More Indigenous children are going to preschool, but is this enough?



The latest *Closing the Gap* data contains some good news – there is a marked increase in early childhood enrolments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The report shows how in the year before full-time schooling, there has been a 25 per cent increase in enrolments over the past seven years.

In 2016, 76.7 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were enrolled in a preschool program. In 2023, it was 101.8 per cent (this figure is more than 100 per cent due to different sources of data and will be updated once we have 2021 Census population figures).

This shows we are both improving on track to meet the target of 95 per cent of students enrolled in early education before they start school by 2025.

Does enrolment equal outcomes?

But it isn't all positive news, particularly when it comes to children thriving in their early years.

While it is not new data, the report also notes only 34.3 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were "developmentally on track" when they started school as of 2021.

This was a decrease from 35.2 per cent in 2018. The target of 55 per cent is also not on track to be met.

The developmental assessment involves five measures: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge.

As the Closing the Gap report notes, this developmental assessment is "based on a Western paradigm [and] it may not fully demonstrate the progress and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children".

But this result is puzzling when we can see the majority of Indigenous children are engaged in early childhood education,

which is supposed to prepare students to be ready for school.

What does the research say?

We know it is important for children to receive quality early education before they begin school, it has benefits both for their wellbeing and for their learning.

Research on Indigenous children has shown it can help build their literacy in both the short and long-term and numeracy skills in the long-term.

A systematic review published in 2020 investigated whether early childhood education programs support positive education and developmental outcomes for Indigenous students. It showed preschool education has the potential to provide long-term benefits and prepare Indigenous students for school.

However, the authors also noted it matters what kind of education they are getting. The preschool programs need to be high quality – exactly what this entails, and how we evaluate it, is still being determined.

For Indigenous children, research suggests affirming their cultural identities as well as having strong engagement and connection with their families and communities is vital.

How can we do it better?

Our latest, as yet unpublished research looks at how we can create culturally responsible resources for Indigenous children. This means resources are meaningful to kids.

With educators and community members on Wakka Wakka Country and Bindal and Wulgurukaba Country we co-designed curriculum resources for children aged zero to five years using Indigenous voices and cultures.

This included using Indigenous languages, animals and symbols [for] children in digital literacy and numeracy resources.

For example, instead of having cows and pigs, we have echidnas and emus with the names in English and Wakka Wakka. Instead of counting three apples or five cats, children count kangaroos, fish and mud crabs, featuring Indigenous designs.

These offer ways of exploring the world that connect to children's real-life experiences and acknowledge and embrace their cultural identities.

As one community member told us during our research: "People who have experienced other people's cultures are better human beings, because that speaks to one's humanity by the fact that we should be respecting each and every one of us and all our forms and shapes and our histories."

What can we do now?

Our research emphasises how early childhood educators can embed identity-affirming practices. But there are many other aspects of high-quality early childhood education, such as key indicators of literacy and numeracy, that need investigating.

We are in the position now where most Indigenous children are enrolled in early childhood educational programs. The focus should turn to developing a robust evidence base for what quality looks like for Indigenous children and how it can be implemented across the nation.

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