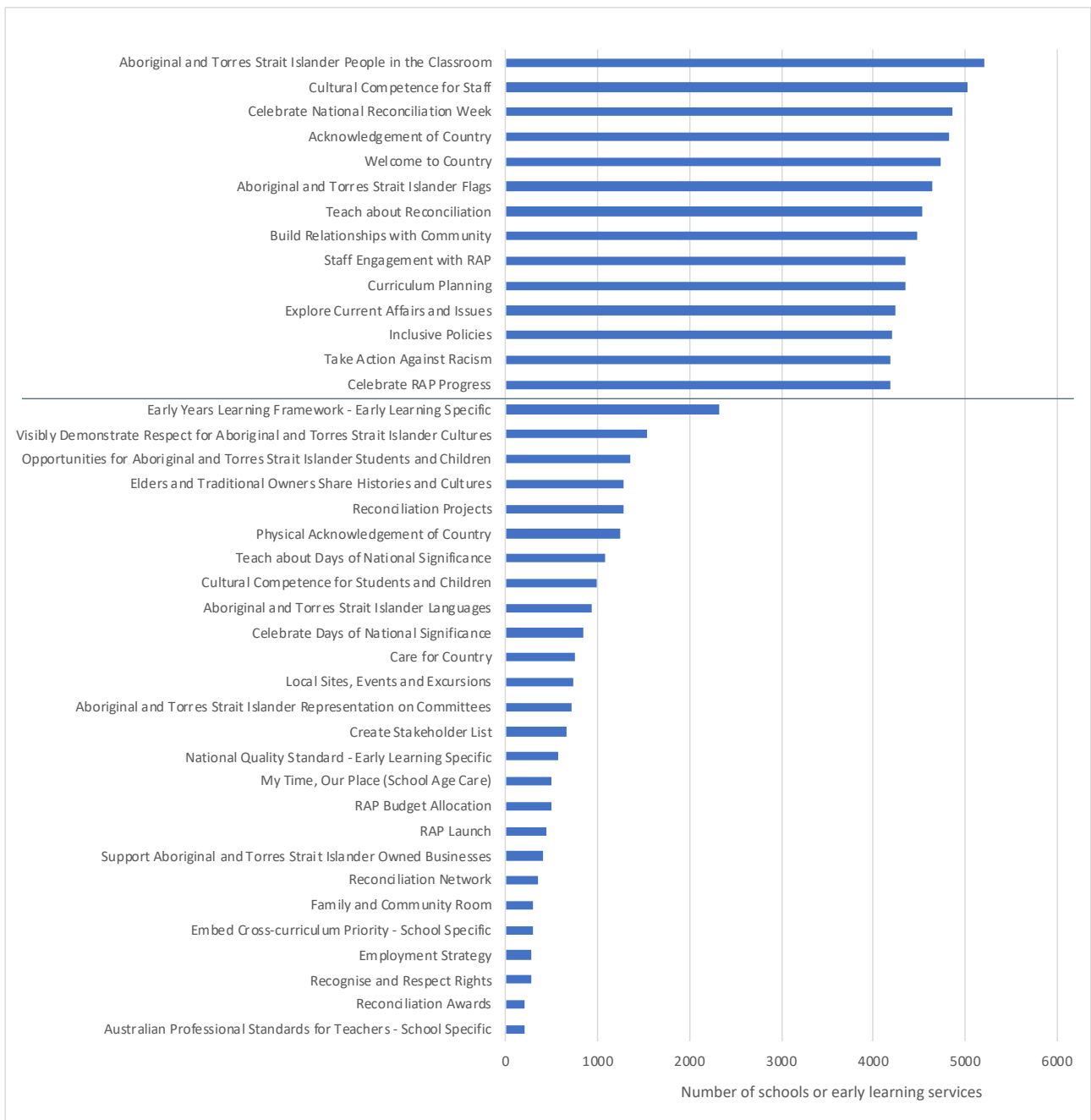
Figure 1 Growth in number of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in schools and early learning services



The vast majority of schools and early learning services that have a RAP are at the ‘Draft’ stage (80.1 per cent), most likely because they are either schools that have had a previous public RAP and haven’t since refreshed their RAP; because they are currently actively going through the RAP refresh processⁱ; or because they have only started the process of developing a RAP and haven’t yet reached publication stage.

