

# Looking for the X-factors: Contextualised learning and young Indigenous Australian children



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## Abstract

This paper outlines an Education Horizons research project (Department of Education & Training, Queensland; July 2016– June 2017) of the same title. The project comprised two research activities: an online survey and a small case study of early childhood and early years education programs in Logan, Darling Downs and Far North Queensland regions.

This paper describes the small-scale case study of Cherbourg State School in Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire (Darling Downs south-west education region) to identify its 'X-factors' in the contextualisation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for young Indigenous Australian learners. In particular, it will outline the X-factors pertaining to the school's Pre-Prep program.

## Contexts

### Australia

In the late 2000s, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) introduced the Early Childhood Reform Agenda to bring a cohesive and consistent approach to early childhood services, including quality standards and curriculum. Two major components were the Early Years Learning Guidelines (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012).

At the same time, the COAG also introduced the Closing the Gap: Overcoming Aboriginal Disadvantage reform agenda (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). Early childhood development was identified as one of seven building blocks for reform. However, the main foci of the agenda were child health and development, and maternal health. Only one area focused on early childhood education, namely access to services or programs.

### Queensland

These COAG reform agendas also informed the Queensland Government's education policies and strategies. This research in this paper also sits within the Queensland Government Department of Education and Training's Strategic Plan 2016–2020 and Every Student Succeeding reports on state schools strategies for 2014–2018 and 2017–2021.

### Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire

The history of Cherbourg is one of Aboriginal people being forcibly removed and brought from all over Queensland and Northern New South Wales to a newly formed government reserve ... . Under the *Aborigines Protection Act* of 1897 the settlement then called Barambah, was gazetted and established in 1904. In 1932, the name Barambah was then changed to Cherbourg due to a nearby property called 'Barambah Station' which caused confusion in mail delivery.

Located 375km north-west of Brisbane, Cherbourg covers 3130 hectares DOGIT [Deed of Grant in Trust] land and is within Wakka Wakka tribal boundaries and bordering onto Gubbi Gubbi (Kabi Kabi) territory to the east ... The population is approximately 2000,

however, as a result of the relocation of indigenous people under past government policies, residents of Cherbourg have connections to many other tribal groups throughout Queensland. (Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council, 2017)

## Cherbourg State School

Cherbourg State School (CSS) is a Band 8 school for Pre-Prep to Year 6 that caters for approximately 180 students. The school is located in the heart of the Cherbourg community, and is part of the Darling Downs West Education district. Approximately 50 per cent of school staff are Indigenous Australians, most from the local community. Table 1 provides details of Cherbourg State School student data.

### Cherbourg State School Pre-Prep

The Pre-Prep class is seen as another class within the school not just a kindergarten located within the school grounds. Staff are seen as, and expected to be, part of the full school staff (i.e. attend staff meetings, undertake professional development). Enrolment for 2017 is 24 children and as the data in Table 1 suggests, the support offered to the students through this additional year of schooling is vital. Therefore, it was a deliberate decision to invest in Pre-Prep, especially through staffing (see Table 2).

The Pre-Prep program has many key features:

- it is based upon the *Foundation for Success* framework and corresponds well with the *Early Years Learning Framework*
- its aim is to ensure children are school ready (experience and understand school culture, gain pre- and early-reading skills, knowledge of basic numeracy concepts and 'language')
- it offers a play-based, positive learning environment
- it is a 'bucket filling' program that promotes healthy consideration of self and others (Cherbourg State School is a Positive Behaviour for Learning school and is striving for Tier II status)
- non-teaching staff are trained in the Abecedarian Approach (3A) to build knowledge of books and reading
- all teacher-aides (Pre-Prep to Year 3) are initially trained in the Abecedarian Approach and a staff member is able to train other staff
- a consultant who specialises in working with EAL/D students (developing awareness of their home language, Cherbourg lingo, and Standard Australian English) spends time with students in Pre-Prep in Term 4 as part of their transition to Prep the following year.

