

Evaluation of the KindiLink Pilot Initiative in Western Australia

Volume 1: Overview and Key Findings

School of Education
Early Childhood Research Group
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June 2018



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Acknowledgements

This project to evaluate the KindiLink Pilot Initiative was funded by the Government of Western Australia, Department of Education. We are particularly grateful to Garry Hewitt (Assistant Executive Director, Early Childhood and Aboriginal Education), Dr Rosemary Cahill (Director, Early Childhood Education, Literacy and Numeracy), Anna Langley (Principal Project Consultant – KindiLink), Robyn Kinkade, (Manager, Early Childhood Branch), Sheridan Lister (Project Consultant Universal Access), Michelle Kriening (Manager Teaching and Learning), Samantha Brown (Administrative Officer) and the KindiLink team within the Early Childhood Branch of the Department of Education Statewide Services Division for their help and advice during the research process.

We have benefitted from the advice of members of our Advisory Committee – Dr Graeme Gower, Gail Barrow, and Rosa Napolitano-Lincoln - and we thank them particularly for their encouragement and support.

We thank the families, school principals, KindiLink teachers, KindiLink Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), and kindergarten teachers for taking time out of their busy schedules to complete the surveys. We are humbled by the vast number of comments the KindiLink teachers and AIEOs wrote in their reflective journal, providing such thoughtful responses and extensive examples, and giving us detailed insight into their experience of KindiLink. To the school principals on each case study site, we are particularly indebted for welcoming us into their schools and taking time to talk with us and introduce us to KindiLink and kindergarten staff and families. We are most appreciative of the families, KindiLink teachers, AIEOs and kindergarten teachers who allowed us to observe the complex relationships they had built up and to talk with them about KindiLink at great length. It was a pleasure to work with the families, KindiLink team and principals, and we have been privileged to share the richness of their experiences of KindiLink.

A special thank-you goes to Emeritus Professor Judith Rivalland, School of Education, Edith Cowan University, and Lisette Kaleveld for their written contributions to this report and deep insights into the interpretation of data. We would also like to thank Liz Walker and Dianne McKillop for their input into aspects of the data analysis and writing.

We would also like to acknowledge the lands on which this research took place and pay our respects to Aboriginal Elders past, present and emerging.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This study is an evaluation of the largest educator-led playgroup initiative in Western Australia. The implementation and evaluation of KindiLink, a supported playgroup targeted at Aboriginal¹ children and their families, is both timely and significant, given the current research on the education and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and their families. The *Closing the Gap* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) identified the importance of early education for Aboriginal children both in terms of participation and achievement. On purely economic grounds, Heckman (2011) found that the combination of early childhood education and parent support produced a 7-10% return for every dollar invested in saved social cost in later life. Although there has been improvement in some areas, research clearly demonstrates that in comparison with Australian children in general, Aboriginal children have lower levels of school attendance and poorer educational outcomes (Department of Social Services, 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Both playgroups and supported playgroups have the potential to make a difference to the early educational experiences of children and their families, particularly in relation to families living in vulnerable circumstances (Hancock, Cunningham, Lawrence, Zarb, & Zubrick, 2015). Supported playgroups have been part of the early childhood landscape for many years in Australia. They are funded and operated by both community and government organisations and although there are a number of different models, generally they are delivered by a paid, early childhood qualified playgroup leader (Jackson, 2013). Supported playgroups are designed to reach vulnerable families, with the broad aim of enhancing children's learning and development and supporting parenting practices (Commerford & Robinson, 2016) and as a means of improving family, school and community connections (Williams, Berthelsen, Viviani, & Nicholson, 2017). Although participation in supported playgroups has been shown to lead to some improved outcomes for families and children (Williams et al., 2017), there is limited evidence about the nature and long-term impact of supported playgroups, particularly in relation to Aboriginal families (Muir & Dean, 2017). This study adds to the evidence through an evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of a supported playgroup for Aboriginal families in 37 public school sites across Western Australia.

Purpose of the study

The four volumes which make up this study describe in detail the implementation and outcomes of KindiLink for Aboriginal families and their 3-year-old children. Conducted on public primary school sites, KindiLink is a play-and-learn initiative for 3-year-old Aboriginal children who attend with a family² member. KindiLink aims to: boost children's development, engagement and learning in the year before they start Kindergarten; forge strong and supportive links between home, school, families and the community; boost the capacity and confidence of parents/caregivers as their children's first educators; and contribute to regular long-term school attendance. Operating as a 3-year pilot (2016-2018), KindiLink was implemented in 37 selected public schools across Western Australia in remote, regional (town and city) and metropolitan communities.

¹ In this study, the term Aboriginal is used to mean Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Indigenous. This is based on the decision made by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Social Justice and Race Discrimination Commissioner (in consultation with key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups) to use the term Aboriginal rather than Indigenous.

² The term 'family' is used to encompass many different carer roles, including parents, grandparents, aunts, custodial parents, and the wider community.

The target group for KindiLink is Aboriginal children and their families. However, through consultation between the school principal, KindiLink staff, attending families and community, non-Aboriginal children and families may also be invited to participate. In addition, younger siblings can attend and families from outside the school's local intake area may be included. KindiLink sessions are provided for a minimum of 6 hours per week and participation is voluntary and at no cost to the families. Each school determines the most suitable facility for KindiLink on or near their school site, and the most appropriate schedule for the delivery of the sessions (i.e. three 2-hour sessions or two 3-hour sessions) is determined through consultation. KindiLink is planned and delivered by a teacher and an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer. Wherever possible the KindiLink teacher is early childhood trained and Aboriginality is considered essential for the position of AIEO. Each KindiLink session is based on evidence-based programs and practices, including the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education and Training, 2009). The content of the sessions reflects the local context and children's interests and capabilities, and includes indoor and outdoor play experiences, LearningGames®, conversational reading, shared storytelling and music/rhymes. It is planned in consultation with participating children's families to ensure the language/dialect³ and culture of the families are incorporated into the program and foster joint ownership of the program. In the pilot phase, AIEOs, KindiLink teachers and principals were invited to attend workshops, and consultants from the Early Childhood Branch of the Department of Education Statewide Services Division provided ongoing support.