There are a number of Actions – within a whole-school frameworkⁱⁱ designed to drive relationships, respect and opportunities in the classroom, around the school/service and with the community - that schools and early learning services can take as part of developing a RAP. Of the forty in total, 14 are minimally required for a public RAP, with the remainder recommended but able to be chosen based on the institution’s needs and aspirations. The following figure lists these Actions, ordered by the number of schools or early learning services that have added Action to their RAP. Those above the line are ‘Required’ RAP Actions whereas those below the line are recommended but not required.

Figure 2 Number of schools or early learning services with particular added RAP Actions, September 2021



3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes in Australia

Shifting the focus from reconciliation in education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education more specifically, the policy frameworks that will be discussed in the next section of this paper either implicitly or explicitly take a lifecourse approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. We can take a similar approach in our consideration of the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and students in Australia. It is important to acknowledge upfront that the policies/success measures referenced in this section relate to formal/government instituted ones, rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogical perspectives.

3.1 Early childhood development

Starting with developmental outcomes, our main information in Australia is the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). This data collection takes place every three years, with the most recent AEDC having taken place in 2021, but data available for this paper from 2018. Data is attempted to be collected in each wave for every child in their first year of full-time schooling using the 'Australian version of the Early Development Instrument'.ⁱⁱⁱ Specifically 'The AvEDI is completed based on the teacher's knowledge and observations of the children in their class. Children are not required to be present while teachers complete the AvEDI and schools participating in the AEDC are provided with funding for teacher relief time.' Based on this instrument,

In their *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID)*^{iv} report for 2020, the Productivity Commission analysed the differences in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who were developmentally on track using the AvEDI compared to non-Indigenous children, as 'defined as the proportion of children entering their first year of full time school who are on track (based on national cut-off scores established on the basis of the top 75 per cent of scores in the 2009 AEDC), in each of the five AEDC domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge.'

The Productivity Commission makes three key points about developmental vulnerability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. First, and perhaps most importantly, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (60-65 per cent) were assessed as being on track, with an increase in the proportion of students on track compared to 2009 when the AEDC was first collected. Clearly, there are no inherent reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should not be at the same level of development as a non-Indigenous student of the same age.

Although most children are on track, there is a large gap in this proportion between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander compared to non-Indigenous children. Specifically, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children [are] assessed in the AEDC as developmentally vulnerable at twice the rate of non-Indigenous children in four of the five AEDC domains.' Although it is important to not take a deficits approach to Indigenous education, the data from the AEDC clearly show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students start school with a greater risk of developmental vulnerability compared to non-Indigenous children.

The third point made by the Productivity Commission regarding the AEDC is that the difference between the two populations widens as remoteness increases, and that the different geographic distribution of the two populations is a likely cause of the developmental vulnerability. Furthermore, although the data is less detailed than by geography, there is also some evidence to suggest that developmental vulnerability is exacerbated by socioeconomic disadvantage and language barriers. Specifically, they quote Williamson et al. (2019)^v as finding that 'a large proportion of the inequality in social and emotional development between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children was explained by differences in socioeconomic disadvantage.'

3.2 Early childhood participation

One of the potential causes of developmental vulnerability is a lack of access to high-quality early learning. In this context, high-quality refers to the general measures captured in the National Quality Framework, as well as specific Indigenous-quality measures, including being culturally-responsive and language-appropriate.^{vi} In a study using linked data, we^{vii} found 'a likely beneficial effect of preschool participation on developmental outcomes.' It is quite a positive finding, therefore, that according to the Productivity Commission 'Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander children's enrolment in a preschool program in the year before full time schooling (YBFS) has increased over time and in 2019 more than nine in ten were enrolled in a preschool program in the YBFS (compared to just under nine in ten for non-Indigenous children).'

