

## Chapter 16

# Promoting wellbeing with educationally disadvantaged children through community partnerships

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### Key words

**Educational Disadvantage** – can be understood as inequality of educational opportunity, resulting from schooling which fails to account for, or makes assumptions about, socio-cultural and economic contexts and other broader structural inequalities, such as limited access to resources (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014).

**Health Promotion** – is based on the World Health Organization's (WHO) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), that educators should promote and maintain the health of children and young people and the wider community. Whole of community approaches which enable an individual or group to realise aspirations, satisfy needs and cope with their environment. Health is therefore a resource for everyday living encompassing personal, social and physical capacities.

**Physical Activity** – body movement produced by skeletal muscles which increases the body's metabolic rate (affecting heart rate, breathing, sweating etc). Health related fitness (HRF) can result from physical activity, when the movement is designed to improve cardiorespiratory endurance, reduce blood pressure and regulate body fat. Performance-related fitness (PRF) results from physical activity that focuses upon improving muscular strength and power, and cardiorespiratory fitness, usually for application in skilled movement or sports (Bouchard, Blair & Haskell, 2012).

**Wellbeing** – the capacity to live a fulfilling life, through informed decision-making and with resources to shape one's future. Wellbeing incorporates a strong sense of identity, developing personal autonomy but also a relational sense of belonging to a collective with a positive sense of life, purpose and direction (Department of Education, 2007, p.6).

**Salutogenic** – an approach to understanding health and wellbeing that draws attention to the qualities, abilities and knowledge that students already have and can further develop, and, a perspective on how to teach so that students may learn in ways that enrich their lives and strengthen them as healthy citizens, contributing to sustainable community health development (Quennerstedt, 2008).

### Introduction

There are many children in Australian attending school who are educationally disadvantaged, meaning they derive the least benefit from the education system in Australia. This chapter focuses on the essential role that educators have in understanding the relationship between educational benefit and health, physical

activity and wellbeing, and their role in working in partnership with communities to *act upon* **educational disadvantage** to promote wellbeing in early years learners.

This chapter is organised into sections that provide the background knowledge that is relevant to the **health promotion**, physical activity and wellbeing for *all* early years learners, paying particular attention to students with backgrounds that for many reasons can be described as educationally disadvantaged. We will review policies that should guide educator decision-making across the dimensions of health, **physical activity** and wellbeing. Insights are given into the relationship between recognition of culture and identity and educational rights, building resilience, safety and pride in the early years and the educator's role in fostering their development. While this discussion does canvass some social and contextual factors underpinning healthy development for children who experience disadvantage, the focus is more on what you can do as a teacher to promote these dimensions from a **salutogenic** (or strengths based) approach (Quennerstedt, 2008). The chapter concludes with a case study of how teachers can act locally and in partnership with national and community-level organisations to facilitate health, physical activity and **wellbeing** in early years learners.