**Table 1** Cherbourg State School and student demographics

<b>Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage rating: 2016</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rating: 610</li> <li>• School distribution: Bottom quartile – 94%</li> </ul>
<b>Australian Early Development Census: 2012</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 54% vulnerable on 2 or more domains</li> <li>• 34% vulnerable on 1 domain</li> </ul>
<b>Nationally Consistent Collection Data – School Students with Disability: 2016</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approx. 30% extensive or substantial adjustments made for them in the classroom</li> <li>• 84% having adjustments made at some level by teachers</li> </ul>

**Table 2** Staffing arrangements: Cherbourg SS – Pre-Prep, 2017

Pre-Prep staffing	
Teacher: Bachelor of Education – early childhood trained (female; full-time)	Teacher Assistant: Diploma – Children’s Services (female; full-time)
Teacher-Aide: Diploma of Education (female; 0.5)	Teacher-Aides: completing Cert III: Children’s Services (male: 2 – full-time; female: 0.5)

## Relationships

Cherbourg State School has worked hard to establish strong community links and this is reflected in our school vision: *Connecting community and school strengths to enrich students' lives*. Major relationships include:

- Cherbourg Early Years Leadership Circle, which includes staff from the school, a local child care centre, regional members of the Department's Early Childhood Education and Care team, Health, Cherbourg Council and invited guests.
- the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program (children from 0 to 4 years)
- Invitation to elders to meet with Cherbourg State School principal (minimum once per term) to provide feedback and advice.

## Literature

Although the first wave of early childhood education policy for Indigenous Australian children focused on access (DEET, 1989; MCEECYA, 2011), more recent policy foci have widened to encompass care, development and education (Arcos Holzinger & Biddle, 2015; Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe & Moore, 2012; Hewitt & Walter, 2015; Wise, 2013). Therefore, unlike compulsory schooling for Indigenous Australian children, early childhood education programs operate within regulatory frameworks such as the Early Years Learning Framework (2009) and the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education, 2009). Each framework identifies particular expectations for these services and programs regarding the role of Indigenous Australian culture.

Subsequently, in Queensland, the Foundations for Success Guideline (first developed in 2008, then revised in 2013) has been employed by educators to contextualise and implement the Early Years Learning Framework in Indigenous Australian early childhood education programs. However, Kearney, McIntosh, Perry, Dockett & Clayton (2014) found 'educators struggle to situate their own knowledge and experiences in relation to the knowledge and experiences of others in both the educational and cultural contexts in which they work' (p. 338). This serves to remind us that teachers do not only draw on professional knowledge, but also draw on personal, cultural experiences and capabilities in their professional roles. Their cultural competence (Guilfoyle, Saggars, Sims, & Hutchins, 2010; Sims, 2011) sometimes frustrates their curriculum competence.

## Methodology

The aims of the research project were to understand the types of decisions and adjustments educators make in their planning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and the role of professional development in supporting early childhood educators to contextualise early childhood education programs for young Indigenous Australian children.

The overall project used two research activities:

- an online survey (not discussed in this paper)
- case studies of early childhood education programs with Indigenous Australian enrolments.

The case studies did not seek to identify and develop 'best practices', or to compare services within and across regions. They sought to identify the factors teachers demonstrate to contextualise curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for young Indigenous Australian learners. This also required understanding the contexts of schools and communities to ensure these macro and micro contexts were not erased or bracketed (see Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). The design was therefore exploratory and analytical.

## Data collection

The methods for data collection were:

- document analysis: policy, community, school (October 2016 – May 2017)
- teaching-learning artefacts (April 2017)
- classroom observations of long daycare, Pre-Prep, Prep, Year 1 (April 2017)
- teacher interviews (April 2017).

## Research findings

The regulatory contexts of early childhood services prior to compulsory schooling are found to add significantly to the roles of early childhood educators. This impacts some educators' efficacy to make professional decisions; for others, it impacts upon their professional identity. If educators are teaching out of their specialisation, these systems expectations can generate disconnections in their work to contextualise the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for young Indigenous Australian learners. Table 3 outlines the number and types of system expectations required of early childhood education services and programs.

*\* While not an expectation of early childhood educators, some educators apply aspects of these curriculum guidelines*

Given the above, and keeping in mind the factors outlined earlier (Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire, Cherbourg State School), a major X-factor in the Pre-Prep program is the investment in staffing, which specifically:

- exceeds regulation requirements in having five staff for 24 children enrolled
- employs two Aboriginal, male teacher-aides (one mature-aged, one young adult)
- represents two non-Aboriginal staff; three Aboriginal staff.