The study was shaped by the requirements of the Department of Education's Early Childhood Branch, with research questions and methodology jointly constructed by the Edith Cowan University Early Childhood team and the Department of Education KindiLink team. The primary aim was to undertake a broad and deep investigation of the 37 KindiLink sites that focused on the voices of the participants, revealing their experiences and perceptions of how KindiLink made a difference to families and children. The evaluation was based on the following four research questions.

- Q1 How effective has KindiLink been at improving the social, emotional, language and cognitive ability of Aboriginal children upon entry into Kindergarten?**
- Q2. What impact has KindiLink had on improving attendance among participating children during their schooling?**
- Q3. How effective has KindiLink been in building the capacity and confidence of families/carers as their child's first educators?**
- Q4. What impact has KindiLink had on building productive relationships between the family, the school and the community?**

Research approach

The evaluation of the KindiLink initiative was a complex, mixed-method, and large-scale undertaking requiring cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of the scope and aims of KindiLink. Given the breadth of the intended outcomes and the complexity of the families, schools and communities within which KindiLink operates, both qualitative and quantitative measures were used. Qualitative data were collected

³ Although the singular form 'language/dialect' is used throughout much of this report, we recognise that more than one language and/or dialect may be spoken within families and/or the local community.

via detailed case studies of four KindiLink sites to capture variation and gain depth through the voices of the participants. Quantitative data, including surveys and Department of Education data on attendance and registration, gave insights into overall impacts and trends across all 37 KindiLink sites. Principals, KindiLink teachers, AIEOs, families, kindergarten teachers and community stakeholders were all invited to take part in the research. The quantitative data gave an overview of participant perceptions and the qualitative data provided further detail, thus capturing different elements of the same phenomena and helping to ensure the validity of the research. The triangulation of data, in which the quantitative and qualitative data were compared, helped to validate and contrast the findings from multiple sources.

Respondent profiles

Aboriginal families: The profiles of the Aboriginal families participating in 2016 and 2017 were very similar, though there were slightly fewer respondents in 2017 (i.e. 83 versus 71 in 2016). For both cohorts, most participants (92-94%) identified as female and more than three-quarters identified themselves as the mother of the KindiLink child. Only a few fathers were represented (4% and 6%), while aunts and grandmothers (combined) made up 12% and 14% of the 2016 and 2017 cohorts, respectively. In terms of languages spoken at home within families and by the KindiLink child themselves, there was slightly more diversity in 2016 than 2017. English was one of the main languages spoken at home by approximately 90% of the 2016 and 2017 families. Aboriginal English was the second most prevalent language, spoken by between 33% and 24% of families in 2016 and 2017, respectively. As might be expected, the languages spoken at home by the KindiLink children largely reflected those spoken within their families, with the exception of Aboriginal English which was less represented for the KindiLink children (26%) than for families (33%). Regarding education, a slightly higher proportion of the 2017 cohort (50%) had completed Year 12 and/or achieved a tertiary qualification (e.g. trade certificate, diploma or degree) than the 2016 cohort (42%).

Principals: A total of 28 principals (76%) completed the survey in 2016 and 31 principals (84%) in 2017. A greater proportion of the 2016 cohort was relatively new to their school: more than half (54%) were appointed within the past 2 years compared to about one-third (35%) of the 2017 cohort. Principals who had served at least 9 years in their current school accounted for 14% of the 2016 cohort and 23% of the 2017 cohort.

KindiLink teachers: The 2016 and 2017 surveys were completed by a total of 29 and 37 KindiLink teachers, respectively. More than half of the teachers (59% in 2016 and 55% in 2017) considered themselves 'proficient', and around a quarter identified as 'highly accomplished' (24% and 26%). This was reflected in the teachers' collective years of teaching experience, with more than half (55% and 57%) of both the 2016 and 2017 cohorts having at least 9 years of experience. Staffing across 2016-17 was relatively stable with more than two-thirds (64%) of the 2017 KindiLink teachers indicating they had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2016.

AIEOs: Surveys were completed by 20 AIEOs in 2016 and 29 AIEOs in 2017. The majority of AIEOs (60% in 2016 and 68% in 2017) had at least 9 years of experience in the AIEO role, and at least half (50% and 54%) had worked in their current school 9 years or more. Interestingly, 50% of the AIEOs in the 2016 cohort indicated they had a Certificate III in Education Support, compared to only 39% in 2017. However, 8 AIEOs (29%) from the 2017 cohort and only 1 AIEO (5%) from the 2016 cohort were actively working towards completing this qualification. KindiLink staffing was relatively stable with 68% of the 2017 AIEOs indicating they had also been the KindiLink AIEO in 2016.

Kindergarten teachers: Surveys were completed by 33 kindergarten teachers in 2017 and 49 kindergarten teachers in 2018. Almost a quarter (24%) of the 2017 kindergarten teachers had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2016, while 21% of the 2018 cohort had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2017 or both 2016 and 2017. Proportionately, the 2017 participants were somewhat more experienced than the 2018 participants, with 52% and 33%, respectively, identifying as ‘highly accomplished’. In 2017, 42% of the kindergarten teachers had been at the school for at least 9 years compared to 29% in 2018. More teachers completed the survey in 2018, so perhaps the increased participation in 2018 allowed for a broader range of experience to be captured.

Collectively, the qualifications, experience and career phase of the principals, teachers, AIEOs and kindergarten teachers was identified as an important influence on the outcomes of the KindiLink initiative.

Key Findings

Social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities

Q1 How effective has KindiLink been at improving the social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities of Aboriginal children upon entry into Kindergarten?

