



**SNAICC Submission to the House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Employment, Education and Training: Inquiry into
Education in Remote and Complex Environments**

February 2020

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, in particular 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.

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1. Introduction

Context

Children who live in remote Australia are likely to share many common experiences. Specifically, they are more likely to be: Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, developmentally vulnerable when they start school, live in low income and single parent households; experience greater social isolation and housing stress, be exposed to family and domestic violence and have contact with child protection services (Arefadib & Moore, 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children account for 44 per cent of all children in remote areas in Australia (ABS, 2016), despite making up less than 6 per cent of all children in Australia (ABS, 2016) and are 12 times as likely as non-Indigenous children to live in remote areas (ABS, 2016). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote Australia are more likely to experience a lack of access to appropriate services, known to mediate the impact of adversity in early childhood. For these reasons, when inquiring into the education of students in remote and complex environments, it is crucial to focus on the needs and circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families specifically.

Developmental vulnerabilities & access to early childhood education and care (ECEC services)

The 2018 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are consistently 2.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains when they start school. More than 19,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included in the 2018 AEDC, 35.2 per cent of whom were 'on track' across all domains, compared to an average of 77.3% per cent of non-Indigenous children. However, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children 'on track' significantly decreases in all domains as remoteness increases.

One major reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are commencing school developmentally behind their peers, particularly in remote Australia, is because of their lower engagement in early education and care services (Arefadib & Moore, 2017). A significant body of evidence concludes that engagement with quality early education and care services enhances children's early development, especially for children who do not live in a rich home learning environment (Sylva, 2010; Moore and McDonald, 2013). It is therefore a major concern that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote Australia have the lowest levels of participation in early childhood education and care compared to those living in major city areas (O'Connell, Fox, Hinz & Cole, 2016; Baxter & Hand, 2013).

We know how important engagement with these services is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, as a further analysis of census, Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) and AEDC data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children concludes that those children who attend preschool are significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those who do not (Biddle and Bath 2013).

2. Key barriers to the education journey

Despite the paramount importance of engagement with quality early education and care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia, there remain extensive barriers for our families in accessing the supports they need.

In SNAICC's Early Years Discussion Paper developed in partnership with Early Childhood Australia, we have identified the wide ranging, complex and interrelated factors that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from accessing and participating in early education and care services – services that are crucial in setting a strong foundation for our children's further education journey. These barriers cross over four domains: individual; service; system and cultural.

Individual-level barriers

As provided in the context to this submission, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in remote Australia have significant and complex needs, circumstances and experiences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more likely to be unemployed and experiencing financial hardship. Data provides that the lowest levels of preschool participation are in families where no-one is employed, or the main source of income is governmental benefits, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are disproportionately represented in these families (Biddle, 2007; Hewitt & Walter, 2014).

Individual-level barriers include family stress and challenges such as housing instability and preventable health conditions. These issues stem from histories of colonisation, child removal and the long-term impacts of intergenerational trauma. If these issues are to be addressed, education services must be designed to support families with the challenges they face, in order to support early learning and development for their children. The way forward and most appropriate service models for our families are discussed further in the 'Community and family structures that support a child's education' section of this submission.

Discrimination is also a barrier for our families to access early education and care services. Families who feel they are discriminated against are significantly less likely to attend preschool (Biddle & Bath, 2013). In remote areas, while it will more often be a primarily 'Indigenous' environment, many families still experience a cultural gap with professional staff

and leadership being non-Indigenous. Fear of institutional involvement, and in particular child removal, remains deeply embedded for many of our families (SNAICC, 2010). The necessity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the major role they play in breaking down these barriers will be further discussed throughout this submission.

Service-level barriers

Service-level barriers are major contributors to our children in remote areas of Australia being significantly behind children in other areas in early education participation and outcomes. Service barriers refer to service delivery systems, programs, processes and style, as well as service staffing and practice. Remote locations in Australia experience a lack of service infrastructure (Wise, 2013), workforce shortages and a lack of housing for staff (ACECQA, 2019).