## **Promoting health, physical activity and wellbeing in education: Some definitions, policies and principles**

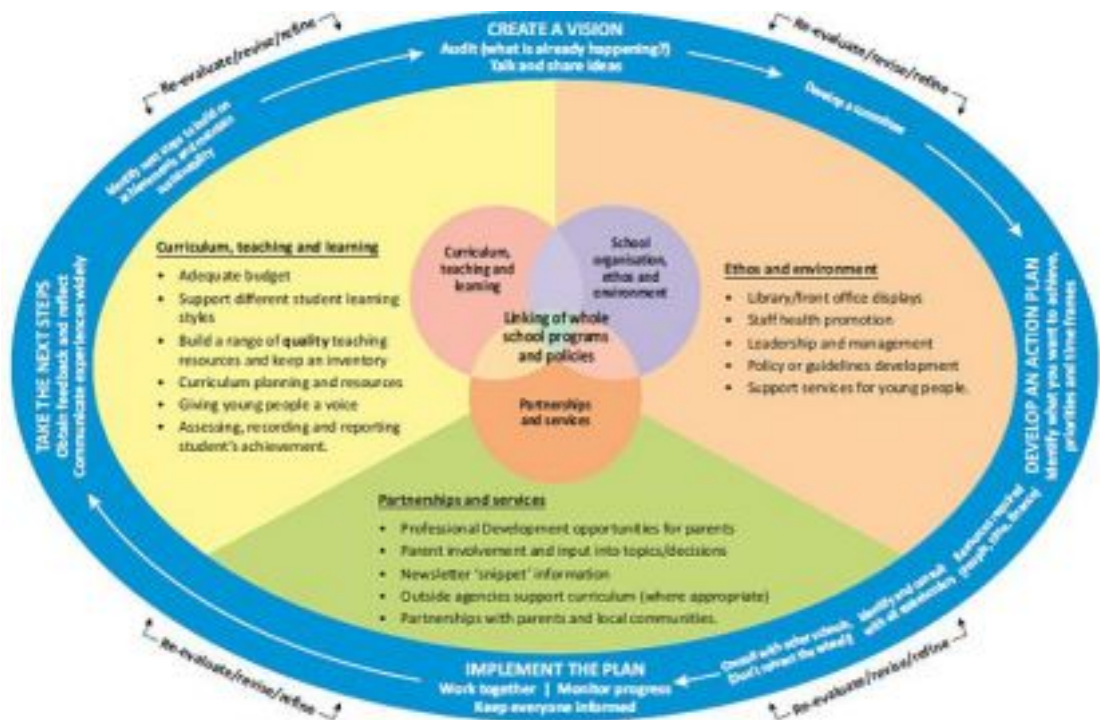
### **Health promotion**

The World Health Organization's (WHO) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) is an international commitment to improving health through the achievement of eight basic rights or prerequisites: peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity. Health

comprises not only a physical state, but spiritual and psychological ones, underpinned by access to and achievement of these basic rights. The relationships between health, education levels, income, home languages and cultural background, and social justice and equity is well discussed in the literature (Lonsdale, 2013). The impacts upon early years learners are equally well documented – for example, the longitudinal study of Indigenous children known as Footprints in Time which is now into its fifth iteration or ‘wave’ (DSS, 2014) and the Australian Council of Social Service Poverty Report (ACOSS, 2014). There is clear evidence that having English as the main home language and living in two parent, higher income households aligns with better health and education outcomes (ACOSS, 2014). Many early years learners do not live in such conditions, with 18% of children whose main language is not English living in impoverished households (below 50% medium income) compared to 11% of English speaking households (ACOSS, 2014, p.23). Many of these factors are systemic in nature, and beyond the immediate control of teachers; these are the responsibilities of governments and communities to address. But improving your understanding of the impact of socio-economic circumstances upon health and wellbeing provides a solid basis for deciding upon what you can do in your professional practice to make a difference to a student’s health and wellbeing. You are an interrelated stakeholder in all systemic measures.

A framework to account for educationally disadvantaged early years learners is suggested in the Australian Health Promoting Schools framework (AHPSA, 2000). Drawing on the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986), the framework notes that a health promoting school is one that ‘implements policies and practices that respect an

individual's well-being and dignity, provides multiple opportunities for success, and acknowledges good efforts and intentions as well as personal achievements' (AHPSA, 2000, p. 8).



**Figure 16.1** – *The Health Promoting Schools Framework* (WAhPSA, 2016)

The AHPSA framework involves a whole-of-community approach which resonates well with the need to bring parent and community stakeholders into partnership with schools. Culturally safe support of students is highlighted as a key priority outcome in urban, rural and remote schools (AHPSA, 2000, p. 20) so these community partnerships are essential, no matter where your school is located. The connections between respecting one's culture and identity, building opportunities and partnerships for success and acknowledging different ways of doing things are well argued. Health and wellbeing from a 'health-promoting' approach then not only comprises opportunities for early years learners to be physically active, but to 'be' who they are,

which is as a member and extension of their community.