KindiLink has improved the social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities of Aboriginal children upon entry into Kindergarten, with evidence of a significant increase in the adequate demonstration of these skills in 2018 Kindergarten commencement.

Skills and knowledge

- In general, principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs all indicated that KindiLink had to some extent been successful in improving the social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities of Aboriginal children. In 2017 there was a greater emphasis on the improvement of cognitive skills by teachers, and AIEOs highlighted language skills and the positive impact of ‘two-way’ learning.
- In a more detailed assessment of Aboriginal children’s social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities, the majority of KindiLink teachers in both 2016 and 2017 indicated they believed KindiLink had improved Aboriginal children’s capabilities. Across all domains, approximately 50% or more of the teachers indicated KindiLink was highly effective.
- All but one of the families indicated that KindiLink had supported their child’s learning, with particular mention of language, social and cognitive skills. Over half of the Aboriginal families referred to specific skills their child had learned, and some mentioned how KindiLink activities were being replicated at home. Reading books and telling stories were mentioned in particular.
- In both 2017 and 2018, higher proportions of the Aboriginal KindiLink children were rated by kindergarten teachers as having ‘consistently’ or ‘often’ demonstrated adequate social, emotional, language and cognitive skills on commencement at Kindergarten than the non-KindiLink Aboriginal

children. The results of the comparisons between KindiLink and non-KindiLink children were statistically significant for both the 2018 cohort and the combined 2017 and 2018 cohorts.

- Kindergarten teachers in both 2017 and 2018 noted that Aboriginal KindiLink children were more confident about coming into class, less stressed about separating from their family and more able to settle into classroom routines and activities than Aboriginal children who had not attended KindiLink.
- On-entry assessment results for the Aboriginal children enrolled in the 2018 pre-primary program at the 37 KindiLink sites suggest attendance at KindiLink in 2016 may have contributed to greater school readiness in terms of reading, listening and speaking, and numeracy skills. However, the observed differences between the Aboriginal children who did and did not attend KindiLink in 2016 were not statistically significant. Given that the results of the Kindergarten children's capabilities survey for the second year (2017) of the KindiLink pilot indicated more positive results, it will be important to continue tracking the KindiLink children to determine the longer term impact of the KindiLink program on children's social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities.

Understanding and engagement

- Teachers/AIEOs worked alongside children and families, modelling strategies and encouraging families to take activities home while building a positive attitude to school. This resulted in families engaging in their child's learning and observing their child's growing independence and undertaking KindiLink activities at home.
- Teachers/AIEOs built effective learners, helping children to become familiar with routines, expectations and the environment and talking to families about children's learning. This resulted in families asking about their child's learning and development and thus increasing their understanding of and support for their child's capabilities.
- Families created a network of support with other families, accessed early childhood support agencies and began to build relationships with school staff, leading to a greater confidence in the school environment and further opportunities to support their child's capabilities.

Transition to Kindergarten

- The majority of principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs indicated that KindiLink had been highly effective in supporting the transition to Kindergarten. Principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs all suggested that the children's improved capabilities had supported their transition to Kindergarten and helped them to develop a positive and enthusiastic attitude to learning.
- All families either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that KindiLink had supported their child's transition to Kindergarten. Aboriginal families commented on how KindiLink had fostered independence and confidence, giving their children the skills they needed to be successful in Kindergarten.
- Kindergarten teachers described Aboriginal KindiLink children as generally displaying more 'school readiness' skills and behaviours and demonstrating a range of skills as well as having a good knowledge of basic concepts. They also indicated that KindiLink children were role models for other children.
- As KindiLink became more established, principals, teachers, AIEOs and families became more confident in their relationships and in the evidence of positive outcomes, suggesting that perseverance and commitment to KindiLink over time may deliver greater improvements in Aboriginal children's capabilities and transition to Kindergarten.

Registration and attendance at KindiLink and Kindergarten

Q2. What impact has KindiLink had on improving attendance among participating children during their schooling?

KindiLink has had some effect on improving the enrolments and attendance of Aboriginal children at KindiLink and attendance among participating Aboriginal children at Kindergarten in 2017.

Department of Education data for all KindiLink sites

- There was a slight increase in overall enrolments at KindiLink from 2016 to 2017 and the proportion of Aboriginal children increased from 70% to 75%.
- The proportion of Aboriginal children who attended at least 81 hours of KindiLink (out of a possible 240 hours) increased from 2016 to 2017, suggesting a slight overall improvement in KindiLink attendance rates.
- More than half (52%) of the Aboriginal children who attended KindiLink in 2016 were found to have kindergarten attendance rates of 80% or greater. Over half (58%) of the Aboriginal students who were categorised as 'regular attendance (i.e. >90% attendance)' at Kindergarten had nevertheless had relatively low attendance at KindiLink in 2016 (i.e. 0-80 hours). Given that three-quarters of the Aboriginal KindiLink children had attended only 0-80 hours in 2016, this may suggest that even relatively low exposure to KindiLink can have a positive influence on kindergarten transition and attendance.

Survey, case study and reflective journal data

- In 2016 and 2017 all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families indicated that KindiLink had supported the transition to Kindergarten. Children who attended KindiLink were reported to have an easier transition into Kindergarten because of their confidence and familiarity with school-based practices and environment.
- In Term 4 of 2016 and 2017, almost all Aboriginal families indicated that they had enrolled their KindiLink child in Kindergarten.
- In 2017, over half of Aboriginal families and almost a third of non-Aboriginal families reported that they brought younger children to KindiLink and that this had enabled them to attend KindiLink. They also described the learning and development gains of the younger children.
- Attendance across the majority of KindiLink sites was challenging and varied between consistent, sporadic and non-attendance. Schools indicated that persistence, resilience of staff and families and continued investment of resources would lead to increasing registrations, suggesting that KindiLink needed time to become established in the community.
- Challenging family circumstances often mitigated against attendance, although many families showed great determination in overcoming these to return to KindiLink. All participants, including families, developed a range of strategies to increase registration and sustain attendance.

