

What can *Footprints in Time* tell us about transition to school?

A successful transition into school creates a pathway for positive academic, social and wellbeing outcomes. A successful transition is one that enables the child to feel comfortable, connected and engaged with the school environment and community; facilitates readiness to learn; and promotes, among parents and families, a feeling of engagement in the school experience and school community (SNAICC 2013b).

Readiness for school does not reside wholly in the child; it is a multi-faceted construct in which children's abilities and health, family capacity, early childhood services and supports, schools and the broader community all play an important part (Dockett, Perry & Kearney 2010).

Readiness may best be understood as the match between the child and the institutions that serve the child including families, schools and communities.

According to Dockett, Perry and Kearney (2010), school readiness incorporates three major components:

- children's readiness for school
- school's readiness for children
- the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children's development and learning.

This article examines what the data can tell us about the school readiness that Indigenous children in *Footprints in Time* have experienced. In terms of ready schools, the SNAICC report identifies outputs in various areas of school readiness that facilitate Indigenous children's transition to school including: positive school and family relationships; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff presence; positive relationships between teachers and Indigenous students; cultural competence of all school staff involved in the transition process; and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning. *Footprints in Time* can provide information that may be useful in each of these areas and these are each addressed separately in this article.

In addition to information collected from primary carers and the children, *Footprints in Time* collects information from the children's teachers. In considering data from the teachers' questionnaire there are a number of caveats to consider. As teachers are approached about the study children if and once the primary carer has given permission, the time of the year that the teacher completes the questionnaire for each child varies. This may have an impact on how well the teacher knows the child and their family. It should also be noted that in some cases the teacher has several *Footprints in Time* children in their class, so proportions and numbers refer to the number of children, not the number of individual teachers unless specifically stated. Unfortunately there are many children at school for whom there is no completed teacher questionnaire, which means that while the data can give an idea of school's readiness for individual children within the sample, it would be inappropriate to draw conclusions from the data about school readiness for Indigenous children either in *Footprints in Time* or in general.

A total of 375 teachers provided responses to the teacher survey for 473 children; 263 children in the younger cohort (55.6 per cent of teacher responses) and 210 children in the older cohort (44.4 per cent of teacher responses). This accounts for 39.6 per cent of all children in the older cohort and 41.2 per cent of the children in the younger cohort who attend school. Most of the teachers (318) had only one *Footprints in Time* child in their class. The remainder had between two and seven.

Positive school and family relationships

One way in which children may become familiar with the school environment is to visit the school prior to their first day of school. In this way, primary carers can help prepare their child to become familiar with the environment without the other pressures the first day of school may bring. Primary carers of older cohort children who had already started school in Wave 3 were asked if their child had visited the school before their first day. The vast majority (85.8 per cent) had. In wave 5, primary carers of the younger cohort were asked the same question. Slightly fewer children (83.4 per cent) had visited the school prior to their first day but the small difference between the cohorts is not statistically significant.

As discussed earlier, parental responsibility for a child's learning does not stop once they enter school. Teachers were asked a series of questions about practices used in their schools to involve parents. There were 13 students for whom there was no response so the total number of responses is 460. Note this is based on response per child, so both teachers and schools may be counted more than once (see Table 34).

Table 34: School practices to involve parents

Activity	Number who said yes	Percentage of all responses
Orientation activities	409	88.9
Parent participation in program	315	68.5
Formal meetings about child's progress	368	80.0
Parent education programs	240	52.2
Social activities for parents	291	63.3
Regular newsletters	324	70.4
Other	58	12.6
None	0	0

Teachers who gave 'other' as a response were asked to describe parental involvement activities offered at their school. Responses include:

- open afternoon
- assemblies
- excursions to important cultural places
- talking to parents when they come to pick up the child
- open door policy
- community visits
- home visits
- family night concert.

For most of these 460 children there are a number of activities available, with eight children having all seven types of activities available and 50.8 per cent having five or more activities available. (Parental involvement in school is further discussed in the article 'Parental engagement in child's learning and development' on page 38.)

Another way of keeping in touch with parents is through parent-teacher meetings. This may be through special parent-teacher evenings that all parents are invited to attend or may involve requests for meetings with the parent of a child about whom the teacher has particular concerns. Teachers of the older cohort were asked about the number of parent-teacher meetings offered for the child so far at the time of questionnaire completion. Of the 191 children for whom there are valid responses, there were only eight for whom no interview had been

offered. The majority had been offered one (77) or two (70), although up to 12 were offered. The data does not distinguish between general parent–teacher nights available to all students and specially requested interviews. The data also includes the number of interviews the primary carer attended. It is not clear from the data whether subsequent interviews were offered because of previous lack of attendance by the primary carer. Of the 177 children whose teachers offered interviews to their primary carers, 94 (53.1 per cent) had primary carers who attended all interviews. One-third attended no interviews. Of these more than half had only missed one interview but other primary carers had missed up to six.