Importantly though, 'the magnitude of the benefit was less among Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous children' and an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child who attended preschool still had a higher rate of developmental vulnerability compared to a non-Indigenous child who attended preschool. This strongly implies that the quality of preschool education received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is lower than the quality received by non-Indigenous students.

3.3 School attendance and skills development

In order to bridge some of the gaps that emerge in developmental outcomes in the early years of schooling, it is important that students are able to attend school on a regular basis, that they see the benefit in doing so and are therefore motivated to attend, and that the instruction that they receive is of sufficiently high quality. Unfortunately, the data suggests that barriers to the education and skills development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students if anything widen over time rather than narrow in comparison to non-Indigenous students.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less likely to be attending school on a given day, compared to non-Indigenous students. The Productivity Commission finds that 'In 2019, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance rate for Years 1–10 was about 80 per cent, equivalent to attending four days on average per week. On average, non-Indigenous students attended school half a day per week more than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2019, with an attendance rate of about 90 per cent. This difference equates to half-a-day a week on average of missed school instruction, or 20 days of instruction over the average year.

Given the relatively low rates of school attendance and the finding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students start school with a higher rate of developmental vulnerability than a non-Indigenous student, it is not surprising that by Year 3 there are large differences in reading, writing and numeracy, as measured by the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). On average, a lower proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children achieved the NAPLAN national minimum standards compared to non-Indigenous students.

The differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Year 3 probably reflect a combination of socioeconomic and locational disadvantage prior to the commencement of schooling, differences in the quality and level of early childhood education, and other external barriers to skills development. However, change in NAPLAN at the individual level between Years 3 and 5 more directly reflect the impact of primary schooling, and the growth between Years 7 and 9 are likely to reflect the impact of secondary schooling.

In order to understand this student growth, modelling was undertaken for this paper to (a) test whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had the same level of growth in NAPLAN as non-Indigenous students (b) whether that growth was greater or less than expected after controlling for baseline NAPLAN, and (c) whether other observed socioeconomic, geographic and demographic characteristics explained any differences.

The ACARA dataset provided to the ANU includes all students who undertook the NAPLAN assessment for a given year. The data set used to estimate the models of growth in student outcomes excludes students who did not complete the previous NAPLAN assessment because it is not possible to measure student growth.

Given that Year 7 is the first year of secondary school, many students change schools between Years 6 and 7. The analysis is therefore based on growth in student outcomes between Year 3 and Year 5, as well as between Year 7 and Year 9. Of the students who completed NAPLAN in Year 5, 71.0 per cent also completed NAPLAN in Year 3 and were attending the same school in Year 3 and 5. For those who completed NAPLAN in Year 9, 69.4 per cent had both NAPLAN data for Year 7, had not changed schools and school income data was available.

The exclusion of students who changed schools between Years 3 and 5 or between Years 7 and 9, and those who missed the previous NAPLAN assessment has the potential to bias the results. In order to ameliorate such a potential impact, inverse probability weights based on the chance of having complete information, conditional on a range of demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic measures have been created. For details of this approach see Langkamp, Lehman and Lemeshow (2010).

Having constructed a weight for each student in the dataset, the next step is to create the measure of growth in student outcomes, which based on the discussion above, is the change in NAPLAN test scores for a given domain, over a two-year period (student gain). Figure 3 gives the difference in student growth between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with an increasing set of control variables in the analysis. Full results are given in Table 1 in the appendix.

The average student gain over the period for the full dataset and across all five test domains is 56.6. In the first model, we only control for the year in which the most recent test took place (2019 or 2018), whether the student was in Year 9 or Year 5 during the most recent test, and the mode of the test (online compared to offline). In this analysis, there was only a slightly higher increase in NAPLAN over the two year period for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students compare to non-Indigenous students (0.31). Despite having a very large sample size (almost 4 million observations), this difference is not statistically significant at the 5 per cent level of significance.