Capacity and confidence of families

Q3. How effective has KindiLink been in building the capacity and confidence of families/carers as their child's first educators?

KindiLink has been effective in building the capacity and confidence of families as their first educator at school and at home.

Increasing capacity and confidence

- Almost all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families in 2016 and 2017 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that KindiLink had increased their confidence and that they had developed skills that enhanced their capacity to support their child. Families expressed pleasure in KindiLink and indicated how much they enjoyed spending time with their child and watching them grow.
- Overall, principals, teachers and the AIEOs all indicated that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families who were committed to KindiLink and attended regularly gained in confidence as their child's first teacher and increased their capacity to encourage, support and engage with their child in learning. Families' increase in capacity was identified as stronger in 2017 compared with 2016.
- In both 2016 and 2017, families mentioned a range of activities that they transferred from KindiLink to their home environment. In particular, reading or telling stories was mentioned by almost half of families in 2016 and over a third in 2017. Families also indicated how they had contributed to KindiLink activities and how KindiLink had modified some activities for them to take home.
- It was reported that some families needed more time to practice skills, others wanted to 'watch' their child and others were content to be directed in their role at KindiLink. Others gave little feedback and some wanted to leave their child at KindiLink without them.
- One principal pointed out that because all families are different, their capacity and confidence develops at different rates: some families, while not necessarily gaining in capacity, are nevertheless developing an awareness that they can and do have a role as their child's first teacher.

Engaging in, initiating and extending activities

- Families made use of many of the activities used at KindiLink, including to a lesser extent the LearningGames®, to engage with and teach their child at KindiLink and at home. Over time, some families began to lead, initiate and contribute ideas to the KindiLink program and provided expertise in language/dialect and culture which was incorporated into KindiLink.
- Some activities appeared to be more successful than others. Families engaged in sensory and early language and literacy activities. The LearningGames® had mixed success. In some sites, they appeared to be incorporated into each session and modified when necessary, while in others the LearningGames® were not taken up by families or used at home.
- Families were supported to gradually move from watching their child to participating in activities, and their engagement with their child (and other children) increased as the year progressed. It is recognised, however, that for some families watching is a central part of learning.

- Through their engagement with KindiLink activities, some families were developing a heightened sense of themselves as valuable contributors to the learning process and using their skills to enhance their child's learning. An increase in time spent sharing books and talking with their child and modelling language was noted, alongside a desire for more information about learning and developmental milestones.

Relationships

- Families played an important role in supporting each other in their parenting roles, thus providing networking opportunities. Families also became more confident in approaching the principal, teacher/AIEO and support agencies to access advice and share their concerns.
- Some family members took on new responsibilities in the school community and others commenced tertiary studies, indicating that their participation in KindiLink had contributed to their growing confidence.

Transition to Kindergarten

- The majority of kindergarten teachers indicated that they had noted differences between KindiLink and non-KindiLink Aboriginal parents/carers in terms of their level of engagement and/or confidence in their child's learning (64% in 2017, 78% in 2018). The apparent stronger impact in the second year of KindiLink suggests that growth takes time and that as KindiLink became more established families became more trusting and comfortable at KindiLink.
- Kindergarten teachers indicated that Aboriginal KindiLink parents were more comfortable and confident in interacting with school staff and discussing their child's needs, progress and placement. They were also more engaged in their child's learning, including participating in activities, routines, attending events and being organised in relation to school procedures and protocols.
- Some kindergarten teachers also felt that the increased confidence and capacity of parents/carers had a positive influence on the level of attendance at Kindergarten. This was further supported by the ongoing engagement of some families in Kindergarten.

Relationships between the family, the school and the community

Q4. What impact has KindiLink had on building productive relationships between the family, the school and the community?

KindiLink has had a positive impact on building productive relationships between the family, the school and the community, leading to increased engagement of families and children.

Significance of relationships

- Positioning KindiLink on a school site provided a safe, warm and welcoming space for Aboriginal families as well as giving them the opportunity to become familiar with the kindergarten and the school in general. It also gave families the opportunity to meet the principal and kindergarten teacher, become involved in school events and, in some families, take an active role in the school. For those children with older siblings, it also seemed (in some cases) to increase their attendance and enable parents/carers to meet with their class teacher. The consistency of the days and time KindiLink was offered also provided some stability and enabled families to make a commitment to KindiLink. Thus, the actual placement of KindiLink seemed to be central to building productive relationships.
- Building strong, reciprocal and sustainable relationships was identified as the foundation for success of KindiLink. Many of the principals, teachers and AIEOs reiterated the crucial importance of the building of relationships. Overall, KindiLink was perceived to be highly effective in building relationships between Aboriginal families who had attended KindiLink, the school and the community.
- The AIEO was identified as central to building relationships, with their role seen as a powerful means of negotiating complex and multifaceted relationships. Some participants indicated that ensuring the AIEO was from the local community was vital to the success of KindiLink, as this would ensure in-depth knowledge and understanding of the community and the language/dialect and culture of the Aboriginal families. The experience and qualifications of the KindiLink teacher and the AIEO and the consultative nature of principals who actively cultivated relationships were also seen as fundamental to building partnerships.
- Principals, teachers and AIEOs 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that KindiLink had supported a positive relationship between families, the school and the community. Interestingly, the proportions of principals and teachers that indicated KindiLink had been 'highly' successful in supporting relationships increased from 2016 to 2017, whereas there was a decrease in the proportion of AIEOs that expressed this view (from 74% in 2016 to 64% in 2017. This is perhaps indicative of the difficulties of sustaining relationships with some families due to sporadic attendance and difficulties faced by some Aboriginal families in attending and engaging in KindiLink. However, while 3% of Aboriginal families in 2016 indicated they did not feel KindiLink had supported a positive relationship between the family and school (but did not elaborate on their answer), this was not reported by any of the 2017 families.
- The majority of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that KindiLink had supported a positive relationship between families and the school. Some families indicated that their relationship with the school had increased their attendance at KindiLink and had positive outcomes for

their child as well as their own sense of ‘belonging’ in the school. For some families, involvement in school led to increased attendance by their older children, an unexpected side-effect of KindiLink.