## **Physical activity**

The Australian Government established national guidelines for physical activity for children in 2004. They note that children between the ages of 5 and 12 years of age need at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity and should not spend more than two hours a day using electronic media for entertainment (Department of Health, 2004/2014). The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) (2014) notes that teachers should equate moderate physical activity with student 'huffing and puffing'. It is not only their cardiovascular fitness that improves with physical activity, but key phases of motor learning and development are facilitated and enhanced via 'affordances' obtained only through such activity. Gross and fine motor skills, coupled with hand-eye coordination, are typically established between the ages of 2 and 8 years (Haywood & Getchell, 2009) and can only be refined in physically active settings, e.g. applied as sport skills, once they have been successfully established in the early years.

A key issue for students who experience educational disadvantage is that their socio-economic status and/or geographic location and/or family care circumstances may impact upon their ability to pursue sport, physical activity and other motor learning affordances, particularly in these crucial early years. Access to weekend competitive club sport or after-school recreation may be very limited so the chance to develop their motor abilities and therefore their lifelong competence and confidence in physical activity (ACARA, 2015), may only occur *in school time*.

Furthermore, recent research into physical activity in preschool settings (McEvelly, Atencio & Verheul, 2015) notes that educators cannot leave motor skill

acquisition up to early years learners' "play time". Educators need to structure outdoor play and actually play with the children, modelling the skills:

...if you just keep throwing balls at children and letting them lie around, they'll play with them, but they never actually get the skill of catching the ball, because they need an adult to do it with them...

(p.11)

Educators should also recognise that early years learners develop these skills at different rates for a range of reasons, including affordances. Burrows and Wright (2001) warned that primary physical education programs often operate from 'a normative, hierarchical trajectory for child development (which) categorises, classifies and marginalises groups of children whose developmental patterns differ from those mapped out in the syllabus' (p.165). Key requirements for designing physical activity include to start from *then extend* their existing capabilities, to give as much opportunity to *improve* these capabilities in school time and with school resources, and to make it as *enjoyable* as possible so that students whose developmental rates and interests vary are not marginalised from structured physical activity.

## **Important Policies informing Wellbeing in the Early Years**

### **United Nations Declarations**

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Under Article 29.1c:

...Education of the child shall be directed to...the development of respect for

the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilizations different from his or her own ...

Similarly, Article 14.1 of the Permanent Forum and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples argues that:

... Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

The key messages here are that home languages and ways of learning should be valued and supported in the early years. This might take the form of bi-lingual education programs where the student language speaking population is substantial, such as in remote Aboriginal communities or large urban schools with significant migrant populations (Calma, 2008). Or it can be achieved through the inclusion of diverse learners' languages in the material resources of the classroom, through the inclusion of games and typical play activities which you can source from their communities – see for example the UNICEF Traditional Games from Around the World and Yulunga Indigenous Games websites at the end of this chapter.

**The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)** The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) states that: 'Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging.'

(p. 7). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, Martin (2012, p. 27) describes such relationships, or 'relatedness', as being the 'ultimate premise of Aboriginal worldview and critical to the formation of identity'. Relatedness sustains ancestral, social, physical and spiritual aspects of a child's family, clan and community, and Martin (2012, p. 28) notes that it is the daily practices and activities of a community with which children engage that relatedness becomes known and enacted.

The EYLF makes reference to the notion that developing children's wellbeing requires sensitivity to their emotional states, their sense of place and belongingness, and provision of safe learning environments, which in turn develop children's sense of self-efficacy, resilience and willingness to learn more.