In Waves 3 and 4, primary carers of the older cohort were asked whether they thought that the study child’s teacher understands the needs of families from an Indigenous background (see Table 35).

Table 35: How well teacher understands the needs of Indigenous families, per cent

Response	Wave 3	Wave 4
Very well	25.4	29.7
Well	33.1	32.0
Just OK	20.7	15.6
Not done at all	20.7	22.8
Number	507	482

In both waves more than half the primary carers felt that the study child’s teacher understood the needs of Indigenous families. Analysis of the *Footprints in Time* data shows that this perception of the child’s teacher is significantly associated with attendance. Children of primary carers who responded ‘well’ or ‘very well’ to this question were more likely to have attended school every day they were supposed to in the previous week than those whose primary carer who responded ‘just OK’ or ‘not done at all’.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff presence

When teachers and children have some common background, such as culture or language, teachers tend to view children more positively (Saft & Pianta 2001 in Dockett, Perry & Kearney 2010), reinforcing the importance of involvement of local Indigenous staff in Indigenous children’s schooling (Dockett, Perry & Kearney 2010).

According to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) ‘Staff in Australia’s schools’ survey report, in 2010 1 per cent of teaching staff in government primary schools and 0.6 per cent in secondary schools were Indigenous (McKenzie et al. 2011). Of the teachers responding to the *Footprints in Time* questionnaire in Wave 5, 10 responded they identified as being Aboriginal, one teacher identified as being Torres Strait Islander and 3 teachers identified as both. The Aboriginal teachers are all in urban areas or areas of low isolation. Between them, these 14 teachers had 22 children from the study in their classes.

Teachers of the older cohort were asked about whether there were Indigenous staff or teachers at the school and whether there were Indigenous education workers at the school (see Table 36). These were part of a series of questions examining Indigenous education focus, which will be examined in more detail later in this article.

Table 36: Indigenous staff and education workers in school, per cent¹

Response	Indigenous teachers/staff	Indigenous education workers ¹
Currently doing	83.0	80.0
Working on	2.2	1.0
Not doing	14.8	19.0
Number	182	195

The majority of children whose teachers responded to the survey attend schools in which there are Indigenous teachers or education workers.

Positive relationships between teachers and Indigenous students

When they are well supported by parents and teachers and they feel safe and loved learning will occur.' (quote from a *Footprints in Time* teacher)

Teachers of *Footprints in Time* study children were asked a series of 15 questions about their relationship with the study child.² The questions use a five point response scale. The responses to these questions can be combined into a single measure and converted to provide a score between 1 and 5, on which higher scores indicate a more positive relationship. For a total of 454 children, the average score is 4.3,³ indicating that on the whole teachers felt they have a positive relationship with the study child. The scores ranged between 2.2 and 5 with 42 children (9.3 per cent) having a relationship score of 5. The relationship between the teacher and child and the combined literacy and numeracy scores (for more information about this refer to the article 'Keeping children at school') is both marked and significant. Compared with children in the bottom quartile of the relationship scale, children in the second quartile have average scores 11.2 points higher on the combined literacy and numeracy scale and children in the top two quartiles have scores on average 18.3 points higher. The same is seen for the approach to learning scale (for more information about this, refer to the article 'Keeping children at school'), with average scores higher by 3.8 and 6.7 points respectively. However, it must be remembered that this association does not indicate causality. For example, it may be easier for teachers to develop strong relationships with children who have good literacy and numeracy skills rather than a strong relationship being the cause of those skills. Teacher–child relationships are bidirectional, with both teacher and child contributing to the nature of the relationship (Rudasill et al. 2006 in Dockett, Perry & Kearney 2010).

Cultural competence of all school staff involved in the transition process

Although evidence in the literature regarding successful school transition points to the need for schools and teachers to be culturally competent, there is little consensus on what this means in practical terms. Overall cultural competence may comprise a number of different competencies:

- commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respectful relationships
- cultural awareness
- cultural respect

¹ Indigenous Education Workers are known by different titles Australia wide: NT—Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, WA—Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer, SA—Aboriginal Education Worker, QLD—Community Education Counsellor, NSW—Aboriginal Education Assistant, VIC—Koori Educator (ref: <http://samekidssamegoals.org>).

² These questions are from the Student–Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta 1992).

³ Scores were calculated pro rata if one or two responses were missing. Scores were not calculated if there were more than two responses missing.

- cultural responsiveness
- cultural safety
- cross-cultural practice and care (SNAICC 2013b).