- Relationships between families were identified as important to networking and sharing experiences as some families met outside KindiLink, arranged shared transport and potentially supported each other as they commenced the school journey together.
- Almost a quarter of kindergarten teachers were the KindiLink teacher in one or both of the previous years and got to know families through that role. Thus, many KindiLink families were connected to school through their familiarity with the kindergarten teacher before their child commenced Kindergarten.

Listening to and including Aboriginal families’ perspectives

- The majority of Aboriginal families indicated that aspects of their language/dialect and culture were positively integrated in KindiLink, although 11% did not feel their language/dialect and culture were well represented. Positive integration could be identified along a continuum ranging from relatively high level incorporation of families’ language/dialect and culture into the KindiLink curriculum to fairly minimal incorporation such as occasional involvement in cultural activities (e.g. NAIDOC Week).
- Aboriginal families indicated that they and their children felt supported in speaking their language/dialect and their children learned about ‘*animals, bush tucker and songs in Aboriginal languages*’. Some families expressed a desire to extend and include more aspects of their language/dialect and culture in KindiLink as a means of helping their children learn.
- More than 60% of Aboriginal families stated that they talked with the KindiLink teacher and/AIEO about their language/dialect and culture. This included sharing information about language/dialect and linking home and school activities. Some families mentioned how this supported their learning and also how they felt KindiLink was supportive and committed to doing ‘*the best*’ for families.
- The majority of teachers indicated that they incorporated a range of activities and resources into the KindiLink curriculum in consultation with Aboriginal families and the AIEO. These included visual text and images, oral language activities, musical activities, decorations, games, crafts and cooking. Of the resources used, some were commercially produced while others were specifically created by staff and/or parents.
- Two-way language resources were also used in a few KindiLink sites. Using a bilingual dictionary, translating songs into the local language and encouraging the AIEO to use the language/dialect families felt most comfortable with were also mentioned. The promotion of and participation in Aboriginal community events and excursions were also seen as important in ensuring inclusivity.
- Overall, teachers and AIEOs nominated families as their main source of information about Aboriginal families’ language/dialect and culture. Teachers regarded families as the ‘experts’. However, teachers also mentioned the AIEO as one of their main sources of information and some indicated that the AIEO acted as the link between families and KindiLink. A few teachers mentioned the use of external sources of information such as the internet and language centres as means of supplementing other sources of knowledge.
- Teachers described how they derived support from Aboriginal families, community guests and cultural performers to create an inclusive curriculum. In some KindiLink sites a partnership model was developed, while in other sites the teacher felt the need to maintain their overall leadership. Some teachers indicated that they fostered ‘open communication’ with families - speaking with them about an inclusive

KindiLink curriculum each time they attended, once a week or once a term. Others created a more formal approach using surveys to ask families what they did and did not like.

- The barriers to incorporating Aboriginal families' language/dialect that were identified by staff included families and the AIEO not speaking the local language, families speaking different languages and families not being interested in the local language. Families not knowing how their language is written was also mentioned, though as an oral tradition this is to be expected. However, a teacher did indicate that although some of the families felt they were *'lacking in cultural knowledge especially language'* she was working with families to learn *'some basic language together'*.

Communicating with families

- Relationships were fostered through multiple forms of communication and were used to maintain contact with families, increase registrations and attendance, and inform families about events. 'Yarning' and face-to-face communication was identified as one of the most effective ways of listening to and involving families in KindiLink.
- Formal and informal meetings between the principal, community members, community organisations and KindiLink staff and families were an essential part of extending relationships and creating inclusivity. Meetings included discussions about ways of promoting and improving KindiLink, planning for the following year, supporting staff who were struggling, and finding ways of helping families to access KindiLink.
- Meetings between the KindiLink teacher and the AIEO were an important part of creating an appropriate and engaging program. Meetings between the KindiLink teacher and the kindergarten teacher were seen as an important part of building and sustaining relationships, getting to know the children and their families, ensuring continuity and thereby easing the transition to Kindergarten.

Benefits, positive stories, and challenges

Benefits

- In 2016 and 2017 almost all KindiLink staff indicated that KindiLink had been either highly or moderately beneficial for children and their families. Principals were consistently positive about the benefits of KindiLink, whereas the 2017 teachers and AIEOs were more positive about the benefits of KindiLink than the 2016 cohort.
- In 2016, the benefits of KindiLink identified by staff included increased engagement by families in their child's learning, involvement in the school community and connection to support services. In 2017 there was greater emphasis on the children's learning and development and the positive transition to Kindergarten. This may reflect a shift in focus as the initiative matured from an initial emphasis on relationship building and engagement in the first year (2016) to a greater complementary emphasis on the learning program in 2017 once routines, community trust/expectations and relationships were established.
- The benefits of incorporating the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families into KindiLink were mentioned in 2017. This may reflect the increasing confidence of families, teachers and AIEOs to work in partnership in ways that created a sense of ownership and involvement.

Positive stories

- There was a multitude of positive stories about the successes and outcomes of KindiLink. These included detailed descriptions of the ways in which KindiLink had enhanced children’s learning and development, increased families’ awareness and capacity as their children’s first teachers, and supported the children’s transition to Kindergarten.
- Several stories described how families had developed independence and grown in confidence as they felt more comfortable and involved in the school and accessed outside services. The recognition and incorporation of families’ language/dialect and culture was also identified as welcomed and successful.