Our families in remote communities across Australia have less access to basic and specialist services than do their counterparts in urban areas. It is of great concern there are persistent shortages in early childhood education and care and intervention services, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disabilities the most disadvantaged (Arefadib & Moore, 2017). There are also shortages in pediatric, allied health services, and mental health services for children (Arefadib & Moore, 2017). In addition, families and professionals often need to travel long distances to access or provide services. Other forms of service that might be able to bridge the gap, such as telehealth services, are not always available (due to lack of access to computers and broadband internet) or culturally appropriate. Together this means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote areas of Australia are at much greater risk of poorer developmental outcomes, and poorer lifelong health and well-being outcomes (Arefadib & Moore, 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services, including Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) play a crucial role in breaking down these service-level barriers and facilitating access to early childhood education and care, as well as other forms of child and family support. They are discussed in the 'Community and family structures that support a child's education' section of this submission.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce challenges

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is central to supporting early childhood education and care participation. Research has found that the presence of a preschool worker who identifies as Indigenous, working in the area where a child lives, significantly increases attendance (Biddle, 2007). However, recruiting and retaining quality staff, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, is a major difficulty in remote communities in Australia (SNAICC, 2016).

Early learning services in remote Australia have more than three times the rate of staffing waivers as services in metropolitan Australia (ACECQA, 2019), and the national regulator, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), acknowledges the problem:

'Children's education and care services located in remote and very remote areas continue to have the highest proportion of staffing waivers, reflecting the greater difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in those locations' (ACECQA 2019, p.54).

Despite the necessity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years educators in remote communities, the challenges around training and employment are extensive. These challenges can be attributed to culturally unsafe training processes, recruitment and workplace culture, structural and language barriers and inflexible workplaces, lack of access and support for relevant qualifications and a lack of recognition of the value of Indigenous culture and knowledge in educational services. Importantly, SNAICC's members identify that there is a major lack of local training opportunities.

Best practice responses for overcoming challenges in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators stress that the engagement approach must be determined by the local context and community it seeks to service, and must be based on genuine consultation with this community (SNAICC, 2011). It is therefore crucial that investment be made into innovative, community-based strategies to recruit and retain suitably qualified local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. The importance of local community knowledge, relationships with community members and an understanding of effective learning methods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children cannot be underestimated.

To create a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in remote communities, additional funding is required for on-the-job mentoring, flexible training to achieve relevant qualifications that can be undertaken remotely or on location in remote areas, as well as flexible working arrangements. Funding for backfill is also a critical component and prerequisite for training to take place in remote communities, yet it is often overlooked (SNAICC, 2011). The gaps in supporting and developing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce undermines services delivery in line with research that shows that incorporating culture and language into early childhood education not only increases child participation but also empowers and provides an honoured place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the education system (Simpson, Caffery, McConvell, 2009).

System-level barriers

There are also extensive systemic barriers in accessing early education and care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities. One major example is the introduction of the Child Care Package (the Package), and accompanying ‘Activity Test.’

Before and since the introduction of the Package, SNAICC has been consulting regularly with a large network of child care service providers that provide services to a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in every state and territory, to monitor and better understand the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Specifically, SNAICC has been hosting regular teleconferences with the network, has held face-to-face workshops and consultations and has distributed online surveys to obtain key data from services who provide educational supports for over 1700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We are highly concerned by the results, which clearly highlight the way the Package has made early education less accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The Package is impacting accessibility in two main ways, by:

1. Reducing the hours of access of many of the most vulnerable children through the introduction of the Activity Test
2. Introducing restrictive administrative burden that discourages participation for families and impacts operational capacity for services

- 1. Reducing the hours of access of many of the most vulnerable children through the introduction of the Activity Test*

The Activity Test introduced by the new Child Care Package in 2018 halved the minimum number of subsidised hours of child care available to families that do not meet specified work and study requirements from 24 to 12. As noted in the introduction to this submission, engagement with early education and care services enhances children’s early development, especially for families experiencing social disadvantage, (Sylva, 2010; Moore and McDonald, 2013). This knowledge, coupled with the many individual-level barriers, including unemployment, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in remote Australia face, make it clear that instead of reducing the amount of hours of access to early education and care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities, policies should be focused on increasing them.