When analysing the factors that predict growth in student outcomes, it is important to take into account the baseline NAPLAN result for that student. This is in part because of floor/ceiling effects where students at the bottom and top (respectively) of the distribution have less space to decrease or increase (respectively) their scores between waves of testing. Another reason to control for baseline scores is the process known as 'regression to the mean', whereby random variation for individuals in their NAPLAN scores in a given year means that those students who (by chance) have a higher/lower score in one year than their true level of literacy or numeracy would suggest will have a relative decrease/increase in their NAPLAN score before the next wave of testing.

When estimating the relationship between student gain and other school inputs, the effect of baseline NAPLAN is controlled for using a modelling approach. This involves modelling student gain as the dependent variable (Year 3 to Year 5; or Year 7 to Year 9) and including baseline NAPLAN (Year 3 and Year 7 respectively) as a linear and squared term in the model. This allows estimation of the factors associated with student growth, holding constant where each student was on the distribution of academic performance in the preceding year.

The second model shows that when we control for baseline NAPLAN, the growth in NAPLAN for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student is significantly and substantially less than the growth for non-Indigenous students. Specifically, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student with the same NAPLAN score in Year 3 or Year 7 will have a growth in NAPLAN that is 22.4 points less than the growth for a non-Indigenous student. To put this another way, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students fall further behind their non-Indigenous peers at the same starting point.

Some of this difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students is due to other observed characteristics. A very flexible specification is used to examine this, as shown in the third line in Figure 3. The specification controls for the student's age, gender and language background. The models also include each category of the following variables as separate dummy variables, with the base case chosen to be the modal category and given in brackets:

- Father's occupation (base case = tradesperson)
- Mother's occupation (tradesperson)
- Mother's school education (Year 12)
- Father's school education (Year 12)
- Mother's non-school education (bachelor's degree or above)
- Father's non-school education (bachelor's degree or above).

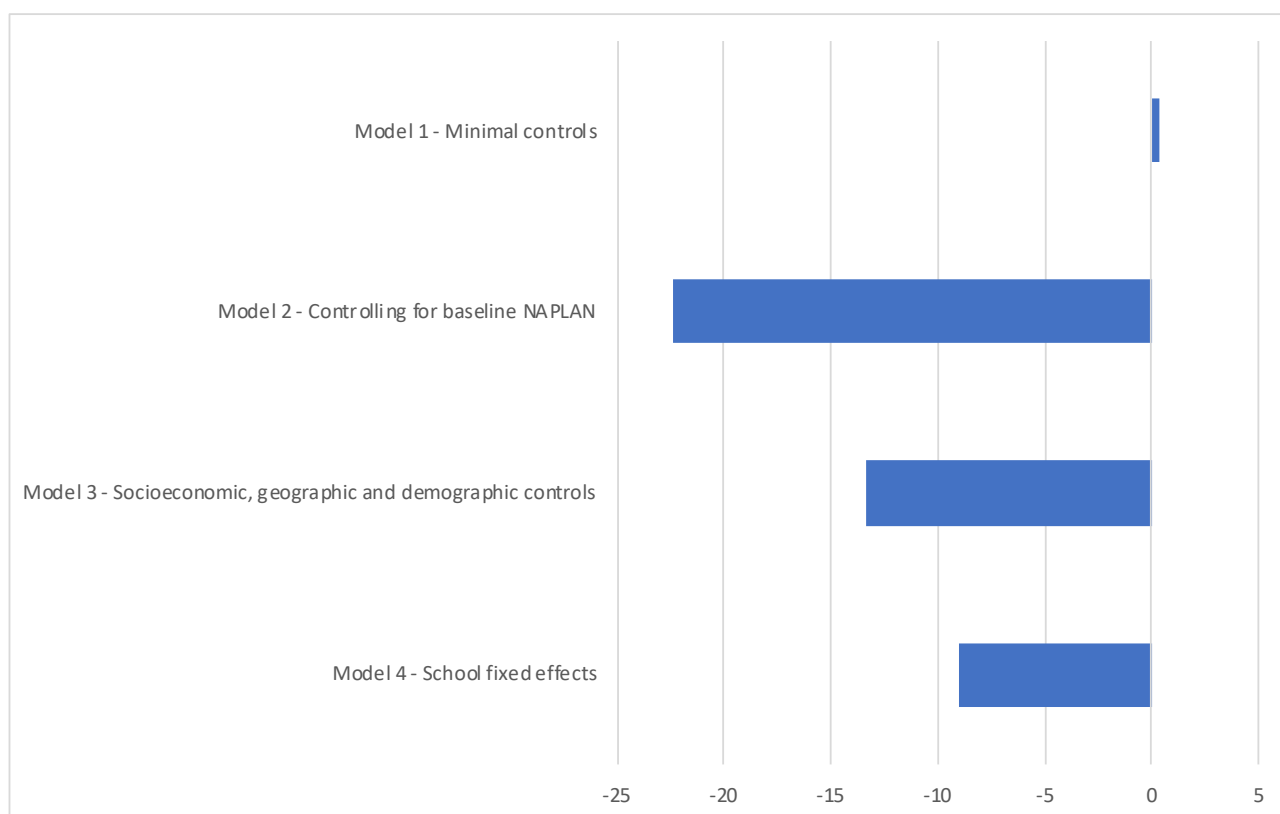
It should be noted that those students for whom characteristics of their mother and father are not known (including single parents) are still included in the analysis with a separate dummy variable for missing data, and that children with two parents of the same gender are likely to have one parent mis-classified as a father or mother.