Challenges

- Most participants found implementing KindiLink moderately challenging. Teachers and AIEOs found it less challenging in 2017, although principals reported they found it more challenging in 2017. Challenges included recruitment and attendance, engagement of families, pedagogical differences between KindiLink and Kindergarten, a lack of resources, staffing, the lack of a permanent venue and the impact of competing programs. Redeployment of some staff to KindiLink was also seen as problematic in some sites.
- Recruitment and attendance were identified as the most challenging aspects of KindiLink across the majority of sites and data sources. Principals, teachers/AIEOS and some families had all worked extremely hard to encourage families to attend on a regular basis and new families to enrol. In some schools, there was a sense of disappointment and frustration about the lack of positive outcomes despite all their efforts, coupled with cautious optimism based on some increases in enrolment and attendance and the positive outcomes witnessed for families that did attend.
- Some schools felt frustrated by the challenges that were beyond the control of the school. These included family circumstances, lack of transport and “natural movement of the community” which negatively impacted on continuity of school experience, especially as the youngest children needed to be with their families.
- The majority of KindiLink participants built on and extended the multiple strategies developed at KindiLink over time to overcome challenges. The continued establishment of family, school and community relationships was at the heart of overcoming challenges alongside allowing younger siblings to attend, listening to families, providing transport, employing effective staff and gaining support from the Early Childhood Branch. Working together as a team to plan, respond to families and communicate with families were mentioned in 2017.
- There were only seven comments from families about the aspects that they found challenging at KindiLink, four of which appeared to be relatively minor and readily addressed. However, three aspects may have been more universal: one related to difficulty in reading to their child (because of parental dyslexia), another mentioned managing their child’s behaviour, and another was concerned about negative comments between families.

Suggested changes

- Changes to enhance the implementation and outcomes of KindiLink included: further support in promoting KindiLink; linking with KindiLink staff in other schools; having more time to liaise with families/community and plan together; and having a permanent venue. Also mentioned were: further inclusion of the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families; reporting changes to document the complexity of attendance patterns; and flexibility of operating hours and days.
- Some changes were presented as dilemmas. These included the inclusion of non-Aboriginal families or making KindiLink exclusively for Aboriginal families, starting KindiLink at a younger or older age, involving families less to give children time to develop independence or involving families more to develop their capacity and confidence, and locating KindiLink on or off school sites. Remote communities also indicated the need to be flexible in staffing to enable the AIEO to deliver KindiLink if the teacher was absent.
- Additions included a breakfast program and health checks at KindiLink and a KindiLink school uniform.

Insights for the future

- Schools and families all mentioned the desire to see the continuation of KindiLink to sustain and extend the achievements gained, and to build on these over time. There was a sense that schools had learned a great deal over 2016 and 2017 and could continue developing and improving the program to achieve greater outcomes in the future.
- Schools suggested that children and families who attended KindiLink go on to experience improved attendance at Kindergarten in subsequent years. Some principals felt it was important to establish ongoing monitoring of KindiLink children to ascertain outcomes over time.
- Schools mentioned the centrality of qualified, experienced and committed staff and the need for training to help address issues and support partnerships. The fundamental need to recruit the AIEO from the local community was again emphasised. The importance of ongoing support from the Early Childhood Branch was also mentioned and greatly appreciated.
- Participants mentioned how significant their professional and personal growth had been - particularly in relation to the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families. This was identified as one of the key aspects of the success of KindiLink.
- Insights about the complexity of interactions between the KindiLink staff and their local community were identified. Three schools indicated that KindiLink was not working well in their communities because of low enrolments and attendance and would be better placed elsewhere. One principal provided ideas about where KindiLink might be more effective.
- No significant differences were found between remote, metropolitan, regional city and regional towns. However, one remote school mentioned the difficulty of establishing KindiLink and identified the problem of attracting teachers who specialise in early childhood and have a passion for pre-kindergarten on anything but a full-time equivalent (FTE) position.
- Families overwhelmingly indicated a shared hope that KindiLink would continue. They identified the benefits gained for their children, themselves and their family and expressed a desire for other families and Aboriginal communities to have the same opportunity.

MAIN REPORT

VOLUME 1: OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The implementation and evaluation of KindiLink is both timely and significant, given the current research on the education and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and their families. The *Closing the Gap* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) identified the importance of early education for Aboriginal children both in terms of participation and achievement. On purely economic grounds, Heckman (2011) found that the combination of early childhood education and parent support produced a 7-10% return for every dollar invested in saved social cost in later life. Although there has been improvement in some areas, research clearly demonstrates that in comparison with Australian children in general, Aboriginal children have lower levels of school attendance and poorer educational outcomes (Department of Social Services, 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Quality early childhood education is seen as a key to improving Aboriginal educational outcomes. In recognition of this, the Federal Government has set a new target of 95% early childhood attendance for all Aboriginal 4-year olds. This aligns with research that suggests for Aboriginal children and families, preschool participation and parental engagement with the child's school has a positive association with cognitive, social and developmental outcomes (Department of Social Services, 2015). The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC, 2014) has indicated that the quality of child-teacher and teacher-parent relationships formed in the early phases of school is a key feature of successful transition programs for Aboriginal children. Consequently, positive transitions to 'formal education', ongoing attendance and strong links between home and school are key indicators of success (Higgins & Morley, 2014). Positive relationships among stakeholders enable true engagement with the school, not only for the child, but also for the family and community (Dockett, Mason, & Perry, 2006). Thus, transition to school is defined as a holistic concept that situates the child within an ecological framework, surrounded by the support of their family, community and the school (SNAICC, 2014; Carbines, Grieves, Robb & Wyatt, 2008; McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson, & Carapetis, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This definition encompasses the notion of ready children, ready families, ready communities, and ready schools in which transition programs build capacity between stakeholders and confidence in parents/caregivers as their child's first educators.