### **Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians**

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) is particularly concerned with improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (p.10). Targeted support for early years learners may take many forms, but in terms of promoting health, physical activity and wellbeing, schools need to invest in providing students with the opportunity to learn about how to build upon their individual and community strengths (McCuaig, Quennerstedt & Macdonald, 2013), to participate in physical activity without the financial constraints of commercial sport and recreation provision or cultural insensitivity, and to be nurtured as young learners in safe and supportive environments.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy** It is particularly



important to become familiar with Indigenous education policies, as these extend beyond general appreciation of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage upon Indigenous learners to valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and worldviews and community partnership in educational decision-making. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (DET, 2015) has been developed after many years of intensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, communities and education providers. This latest national plan builds upon a long history – since the federal Education Department published the National Aboriginal Education Plan (NAEP) in 1989 – of lobbying by Indigenous communities around Australia for a unified commitment and approach to funding and developing schooling for Indigenous children (Whatman & Duncan, 2012, p. 127).

Figure 16.2 illustrates the priority areas from the National Strategy upon which teachers can focus when designing curriculum and learning experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years learners.



**Figure 16.2** Priority Areas of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy\_v3 (DET, 2015)

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The central cycles of ‘Culture and Identity’ and ‘Partnerships’ gives direction to teachers, school administrators and Education Departments as to why and how to develop learning experiences for Indigenous Australian and other early years learners. Furthermore, the interdependencies illustrated assist teachers to consider what they could adopt at the local level and those that require institutional support or external partners.

Figure 16.2 shows the complex interplay between stakeholders in Indigenous education, representing not only sites of contrast and often tension between priorities for education, but the opportunities for contrasting perspectives to support common goals. Nakata (2011) described this overlapping space as the ‘cultural interface’. For example, literacy and numeracy and attendance may be regarded as the most important outcomes in the plan by school administrators and Education Department staff, whose daily work consists of collecting data around such outcomes. However, how these outcomes are to be achieved may be conceptualised in a totally different way by someone who believes that engagement and connection are the most important outcomes, from which literacy and numeracy will develop. Figure 16.2 shows that these priority areas are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities throughout the year levels, but the focus will be on different aspects at different times. In the early years, the focus is most definitely on transitions and building readiness for school.

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## **Understanding how culture, identity, safety and pride promote wellbeing**

### **Understanding culture**

Culture comprises many things, including language, daily practices, beliefs, laws, relationships and locality. Culture is neither fixed nor totally fluid – it is enduring yet shifting; culture is developed by the experience of the everyday. It is affirmed by seeing yourself and your family in the everyday experience. Consequently, it is also challenged by *not* seeing yourself and your family in the everyday experience. It is clear, then, that building a safe learning environment that affirms children’s cultures and identities must be achieved through the inclusion of community people in educational decision-making, bringing educators into contact with their perspectives and knowledges.

### **Recognising epistemological violence**

Before examining some of the things you can do to affirm culture and identity, and build safety and pride in schooling, it is important to consider the consequences if you don’t. School is often the site of early years learners’ first experience of epistemological violence. This means that the way they view themselves and the world is challenged and questioned by other early years learners in shocking ways and with real and traumatic consequences. It is often the first time they comprehend that someone else believes there is something ‘wrong’ with their identity. Acceptance by your peers of your culture, your language and your way of being in the world is essential to childhood wellbeing (Martin, 2012). Box 16.1 presents an excerpt from

Leesa Watego's blog, [www.notquitecooked.com](http://www.notquitecooked.com), which illustrates the impact of epistemological violence on children, their families and the entire education system.

**Box 16.1 I wonder what Johnny's mum was up to today** Yesterday little 'Johnny' (not his real name) told my son that he 'should go back to where he came from' (among other things).

That meant I was up at the office this morning discussing racism with the Deputy Principal. It wasn't the first time that little Johnny expressed his disgust at my son's apparent Asian-ness (apparently his surname is not Australian enough for little Johnny). The school response was fine. They took little Johnny to the guidance counsellor. But not only does little Johnny have no idea why what he said was racist, turns out there're about five kids who have been saying a whole bunch of racist stuff (rather than Asian-ness being a problem, for them it was his Indigenous-ness) towards my boy for a couple of months.

So it got me thinking . . .