The final set of variables in the model is a very flexible specification of remoteness, school sector, and school size. In this model, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student still has a lower growth in NAPLAN compared to a non-Indigenous student, but the difference (-13.4) is less than when these characteristics are controlled for. Observable characteristics explain some, but not all of the difference in growth by Indigenous status.

The final model in Figure 3 includes a school fixed effect term, which captures the average growth in the school that the individual child attends. The final difference (-9.0) in growth between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students is less again, once school level characteristics are controlled for. That is, the schools that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are attending appears to explain some of the difference in outcomes (that is, they have lower average growth rates), but even within the same school Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience lower rates of growth.

In sum, there are very large gaps in literacy/numeracy growth between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers adjusting for starting point, with some but far from all of these gaps explained by demographic and socio educational characteristics. It may be the case that the inclusion of further controls reduces the unexplained gap in the change in outcomes. However, these controls would need to predict change in NAPLAN, rather than levels.

Figure 3 Difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in growth in NAPLAN between years, 2016/17 to 2018/19, Year 3 and Year 5 students



4 The Closing the Gap and other policy frameworks

The previous section has shown that despite a very strong commitment to education from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, that compared to non-Indigenous children they attend preschools that have less of an impact on their developmental outcomes; start school with a greater rate of developmental vulnerability; attend school less frequently; have lower levels of reading, writing and numeracy in Year 3; and have lower levels of growth in reading, writing and numeracy between Years 3 and Year 5 or between Years 5 and Year 7. There are a number of policy frameworks in Australia both currently and historically that have attempted to address these and similar disparities.

Hogarth (2017), writing for *The Conversation*^{viii} identified a number of historic policies and practices that have had and continue to have negative impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. During most of the 1800s in Australia, schools were generally established by churches or charities. Missions were established, however, with the goal of civilising and centralising the Indigenous population and as noted by Hogarth (2017) ‘the education was minimal at best [and the] teaching and learning provided was to produce domestic servants or farm hands.’ During the protection era, segregated schools were established in any locality with sufficient numbers of Aboriginal children. Despite protests by parents of some non-Indigenous children, Indigenous children were still allowed to attend public schools in areas where segregated schools could not be established.

However, as noted by Hogarth (2017) ‘There was also the 1902 “Exclusion on Demand” policy, under which government schools in NSW were told to exclude Aboriginal children if other parents made a complaint about Indigenous children being in their child’s classroom. These children could then only attend special Aboriginal schools, which were not run by the Education Department, and were therefore predominantly taught by unqualified teachers.’