Both playgroups and supported playgroups have the potential to make a difference to the early educational experiences of children and their families, particularly in relation to families living in vulnerable circumstances (Hancock et al., 2015). Supported playgroups have been part of the early childhood landscape for many years in Australia. They are funded and operated by both community and government organisations and although there are a number of different models, generally they are delivered by a paid, early childhood qualified playgroup leader (Jackson, 2013). Supported playgroups are designed to reach vulnerable families, with the broad aim of enhancing children's learning and development and supporting parenting practices (Commerford & Robinson, 2016) and as a means of improving family, school and community connections (Williams et al., 2017). Although participation in supported playgroups has been shown to lead to some improved outcomes for families and children (Williams et al., 2017), there is limited evidence about the nature and long-term impact of supported playgroups, particularly in relation to Aboriginal families (Muir & Dean, 2017). This study adds to the evidence, through an evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of a supported playgroup for Aboriginal families in 37 public school sites across Western Australia.

KindiLink

The KindiLink initiative is based on a 'supported playgroup' model for 3-year-old Aboriginal children who attend with a parent/caregiver. KindiLink aims to support children's learning, development and engagement in the year before they start Kindergarten, enhance the confidence and capacity of parents/caregivers as their children's first teachers, and forge strong and supportive links between home, school and the community. Operating as a 3-year pilot (2016-2018), KindiLink was implemented in 37 selected public schools across Western Australia, in remote, regional (town and city) and metropolitan communities.

KindiLink sessions are free and provided for a minimum of 6 hours per week where participation is voluntary for families. Although the target group for KindiLink is Aboriginal children and their families, where capacity exists and in consultation between the principal, KindiLink staff and attending families, non-Aboriginal families may be invited to attend. Where capacity exists, younger siblings may also participate in KindiLink. Schools are responsible for determining the most suitable facility for KindiLink on or near their school site.

The most appropriate schedule for the delivery of KindiLink sessions (three 2-hour sessions or two 3-hour sessions) is determined by KindiLink staff, in consultation with the principal, families and the local community. The sessions are planned and delivered by an early childhood trained teacher (wherever possible) and an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO). Each session is based on evidence-based programs and practices, including the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education and Training, 2009). The content reflects local context and children's interests and capabilities, and includes indoor and outdoor play experiences, LearningGames®, conversational reading, shared storytelling and music/rhymes. It is planned in consultation with participating children's families to ensure Aboriginal language/dialect and culture is incorporated into the program, leading to joint ownership of the program. In the pilot phase, AIEOs, KindiLink teachers and principals were invited to attend workshops and consultants from the Early Childhood Branch, Department of Education Statewide Services Division provided ongoing support.

As a 'supported playgroup' model of delivery, staff-to-child ratios specified in the National Quality Standard are not applicable to KindiLink. Funding is distributed to schools as a Targeted Initiative through the School Allocation Module (SAM). Funding for 2018 is sufficient for a 0.3 FTE teacher and 0.25 FTE AIEO. This level of funding provides time for 6 hours of program delivery plus Duties Other Than Teaching (DOTT) for the teacher, as well as additional time for the teacher and AIEO for KindiLink community engagement and program planning, preparation and support.

1.2 Research Methodology

The evaluation of the KindiLink initiative was a complex, mixed-method, and large-scale undertaking requiring cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of the scope and aims of KindiLink. The study was shaped by the requirements of the Early Childhood Branch (Department of Education), with research questions and methodology jointly constructed by the Edith Cowan University Early Childhood team and the Early Childhood Branch KindiLink team. The primary aim was to undertake a broad and deep investigation of the 37 KindiLink sites which focused on the voices of the participants and revealed their experiences and perceptions of KindiLink. The results were based on the intended outcomes of KindiLink and structured in terms of the research questions:

- Q1. How effective has KindiLink been at improving the social, emotional, language and cognitive ability of Aboriginal children upon entry into Kindergarten?**
- Q2. What impact has KindiLink had on improving attendance among participating children during their schooling?**
- Q3. How effective has KindiLink been in building the capacity and confidence of families/carers as their child's first educator?**
- Q4. What impact has KindiLink had on building productive relationships between the family, the school and the community?**

Qualitative and quantitative data were utilised to capture the complexity of the families, schools and communities within which KindiLink operates, and the multifaceted nature and aims of KindiLink. The 37 sites ranged from large metropolitan schools with mixed student profiles to small remote community schools with 100% Aboriginal enrolment. A summary of the data collection instruments is provided in Table 1. The data were gathered over a 2-year period and included survey data collected across the 37 KindiLink sites (participants included families, AIEOs, KindiLink teachers and principals). The surveys conducted across all KindiLink sites regarding children's capabilities were undertaken by kindergarten teachers in 2017 and 2018. The survey data allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. An analysis of pre-primary on-entry assessment data for 2016 KindiLink children entering pre-primary in 2018 was also undertaken. The qualitative data consisted of a reflective journal completed across three school terms by AIEOs and KindiLink teachers. Additionally, members of the research team undertook four case studies in two metropolitan communities, one regional city and one regional/remote community. This mixed method approach enabled the research team to respond to contextual variables and to be flexible and responsive to changes while also capturing variations in the local context. The use of qualitative and quantitative methodology enabled validation of the data through triangulation.

In conducting the research in partnership with diverse communities, the research team endeavoured to ensure the voices of participants were heard. Strategies to achieve this included adopting culturally appropriate ways of speaking with families and KindiLink teachers/ AIEOs. This meant being aware of the languages/dialects in each community and enabling participants to communicate in the language of their choice. The KindiLink evaluation research advisory committee, convened by ECU, made a significant contribution to the evaluation, sharing insights into the cultural, linguistic and social contexts of the evaluation communities and knowledge about issues that impacted on the evaluation process. In addition, the data collection was designed to be mutually beneficial to the evaluation and to the families, AIEOs, teachers and principals in their ongoing reflections about KindiLink as they engaged with the research process.