In terms of understanding how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is contextualised, Table 4 outlines the Cherbourg State School Pre-Prep X-factors.

**Table 3** Systems expectations regarding Indigenous early childhood education, early years education curriculum, pedagogy, assessment

Education setting	Systems expectations
Childcare/ Children's Services: Educational Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundations for Success: Guideline for extending and enriching learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the kindergarten year.</li> <li>• Early Years Learning Framework.</li> <li>• ACECQA National Quality Standards: 7 Quality Areas; Quality Rating &amp; Assessment process.</li> </ul>
Pre-Prep programs: Educational Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundations for Success: Guideline for extending and enriching learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the kindergarten year.</li> <li>• Early Years Learning Framework.</li> <li>• ACECQA National Quality Standards: 7 Quality Areas; Quality Rating &amp; Assessment process.</li> </ul>
Prep classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundation Year: National Curriculum</li> <li>• Curriculum into the Classroom</li> <li>• Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline; Early Years Curriculum Guidelines*</li> </ul>
Year 1 classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year 1: National Curriculum</li> <li>• Curriculum into the Classroom</li> <li>• age appropriate pedagogies</li> <li>• Australian Early Development Census data collection</li> </ul>

**Table 4** Cherbourg State School – Pre-Prep X-factors

Education setting	Systems expectations
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contextualisation of curriculum was intentional and explicit</li> <li>• expectations stated in curriculum guidelines had been competently mediated</li> </ul>
Pedagogy (teaching)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• planning for teaching was explicit</li> <li>• teaching plans were designed for the term and subsequent weeks and days</li> </ul>
Pedagogy (learning experiences)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pedagogy was learner-focused</li> <li>• it was intentional in demystifying the culture of the classroom for children</li> <li>• it was intentional and explicit in making expectations for learning and interacting with adults and other children clear</li> <li>• responsiveness to children was intuitive</li> <li>• it was explicit in building the children's identity as learners</li> <li>• play was unstructured and educational</li> </ul>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflections of teaching were explicit</li> <li>• reflections children's learning were intentional and implicit</li> <li>• learning was documented daily</li> <li>• learning was reported daily and weekly</li> </ul>

## Take away messages: How to look for the X-factors

- Understand how the level of regulatory burden in early childhood education programs impacts educators in contextualising curriculum, teaching and assessment. This shouldn't be an excuse to lower the expectations of children, families, educators, schools and communities.
- Look for ways educators apply professional knowledge and demonstrate capabilities to mediate systems expectations and contextualise these in classrooms (don't solely focus on the 'gaps' or deficits as per testing outcomes).
- Look for in and across the contexts of classroom, year level, school level and community (this is an ecological approach).
- Look for evidence of the culture of the classroom and the culture of the school (and not only the culture of Indigenous Australians).
- Look for curriculum competence that engenders and facilitates cultural competence.

## Key points for discussion and conclusion

The X-factor project was never intended to be a study of an educational intervention. Its purpose was to understand what is happening in some early childhood services for young Indigenous Australian learners. It has identified some core concepts that are foundational to any educational setting (i.e. curriculum competence), but then also identified concepts that emerge out of their particular contexts. Where these are intentional, made explicit and articulated by educators, especially for children and families, they also serve to demystify the culture of teaching and of classrooms.

Where school-level decisions are made as both short-term and long-term goals, the X-factors are logical and strategic and a worthy investment.

As schools are a major employer of people from the local community, many, like Cherbourg State School, can boast another X-factor – the inter-generational stories of 'an education community' (as different to a school-community). An education community documents its factors, similar to those outlined earlier (also seen in newsletters and annual reports). When studied closely, another X-factor emerges – that of an 'educated community'. This pertains to the capabilities, achievements and successes of current and former students of the school. For example, the Aboriginal staff who are now employed in the same school where they were once students.

Finally, along with the administrative data available from many sources, there needs to be a pool of data (and

therein, evidence) regarding not just 'what' is taught and 'what has been learned' (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004), but 'how' this has been intentionally designed and also made explicit in pedagogy, monitoring and measuring children's learning. Gaining an understanding of how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is contextualised, and focusing on curriculum competence (and not solely cultural competence), will provide insights to closing the gaps in educational outcomes. Then, the small, localised (and seemingly insignificant) X-factors of the present, could be the benchmarks of the future.

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