Between around 1940 and 1968, there was a decline in the Aboriginal schooling system, with the closure of many of the smaller schools discussed above. While this did lead to an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending mainstream schools, there were very few attempts to incorporate culturally-relevant and language-appropriate perspectives into practice and pedagogy.

4.1 The Closing the Gap framework

The main policy framework that exists at the national level in Australia to improve the outcomes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is the Closing the Gap framework. Originally implemented in 2008 by the Rudd government with a focus on the differences in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the framework has since been expanded to include 17 socio-economic and health targets across a range of domains^{ix}

1. Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031.
2. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 per cent.
3. By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent.
4. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.
5. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent.
6. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent.
7. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent.
8. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent.
9. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent.
10. By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent.
11. By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10-17 years) in detention by 30 per cent.
12. By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent.
13. By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero.
14. Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.

15. By 2030,

1. a 15 per cent increase in Australia's landmass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests.
2. a 15 per cent increase in areas covered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests in the sea.

16. By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.

17. By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion

Unlike the previous iteration of the Closing the Gap agenda, which had minimal input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) established the Joint Council on Closing the Gap (the Joint Council) in December 2018. The Joint Council is co-chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Australians (currently the Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP), and the Lead Convener of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks), Ms Pat Turner AM. It includes ministers from each state and territory, twelve members of the Coalition of Peaks, and a representative of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA).

There is generally much greater support amongst the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community for the current framework compared to previous iterations. According to Janine Mohamed, Distinguished Fellow of the George Institute for Global Health^x "The expanded targets, which our people had urged for years, include the wider social and cultural determinants of health, such as language, housing, child protection, family violence, social and emotional wellbeing, and land and water access and rights."

There are still, however, real limits with the current Closing the Gap target and agenda, particular with regards to education and the findings discussed earlier:

- Although there is a justified focus on enrolment in the YBFS, this does not factor in the evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students obtain less of a benefit from preschool compared to non-Indigenous students;
- Although there is a commitment to increase the proportion of children that are developmentally on track, there would still be a very large gap when compared with non-Indigenous students;
- There are no targets set for the school years, with no commitment to improve literacy/numeracy, make schools engaging enough for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attend, or improve the level of school attainment (as opposed to school completion).

A further limit of the Closing the Gap agenda is that it places all the focus on the characteristics of Indigenous Australians. For example, there are no targets related to the knowledge or awareness held by non-Indigenous peoples, including recognition of, or respect for, Indigenous histories, languages or cultures. There are also no targets related to reducing the negative attitudes towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait population held by some non-Indigenous Australians, as documented in the Reconciliation Barometer.^{xi}

4.2 Other policy frameworks

While the Closing the Gap policy framework invariably sets the agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, it is far from the only policy framework that guides or impacts on student or other outcomes. Alongside the Closing the Gap framework, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy was endorsed by education ministers on the 18th September 2015.^{xii} The Vision as part of the strategy is ‘All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia’s First Nations peoples.’

As part of Australia’s Federal system, each State and Territory has significant control and autonomy over education design and delivery. This is guided by State and Territory specific policy frameworks that work alongside the Commonwealth’s frameworks (including on Closing the Gap). A review of each of these is beyond the scope of this paper, though it should be noted that they often have quite different foci and priorities to each other, and to the Commonwealth’s approach. The same could also be said for the non-government school sector which, although providing education for a smaller proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than the non-Indigenous population, can also directly impact on the education outcomes of a large minority of the Indigenous population.

There are also non-government organisations or other parts of government that are important parts of the broader ecosystem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The strategies or approaches that these organisations take can also impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and also shape the potential direction and outcomes from programs such as Narragunnawali.