It occurred to me that after my –

- drive to the school for an emergency conference with the Deputy Principal • talking to the Deputy an hour later with an 'I'm sorry but it seems that it's bigger than we imagined' conversation
- an hour or so digesting and absorbing the toxic pit of epistemological violence I send my son to each day
- conference with husband over the phone about 'what this means' and 'what do we do?'
- a few angry tears of frustration
- a quick scroll around the Education Department's website to look for a fact sheet or

two about ‘what to do if your child is a victim of racism in our schools’ (and finding nothing)

- a call to the Education department’s Indigenous section who transferred me to a school community liaison officer who quickly suggested that I should simply peruse the bullying resources cause racism/bullying: ‘it’s basically the same’ • a few more angry tears of frustration

- composing a letter to the Deputy Principal about my course of action •

- questioning and doubting myself (am I just being overly sensitive?) •

- picking up said son from school early, and

- debriefing him about feelings, ideas, attitudes of Australians and the impact on him and us and Murris in general . . .

. . . so after all that, I got to thinking ‘I wonder what little Johnny’s mum was doing today . . .?’ I wondered what she had the privilege of having to deal with today. I know I would rather have been doing something else.

Racism sux.

## **Valuing home languages in the classroom**

An essential approach that supports and affirms the cultural identity of early years learners and their sense of belonging is the inclusion of their home languages wherever feasible in formal and informal learning settings. Not only do bi-lingual education programs outperform English-only language instruction, they provide a natural opportunity for community participation and partnership in schools.

Bi-lingual education programs are effective in promoting academic achievement and sound educational policy should permit and even encourage the

development and implementation of bi-lingual education programs (Calma, 2008, p.1).

Consider how bi-lingual programs, or programs which encourage the use of home languages in the classroom, involve parent helpers, and are designed to meet EYLF curriculum outcomes, such as Outcome 4: ‘Children are confident and involved learners, who develop dispositions for learning through enthusiasm and persistence, transfer learning from one context to another, [and] resource their own learning through connecting with people, place and natural materials.’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 34) The privileging of culture and cultural knowledge through language use affirms identity through the inclusion of community members in formal learning and simultaneously fulfils standard curriculum requirements of all early years learners.

## **Promoting wellbeing through salutogenic (strengths-based) approaches**

The Australian Curriculum has prioritised the inclusion of Asia-Pacific and Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and knowledges across every discipline (see ACARA, 2015). However, each discipline is tackling such perspectives and knowledges from ‘within’ the discipline, shaping its possibilities and therefore placing the limits around its potential. The Australian Curriculum for Health and Physical Education (Version 8.1), endorsed in late 2015, suggests multiple points of access for the inclusion of these knowledges and perspectives, including exploring the importance of extended family and community, salutogenic or strengths-based approaches to community health development (McCuaig et al., 2013), and games from around the world as choices for physical activity, fitness and motor skill development (Leahy, O’Flynn & Wright, 2013).

The challenges for embedding diverse cultural knowledges in your own teaching context are very similar to those facing policy writers determining ‘when’ and ‘where’ such knowledges ‘fit’ in the curriculum. You are responsible for developing essential school knowledge in young learners, while validating their existing knowledges as they are introduced to the cultural and discursive practices of the discipline (Nakata, 2007). This requires you to see early years learners as more than empty vessels to be filled.

To develop early years learners’ confidence and resilience and to establish important learning dispositions, Armstrong et al. (2012, pp. 6–7) described three strategies that teachers can implement:

- *building upon existing capacities in familiar, enjoyable and engaging tasks* – such as providing opportunities to demonstrate and develop visual spatial awareness and fine motor skills with culturally familiar physical activity tasks, as well as ‘typical Western’ school-based activities such as drawing lines, cutting with scissors, threading pasta and so on;
- *employing home language alongside Standard Australian English where possible* – such as displaying posters and books and other multimedia resources that feature the home languages of students; and,
- *bringing family members into the school learning domain* – to contribute to learning experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom. As do-able as these approaches are, teachers themselves must have the capacity to come to know diverse student capacities, to appreciate what is familiar and enjoyable and to be supported as they develop their own capacity to build solid relationships with parents and community members in order to bring the home and school learning domains closer



together. This is where systemic support becomes essential and can take the form of professional development opportunities by employers or professional associations.