Evidence on the optimal hours per week of early education and care required for children experiencing disadvantage is not fully conclusive, however leading reviews of the international evidence base have concluded that a minimum of 15 hours and likely more is required for at least 2 years before formal schooling to improve learning outcomes (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017). A number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early

years services have identified that it is important for children to have access to up to 50 hours per week to be able to support the rights of individual children and families appropriately, as their needs vary over time depending on the family context (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016; SNAICC, 2018). Analysis of data from a longitudinal study in the United States suggests that children from low income families required attendance at a centre for more than 30 hours to experience significant gains in pre-reading skills; and with additional hours gains could be seen in reading and maths (Loeb et al, 2007). Broadly the evidence suggests that a minimum of 30 hours per week in age-appropriate early education and care programs for children experiencing disadvantage, with the potential for flexibility based on an individual child's needs, far more than what current government subsidies allow.

Given that increased participation in quality early education and care represents a powerful means of transcending disadvantage (Black et al., 2017; Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2017), the introduction of the Activity Test runs counter to and undermines an extensive range of government policies intended to close the gap in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In SNAICC's most recent survey in 2019 on the impacts of the Package, 14 out of 31 services (45%) told us that children were accessing less hours of early education and care because families were entitled to fewer subsidised hours of care as a result of the Activity Test. Given that SNAICC's early years network supports a high proportion of the most vulnerable children and families across rural and remote Australia, these findings suggest that the Activity test is widening the already large gap in access between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children. Services have been reporting that the 12-hour minimum subsidised hours only equates to one full day of child care in a week, and regularly describing how challenging it is to tell families in difficult circumstances that their children are entitled to only one day of child care. These challenges are culminating in a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families dropping out of early education and care services altogether. In fact, 21 out of 31 services (68%) that responded to a relevant SNAICC survey question reported that families have dropped out of attending their service following the transition to the Package.

Quotes from SNAICC's surveys:

- *The babies' room is the worst. We used to have 8 babies and now because of the Activity Test we only have 4. (Child Care Provider QLD)*
- *Being in a remote community in the middle of Australia, it has been hard to tell our parents that this isn't what we want, it's the government doing this, and that it's happening across Australia for all child care services and centres. (Child Care Provider NSW)*

- *It does not cater for our community at all.* (Child Care Provider QLD)

2. Introducing restrictive administrative burdens

SNAICC's consultations have revealed that the Package has resulted in significant administrative burden for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in remote communities, and a significant increase in administrative burden for services, which are acting as barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing early education and care services. One major complication is the requirement that families be registered with Centrelink. Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities do not have access to adequate internet or mobile phone coverage, or personal computers. This has resulted in either the family not attending a service because they do not have supports necessary to register, or in service staff personally setting up families' Centrelink accounts. This process creates a high burden of additional, unfunded administrative and family support work for services. 31% services that responded to a survey question on the key reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are accessing fewer hours of early education and care, said that it was due to families being unable to register with Centrelink.

Quotes from SNAICC's surveys:

- *You can't just roll stuff out mainstream and expect Indigenous communities to cope* (Child Care Provider QLD)
- *The process for some families to apply for CCS has been very frustrating. Often families are being told different information each time they talk to Centrelink. They are spending hours on the phone or when they visit Centrelink they are just directed to the computers and no one that knows about CCS can help them.* (Child Care Provider NSW)
- *10-15 children have gone. They find the new system difficult to navigate.* (Child Care Provider NSW)

Cultural-level barriers

Cultural factors are pivotal barriers to accessing and participating in early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Early learning programs that do not reflect the culture and knowledge of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community are seen as unsafe 'white fella' places and tend not to be used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families within that community (Kitson & Bowes, 2010).