One overarching group of frameworks or interventions relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that provide direct or indirect support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. This includes:

- the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) which has a draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy;^{xiii}
- the GO Foundation^{xiv} which provides ‘scholarships to Indigenous students from primary school through to university, to students who live on country, in community and with family’ primarily in public schools;
- the Aurora Education Foundation which provides a number of programs for school-students outside of schools;^{xv}
- The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which ‘provides scholarship funding for Indigenous students to complete Year 12 or tertiary studies, with career support to help them make a successful transition to employment’, primarily in private schools;^{xvi} and
- and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) that has recently released its education strategy.^{xvii}

What these strategies and approaches share that may differ somewhat from government approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is the more direct focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages both as an important area itself, but also as a way to maintain engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

A second broad set of policy approaches or frameworks relate to those developed by or for organisations that represent educators. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has, as part of a wider research and resource development project, developed an ‘Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce’

Discussion Paper^{xviii} which ‘seeks to bring the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities together to re-imagine what our shared future might look like.’ The framework and the organisation more broadly recognises that ‘Addressing our internal biases and assumptions and developing a greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges is critical to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It can improve learning outcomes, strengthen engagement, and recognises that a relationship between students and teachers built on cultural respect and understanding can change lives.’

The Discussion Paper also references the following kinds of points of relevance to reconciliation in education/aligned with the focus of the Narragunnawali program:

- “the need for the teaching workforce to reflect on their role in working towards reconciliation and improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students”;
- “culturally competent systems and teachers promote reconciliation”; and
- “developing and implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan”

At the older end of the education distribution, Universities Australia has developed an ‘Indigenous Strategy’^{xix} that ‘brings all member universities together to achieve common goals to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education.’ It is somewhat concerning that the strategy does not appear to have been updated beyond the 2017-20 timeframe and that there is not a greater focus on the role of universities to train professionals (including but not limited to teachers) who may not identify as Indigenous themselves but that will have a substantial impact on the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

There is also a Quality Initial Teacher Education review taking place^{xx} with the associated Discussion Paper making some reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, although no explicit reference to reconciliation in education.

A final broad set of frameworks or policy discussions relate to the curriculum and what students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are taught at school regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, language and culture. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is currently undertaking a review of the Australian Curriculum.^{xxi} The last time this took place was in 2014. A key part of the review is to strengthen the existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. This cross-curriculum priority is relevant to all learning areas and year levels and seeks to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the ability to see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in the curriculum; and allow all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-curriculum Priority Consultation Document highlighted the need to respond to Review findings that showed that the existing organising ideas associated with this Priority were outdated and did not reflect Australia’s First Nations Peoples’ calls for truth-telling with greater respect for, and inclusion of, First Nations Australians histories and cultures throughout the Australian Curriculum

Such a focus is not without its critics and it will be important to reflect on the extent to which this priority is either strengthened or diminished once version 9.0 of the curriculum is made public in 2022.

Alongside the review of the Australian Curriculum (relating to primary and secondary schools), there is also a current review of the Approved Learning Frameworks for early

learning and outside school hours care services.^{xxii} The Stage 2 Discussion Paper makes many direct references to reconciliation (as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education considerations). Indeed, “Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives throughout the Frameworks, including the vision, principles, practices and outcomes” is highlighted among the opportunities to update and improve the ALFs, with an explicit recommendation re “Expanding the EYLF and MTOP visions recognises the role of ECEC and OSHC in advancing children’s engagement in Reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures.”

5 Concluding comments and implications for Narragunnawali

This paper has documented the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, as well as the policy frameworks in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is delivered in Australia. It has documented how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth and their families engage in education at high rates at all levels of education. However, it has also shown that there are ongoing barriers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population achieving equity in education outcomes. Detailed analysis of NAPLAN data has shown that not only do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students start school with measured literacy and numeracy levels that are lower than for the non-Indigenous population, but that these outcomes do not increase by as much between Year 3 and 5 or Years 5 and 7 for an otherwise equivalent non-Indigenous student (based on observable characteristics).