## **A community partnership approach to promoting health, physical activity and wellbeing: The Remote Aboriginal Swimming Program (RASP)**

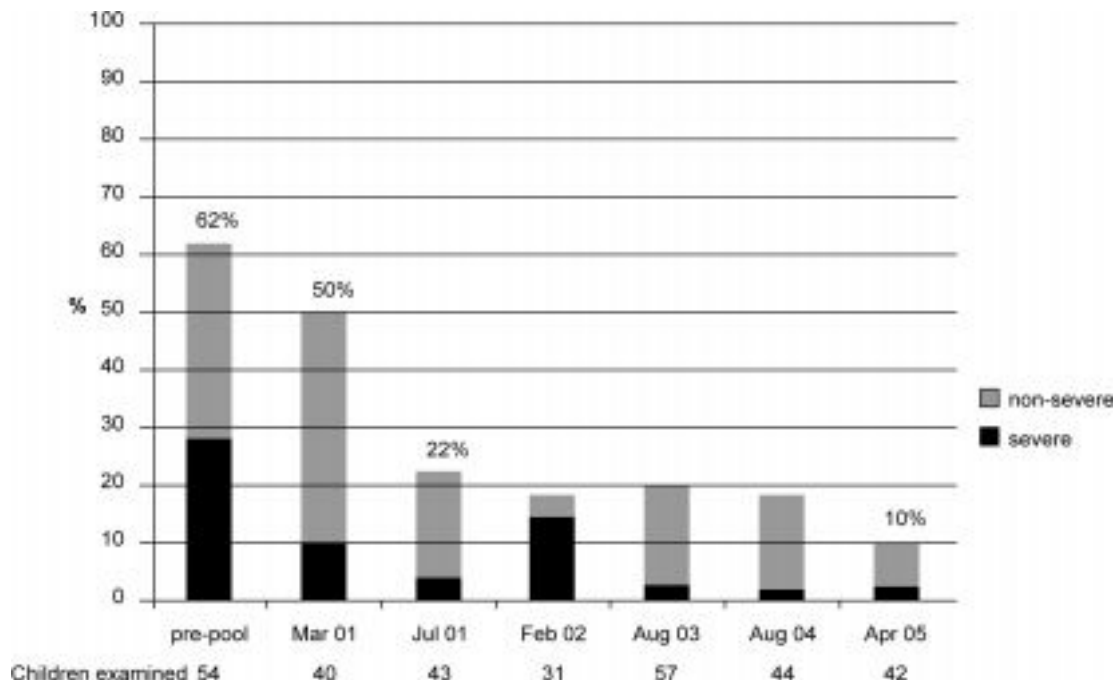
In 2005, the Western Australian (WA) government instigated an inquiry to the health benefits of projects providing public swimming pools for remote Aboriginal communities in WA and the Northern Territory (NT). The Education and Health Standing Committee visited the communities of Karalundi, Jigalong, Mugarinya, Burringurrah, Warmun, Balgo and Bidyadanga, the remote townships of Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing and the community of Wadeye (Port Keats) in the NT. Associated health, wellbeing, educational and social benefits were considered in the provision of the pools themselves, as well as in conjunction with programs run by the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) under a co-funded national scheme to bring swimming pools to remote communities.

Otitis media (a persistent middle-ear infection also known as ‘Glue Ear’), and respiratory and skin infections affect significant numbers of children in remote communities, and the effect of the swimming pool programs on such afflictions has been specifically examined. Results indicated that in Jigalong alone there have been reductions of 41% in antibiotic prescriptions, a 44% reduction in the number of cases of ear disease, a 51% reduction in the incidence of skin disease and a 63% reduction in the number of cases involving respiratory disease (Education & Health Standing Committee, 2006, p. xvi).