Trust is the most important factor in determining participation in services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more likely to trust a service if a positive and engaged relationship was established with the service

provider, the service employed local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, and the services incorporates and demonstrates value for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Pre-existing staff relationships with the children and family members, or within a close-knit remote community, have also been highlighted as particularly important to building trust (Kellard & Paddon, 2016).

Cultural safety and competency are central to considerations in addressing cultural barriers to service access. A culturally competent early childhood service is one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are recognised and valued. Cultural competency has different facets and must be applied across an organisation, from individual staff attitudes, values and behaviours, to the policies, programs, culture and leadership at the institutional level. Cultural competence is best enabled through service delivery by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as discussed below.

3. The role of culture and country in a child's learning

The vital importance of culture and language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Culture is a fundamental aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning and wellbeing. The importance of culture is not limited to the knowledge held by and practices of Indigenous Australians, but also the respect and recognition of that culture amongst the wider community. It is also important to understand that the word 'culture' refers to the diversity of the myriad Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and peoples, each with their own 'distinct cultural norms, law, language and identity' (AHRC 2013; SNAICC 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures differ across clans, locations and generations – cultural norms practiced amongst one particular Aboriginal clan in one particular remote community may look very different to cultural norms practiced amongst another clan within that same remote community.

Culture is of the utmost importance for our children in remote locations across Australia, because growing up with a strong connection to, and understanding of culture acts as a strong protective factor for children and families. Current research confirms this link between culture, child development and wellbeing, and demonstrates that interventions that include opportunities for the expression of cultural identities are associated with measurable improvements in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (MacLean et al. 2017; SNAICC, 2019).

Therefore, in order for our children to get the best start to life on their educational journey, cultural views of health, wellbeing and the importance of family and parenting need to be well understood and respected when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Educational services must be responsive to cultural needs and understand the

cultural determinants of health and wellbeing, while recognising the broader social determinants that impact upon the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Lohoar, Butera & Kennedy 2014).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is the interconnection of social, emotional, physical and cultural factors that contribute to individual health and wellbeing (SNAICC, 2019). Regardless of the culture specific to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family, the ability of an education service to recognise and incorporate cultural practice into the way it interacts with a child and family has been identified as the most important aspect of child care for Indigenous children (Australian Government, 2006, p.8).

Importance of language

Language can act as a significant barrier to accessing and engaging in early education in remote communities. Recognising and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in schools and early education programs is vital to enhancing remote education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The year one school curriculum presumes a level of English that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities do not have. For this reason, many of our children are beginning their school journey from a position of disadvantage.

The benefits of bilingual education have been recognised for many years, as reflected in international and Australian evidence documenting the link between recognition and use of first language and cultural knowledge and student identity, wellbeing and education outcomes (Black, 1993, Crawford 1997, McCarty and Bia 2002; UNESCO 2003). Research shows that learning a concept in a child's first language supports second language learning and achieves better academic results in both languages. Therefore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be respected, taught and preserved, as their unique value is fundamental to improving educational outcomes for First Nations children.

Bilingual education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was promoted in the 1970s and by 1988, 24 remote schools were teaching both English and 19 Aboriginal languages. Since then, a number of interventionist policies, including a Commonwealth Government supported closing of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, have resulted in a significant decrease of the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Languages in remote education (Devlin, Devlin, Disbray, 2017). In 2016, 58% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were reported to speak an Australian Indigenous Language at home (Census, 2016). Despite these statistics and the compelling evidence for the benefit of bilingual education, there continues to be a lack of investment and acknowledgement for the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in improving the wellbeing and education of children in remote Australia.