The main policy framework in Australia that incorporates education outcomes is the Closing the Gap framework. This paper has discussed how the current version of the framework has more substantially incorporated input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations than previous versions. However it has also documented where there are a number of gaps in the framework, particularly that there are no targets set for the school years, and that there is no focus on the attitudes or outcomes of non-Indigenous students, with no attempt within the framework to increase knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, culture or history, nor any focus on reducing the level of discrimination perpetuated by predominantly non-Indigenous Australians on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

The paper also outlined a number of additional frameworks that either explicitly or implicitly attempt to fill some of the gaps in national education (and related) policy. These policies or frameworks fall into three categories – those related to the direct support provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students including by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations; those related to the training and development of professionals or institutions within the education ecosystem; and those related to the curriculum within which education is delivered in Australia.

A program that also fits within the education ecosystem is Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education. The direct targeted change agents of this program is somewhat different to the other frameworks and focus areas outlined in this paper, particularly with regards to the program’s focus on the knowledge, beliefs and behaviours of non-Indigenous staff, students and wider members of educational communities. In research presented and/or discussed in previous papers in this series, it has been documented that some of the outcomes outlined in this paper (including relatively low levels of literacy and numeracy and wellbeing at school) are directly associated with discrimination and the attitudes of the non-Indigenous population. It would appear from the review of other frameworks presented in this paper that a program such as Narragunnawali is somewhat unique, but by supporting positive attitudinal shifts and respectful educational environments, vital to achieve the goals in

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education set by those frameworks. The quite rapid growth in schools and early learning services that have engaged with the Narragunnawali RAP development process, and the number of individuals registered to access the information and resources available on the Narragunnawali platform more broadly, suggests strongly that there is demand for such a program.

The focus of Narragunnawali is on reconciliation in education, more so than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education more specifically. Indeed, improving the ability of educators to deliver evidence-based programs that focus on and are informed by Indigenous perspectives, cultures, languages and histories is important in and of itself. However, such programs also have the potential to facilitate educational environments that are conducive to improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly when delivered alongside some of the other community-driven and informed interventions discussed in this paper.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/storage/media/media-uploads/refreshing-your-rap-faqs_982OA.pdf
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/raps/rap-framework>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/researchers/early-development-instrument>
- ^{iv} <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2020>
- ^v Williamson, A., Gibberd, A., Hanly, M., Banks, E., Eades, S., Clapham, K. and Falster, K. 2019, 'Social and emotional developmental vulnerability at age five in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in New South Wales: a population data linkage study', International Journal for Equity in Health, vol. 18, no. 120
- ^{vi} <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>
- ^{vii} Falster, K., Hanly, M., Edwards, B., Banks, E., Lynch, J.W., Eades, S., Nickel, N., Goldfeld, S. and Biddle, N., 2021. Preschool attendance and developmental outcomes at age five in Indigenous and non-Indigenous children: a population-based cohort study of 100 357 Australian children. J Epidemiol Community Health, 75(4), pp.371-379.
- ^{viii} <https://theconversation.com/is-policy-on-indigenous-education-deliberately-being-stalled-76855>
- ^{ix} <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>
- ^x <https://theconversation.com/how-can-the-new-closing-the-gap-dashboard-highlight-what-indicators-and-targets-are-on-track-163809>
- ^{xi} <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/australian-reconciliation-barometer-2020/>
- ^{xii} <https://www.dese.gov.au/indigenous-education/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-strategy>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.snaicc.org.au/early-childhood-strategy/>
- ^{xiv} <https://www.gofoundation.org.au/>
- ^{xv} <https://aurorafoundation.com.au/>
- ^{xvi} <http://www.aief.com.au/about/>
- ^{xvii} <https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/aiatsis-education-strategy-2021-25.pdf>
- ^{xviii} <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/indigenous-cultural-competency/get-involved>
- ^{xix} <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/policy-submissions/diversity-equity/indigenous-higher-education/>
- ^{xx} <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review>
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- ^{xxii} <https://www.mq.edu.au/faculty-of-arts/departments-and-schools/macquarie-school-of-education/our-research/research-groups/approved-learning-frameworks-update>