Footprints in Time teachers were asked a number of questions about their cultural competence including whether they had had any formal training, where they had received this training and what additional training they thought they would benefit from.

Teachers of the younger cohort were asked what Indigenous-specific training they had received. There were 115 teachers (teaching 135 children between them) who described the training they had received and 54 (teaching 56 children) who responded that they had received no Indigenous-specific training. There were also a further 23 teachers (teaching 54 children) who responded that they did not know. Responses from teachers about the types of training they had received were varied and included:

- personal experience, such as teaching in remote schools or growing up with other Indigenous children
- professional development courses
- courses as part of tertiary qualifications
- policy training and awareness
- conferences
- language courses
- state and local training
- working alongside Indigenous teacher aides
- being Indigenous themselves.

Teachers of children in the older cohort were asked a set of questions about whether they had received specific types of training and if so, how that training had been delivered. Table 37 shows the responses to these questions. There are responses from 165 teachers. Teachers could select more than one response.

Table 37: Teacher training, number

Training	As an undergraduate	In-service training	As part of post graduate studies	Learned on the job	No
General cultural awareness	66	72	14	1	10
Indigenous cultural awareness, appreciation or cultural safety	56	61	9	84	19
How to teach Indigenous knowledge	35	45	4	63	59
How to teach Indigenous children	41	47	6	94	23
One or more Indigenous languages	5	6	1	15	141

While most teachers had received training in general cultural awareness, fewer teachers had received Indigenous-specific training. Teachers were most likely to have learned Indigenous-specific knowledge and teaching skills on the job. Teachers were much more likely to have received training in these skills as an undergraduate if they were in the 25 to 34 years age group.

Even though most teachers in the study had received training, many still felt that they would benefit from further training in Indigenous culture or teaching Indigenous children. There are responses to questions about further training from 350 teachers (see Table 38).

Table 38: Further training desired, Wave 5

Type of training	Number	Percentage
Indigenous cultures in general	156	44.6
Indigenous culture in your local area	228	65.1
How to teach Indigenous children successfully	235	67.1
How to teach Indigenous knowledge appropriately	214	61.1
Indigenous language training	112	32.0
Other training or study	15	4.3
I feel confident I have sufficient training	44	12.6

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers selected more than one of the five specific areas listed. Of those who specified 'other training or study' they would like to receive, several mentioned Indigenous-specific courses or always wanting to learn more. One teacher mentioned wanting to have ESL training and another to learn Kriol.

Around one-quarter of the study children speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language and primary carers reported that around 9 per cent were learning one in school in Wave 5 (refer to articles on language in Part B). As Tables 37 and 38 show, Indigenous languages is an area of learning in which few teachers have received training, as well as the one in which they are least likely to feel they would benefit from further training. Of the 375 teachers who provided survey responses, two said that they speak, read and write an Indigenous language and 38 said that they speak a few words only. Yet there are 23 teachers who teach classes in which all the children speak an Indigenous language. One of the two teachers who speak, read and write an Indigenous language and 11 who speak some words only teach classes in which all the children speak an Indigenous language.

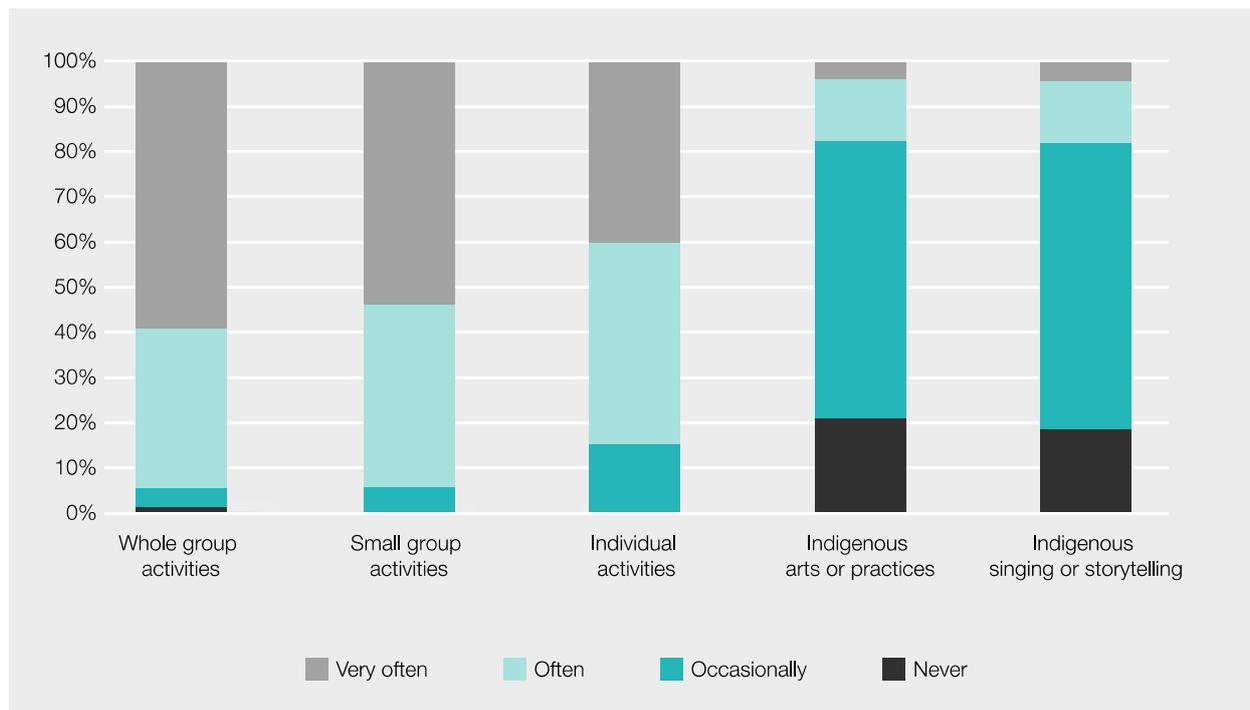
Another way in which the cultural divide may be bridged in the classroom is through other staff working with the teacher. In the free text responses about what works well for Indigenous children, several of the teachers mention that they have Indigenous teacher aides working in the classroom with them.

Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning

Children learn in different ways. Some absorb information best when reading or seeing it, some absorb it best when hearing about it and others learn through doing. Teachers were asked to specify what they had found to work well for Indigenous children's learning outcomes. In relation to their learning styles, teachers most commonly mentioned children learning through hands-on activities. Other commonly mentioned themes were 'working in small groups' and 'having clear structure and routines'.

- 'Hands on real life activities small group activities'
- 'More hand on activities more practical activities / give simple directions'
- 'Working well: hands on, explicit instruction. Using resources which are specific to their understanding'
- Teachers were asked how often they conducted specific types of activities in the classroom (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Types and frequency of classroom activities, per cent



Tabular version of figure 9

Activity	Never	Occasionally	Often	Very often
Whole group activities	0.2	4.8	35.0	60.0
Small group activities	0.0	5.0	40.9	54.1
Individual activities	0.0	14.8	44.6	40.7
Indigenous arts or practices	19.6	62.8	13.3	4.4
Indigenous singing or storytelling	18.2	63.6	14.7	3.5

The majority of children participate in small group activities often or very often but they are equally likely to participate in whole group activities often or very often. Of the children who participated in whole group activities very often, 73.9 per cent also participated in small group activities very often.

Indigenous-specific activities (such as Indigenous arts or practices and Indigenous singing or storytelling) were done less frequently with less than 20 per cent of children in this sample participating in them often or very often. Teachers are more likely to do these two activities very often in classes in which there are more Indigenous children.

Teachers were further asked whether they conducted any of these activities in an Indigenous language. Two teachers (three children) conducted all activities in an Indigenous language and 48 teachers (78 children) conducted some of the activities in an Indigenous language. There were 340 children for whom all teaching activities were conducted in English.

Some of the teachers also commented on the importance of Indigenous culture and learning in the question about what works well for Indigenous children in the school setting.

- Working well is language and culture lessons, opportunity for student to express themselves, creating a safe and warm classroom.'
- 'Recognition and value placed on the culture in the whole school setting through display of artwork, inclusion of texts in class and celebration, activities and performers during NAIDOC week.'
- 'Relating their work to their own real life experiences and valuing and integrating Indigenous culture into teaching and learning activities.'
- 'Hands on and real life or life like experiences links to both cultures—'white' and Indigenous.'
- 'Integrating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum—it helps them connect with their culture and history, particularly those children who are disconnected as time has gone on and they may have very little knowledge of their elders/ancestors.'
- 'The presence of [Indigenous] staff who are here every day to give lessons and to support. Being immersed in language through song, activities and dance.'

Concluding comments

From the responses to the teacher's survey, the schools attended by the *Footprints in Time* children appear to be implementing many activities and learnings to assist Indigenous children transition to school. However, what has not been examined is the number of different practices within each school. Also not examined in this article, largely due to small sample size, is how geographic differences influence what is put in place to help Indigenous children make the transition. As the study collects more information about the children over the next years of their schooling, further analyses will unpack what helps a successful transition to school.

For references and appendices cited in this research, please refer to the full version of the *Footprints in Time: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children Report from Wave 5*.