4. Community and family structures that support a child's education and their attendance at school

The fundamental role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Early Education and Care Services & integrated service models

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early education and care services, which are grounded within and managed by the local community, have the unique ability to provide a culturally safe and nurturing space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to commence their education journey. A growing body of knowledge evidences that they are best placed to deliver the most culturally appropriate care and to successfully engage with our families experiencing vulnerability (Sims, 2011). They provide a safe space to build cultural pride, confidence and resilience to support children to engage successfully with mainstream schooling and to better deal with and respond to racism that they may experience (SNAICC, 2012a).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-controlled early education and care services that are equipped to build on the skills and strengths of their children, instead of emphasising their perceived 'deficits', provide a safe space for children to build confidence and learn, and ensure content is relevant and meaningful. Given the education gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children, particularly in remote communities, increasing access to community-controlled education structures is an important way to get our children on track at the beginning of their education journey.

Integrated service delivery models are emerging as a best practice approach to engaging effectively with children and families experiencing vulnerability. In Australia, the pursuit of increasing service integration has been viewed as a promising means of engaging with, and responding holistically to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (SNAICC, 2019). Services that are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that incorporate integrated offerings and seen to offer the greatest capacity to shift the trajectories of our children (SNAICC, 2019).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated community-controlled early years education and care services are often described as 'holistic, one-stop shops' providing families with access to the wraparound support services they require. These programs include a range of services in addition to early childhood education and care, including health screening and programs such as maternal child health, speech pathology and occupational therapy and family supports and referral pathways to specialist services. These services are vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas across Australia, as they act as anchor point for relationship building and to facilitate referrals later as required (SNAICC, 2019). Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote Australia are likely

to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school and experience greater social disadvantage than their non-Indigenous counterparts, it is vital to invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years services.

Case Study: Nai-Beguta Agama Aboriginal Corporation

Evidence of the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled early education and care services can be seen in the Nai-Beguta Agama Aboriginal Corporation in remote New Mapoon in the Northern Peninsula Area of QLD, which operates a childcare service and an outside hours care service. Nai-Beguta Agama Aboriginal Corporation fills the gap of quality child care and activities and creates a place for women to be able to talk about issues they may face when seeking to create healthy, safe families. New Mapoon Child Care Centre caters for 39 children, and the after-hours care caters for 30, all of whom are Indigenous.

In addition to offering child care and after-hours care, Nai-Beguta Agama Aboriginal Corporation offers a large array of allied health and family support services. The Corporation regularly provides growth and development assessments and occupational therapy supports, and have recently implemented a healthy eating and breakfast program.

Culture is an inherent part of the Corporation. All the service educators are Indigenous and share their culture with the children, and the educators are currently receiving additional training on how they can further embed culture into all activities. The Corporation runs a cultural food program with the children, and New Mapoon language and Torres Strait Islander language is spoken in the service. The Corporation coordinator Jasmine Sandhu explained that embedding language into daily activities is important for the children's growth.

Being a remote service, one of the major challenges for Nai-Beguta Agama Aboriginal Corporation relates to workforce and having access to relief staff. In most situations potential relief staff don't have access to transport to get to the service, and there is no local transport in the community, which makes things very challenging. The difficulty in finding relief staff also makes finding time for professional development for the educators an ongoing struggle.

In describing the strengths of the Corporation, Jasmine says that they are regularly bringing in new programs tailored to the Indigenous children attending to ensure that when parents bring their children in, they know the children will be looked after and will get access to the additional supports they need to start school stronger. Having been in operation for over 23 years the Corporation has the trust of the community and is embedded within it. The employment of local staff is crucial to this.

5. Recommendations

1. Commonwealth and state/territory governments permanently commit to funding universal access to high-quality early education for three-and-four-year olds.
2. Invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services, through a specific early education program, with clear targets to increase coverage in remote areas of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and high levels of disadvantage.
3. COAG to fund a targeted program for supporting evidence informed, culturally safe, integrated early childhood and family-focused programs across the nurturing care spectrum in early education and care services that work with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
4. Closely monitor and publicly report on the impact of the transition to the Child Care Package on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to ensure that the goal of increasing their access to early education and care is achieved, making adjustments as required.
5. Amend the Activity Test within the Child Care Subsidy to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements.
6. Deliver an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care workforce development strategy to expand and build capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and strengthen the cultural competence of the mainstream workforce.
7. Invest in bilingual education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and educators in remote settings.

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