Six of the remote communities in Western Australia implemented a ‘no school, no pool’ policy as a part of the Remote Aboriginal Swimming program (RASP) (Cunningham-Dunlop, 2008; Juniper, Nimmo & Enkel, 2016) which, in some cases, showed increased school attendance, particularly in the 8-10 years age range, on school days where pool activities were available (Juniper et al. 2016, p.41). Clearly, such an approach requires the educational partnership of schools and teachers to work, but it aligns very well with Recommendation 4 of the parliamentary report, that schools with access to swimming pools should consider including pool-related educational activities to enhance school attendance (Education & Health Standing Committee, 2006), rather than making access to swimming a reward for school attendance (and, subsequently, prevention of swimming a punishment for non attendance).

### **Box 16.2 Reflection**

Consider further the impact and benefits to health and wellbeing of educational programs like RASP. Read the Royal Lifesaving Society (2012) report and Juniper et al. (2016) and watch the video clip to consider the issue of pool access as reward or punishment for school attendance - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqZtQEe9maY>. Further data (in Figure 16.3) to inform your views are also included below. If you were an educator at a similar school, would you instigate a ‘no school, no pool’ access policy, based on the evidence presented in this activity? Why/why not? *2011-2012 (Warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the video may contain images and voices of deceased persons).*



**Figure 16.3** Incidence of child skin infections pre- and post-pool introduction, in

*Burringurrah*

*Source: Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (2012), Appendix 6.*

## Conclusion

Being educationally disadvantaged should not consign young Australians to a life time of poor health and wellbeing or physical inactivity. Teachers of early years learners have an essential role and great examples to draw upon from communities around Australia of partnerships that make a real difference in overcoming educational disadvantage to promote wellbeing with early years learners.

## Summary

To be an inspiring, motivating, caring and effective educator of educationally disadvantaged children, consider the following recommendations:

- Understand how relevant policies and priorities for early years education should

inform your professional practice in designing and delivering curriculum.

- Understand how curriculum and teaching choices you make impact positively on culture and identity.
- Appreciate and *act upon* your important role in preventing epistemological violence against culturally diverse learners to promote their safety and pride in schooling.
- Recognise and cultivate partnerships in educationally disadvantaged communities to contribute to positive systemic change.

## Questions

- 16.1 Which education policies could you consult in developing your teaching and learning approaches for early years learners who experience educational disadvantage and why?
- 16.2 Explain how providing learning opportunities that affirm culture and identity positively contribute to health and wellbeing.
- 16.3 What are two teaching and learning approaches that you will adopt in your teaching practice and why?
- 16.4 What else can you do to continue to understand educational disadvantage and plan curriculum for those early years learners who continue to benefit least from schooling?

## Suggested websites for further reading

1. The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation  
[www.achper.org.au](http://www.achper.org.au). This is the peak professional association for HPE teachers in Australia. This website links to an extensive range of health and wellbeing

resources.

2. Australian Health Promoting Schools Association <http://www.ahpsa.org.au/>.

The AHPSA is associated with ACHPER, but with a particular focus on school health activities and health policy development.

3. Critical Classroom Indigenous Education Resources

[www.criticalclassroom.com](http://www.criticalclassroom.com). This website is curated by renowned Australian Indigenous educator Leesa Watego and is designed as a digital space to encourage teachers to seek out Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in educational resources.

4. Traditional Games: A Collection of group games from around the world

[http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/Resources/Documents/UNICEF\\_TraditionalGames\\_resource.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/Resources/Documents/UNICEF_TraditionalGames_resource.pdf) This resources is designed to encourage teachers to consider games from around the world as an way to foster intercultural understanding across the curriculum.

5. Yulunga - Traditional Indigenous Games, Ausport.

[http://www.ausport.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/402191/SP\\_31864\\_TI\\_G\\_resource\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/402191/SP_31864_TI_G_resource_FINAL.pdf) This resource is designed to encourage teachers and sports coaches to learn Indigenous games as a way to validate and appreciate Indigenous knowledges in these teaching and learning spaces.

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