The research team adhered to the 'National Ethical Standards for Research' exemplified in the Edith Cowan University ethical requirements for all research projects and the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2012). Ethics approval was gained from Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee and approval to conduct research on school sites was obtained from the Department of Education.

Table 1: Data collection instruments

Instrument	Participants	2016	2017	2018
KindiLink participant surveys	KindiLink families	Term 4	Term 4	
	Principal, KindiLink teacher and AIEO	Term 4	Term 4	
Kindergarten children’s capabilities survey	Kindergarten teacher		Term 1	Term 1
Registration and attendance data	KindiLink children	Across 2016 and 2017		
	KindiLink children in Kindergarten	Across 2017		
Pre-primary on-entry assessment data	Pre-primary teacher at KindiLink sites			Term 1
Case studies	KindiLink families, principals, teachers AIEOs, kindergarten teachers and stakeholders across four sites		Term 2	
Reflective journal	KindiLink teachers and AIEOs		Terms 2 - 4	

Quality control mechanisms

A number of quality control mechanisms were put in place to ensure that the evaluation caused as little disruption as possible and did not add to the everyday demands of families, AIEOs, teachers and principals. These mechanisms, described in Table 2, ensured the research process was as mutually beneficial as possible for stakeholders and researchers.

1.3 Research Instruments, Respondent Profiles and Analyses

KindiLink participant surveys

KindiLink families

Families attending KindiLink from the 37 KindiLink sites were invited to complete an online or paper-based survey. Information about the evaluation was given to families while attending KindiLink by the KindiLink teacher and/or AIEO. Participants were given the opportunity to complete the survey with or without the support of the KindiLink teacher and/or AIEO. An interpreter was available if necessary. The survey was completed at the end of Term 4, 2016 (for the 2016 KindiLink cohort) and the end of Term 4, 2017 (for the 2017 KindiLink cohort).

The first group of items was designed to capture information about each family attending KindiLink, including their cultural identity, language most frequently spoken at home, the highest level of education in the family, and the respondent’s relationship to the child attending KindiLink. The second group of items sought to gather perceptions of KindiLink and its impact on family/school relationships, parent confidence and their child’s learning.

Table 2: Quality control mechanisms

Quality Control Mechanisms	Description
Easy to use and process data collection tools	The data collection instruments and protocols were designed to avoid placing an unreasonable burden upon families, AIEOs, teachers and principals.
Voices of participants	Managing focus group processes and using informal yarning processes maximised participation. Members of the project team were experienced facilitators. Where interpreters or locally based research associates were available and necessary, training was provided before any data collection.
Recruitment and training of local research facilitators	Attention was given to the inclusive selection of participants. Local advice was sought especially in sites where English is not the first language of participants. Every attempt was made to use the language/dialect of choice of families.
Ensure consistency and usability of teacher collected data	Instruments selected were easy to use and data submission methods streamlined. All tools and processes were developed in consultation with the KindiLink Evaluation Group prior to use. Comprehensive data management protocols were established from the onset in line with ECU research management policy and ethical requirements.
Completion of reflective observation journals	Observation journals are an important aspect of professional learning, however they are not necessarily a regular aspect of teacher practice. Participants were therefore given clear guidance about completing the journal and control over which parts they shared.
Project management structure	A clearly articulated management structure was established. This included a project director to ensure all tender requirements were met, a multi-skilled team to cover all aspects of the evaluation, and a project manager to oversee the project.
Project team communication and data management protocols	Regular team meetings and rigorous data management and storage protocols were negotiated, established and maintained throughout the evaluation.
Issues arising	The team is experienced in quickly resolving issues that may arise to the satisfaction of those involved. The ECU research environment provided infrastructure to support this project and access to expert advice from a broad range of experienced researchers/evaluators.
Communication of evaluation findings	Careful ongoing planning and consultation was undertaken to ensure that the means of reporting and disseminating findings were compatible with the needs of the client, KindiLink schools, participants and other stakeholders.

KindiLink staff

School staff involved in KindiLink (principals, teachers and AIEOs) across all 37 KindiLink sites were invited to complete an online or paper-based survey. KindiLink teachers and AIEOs were invited to complete the survey individually or in collaboration. The survey was completed at the end of Term 4, 2016 and the end of Term 4, 2017.

The first group of survey items was designed to capture information about the name of the school, career phase, teaching experience and employment history. The second set of items asked about perceptions of the implementation of KindiLink and perceived outcomes for families and children in relation to the four research questions. The third group of items invited participants to identify benefits, challenges and suggestions for change and concluded with insights gained that might inform the future of KindiLink.

As far as possible, survey questions for KindiLink principals, teachers and AIEOs, and families were similar (with slightly different wording when necessary), providing opportunities for triangulation of results.

Survey responses

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the respondent groups and response rates for the surveys administered to principals, teachers, AIEOs, and KindiLink families (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). For the purposes of this report, Aboriginal families are defined as those where the 3-year-old KindiLink child identified as Aboriginal. We note that there were several parent/carer respondents (19% in 2016, 17% in 2017) whose child identified as Aboriginal, but they themselves identified as non-Aboriginal. Non-Aboriginal families are defined as those where the 3-year-old KindiLink child and their parent/carer did not identify as Aboriginal.

Whereas the response rates for the school staff (principals, teachers, AIEOs) and non-Aboriginal families were higher in 2017 than 2016, the reverse was true for the Aboriginal families. It should be noted that the percentages of KindiLink families who completed the survey are based on the number of **registered** families attending KindiLink. Data from the surveys suggest that attendance of families was sporadic, and for some families, infrequent. Thus, it is possible that the survey response rates would be considerably higher than 24% in 2016 and 18% in 2017 for Aboriginal families, and 20% in 2016 and 24% in 2017 for non-Aboriginal families, if based on families who actually **attended** during Term 4.

Table 3: Sample sizes and response rates for the KindiLink surveys

Participants	Completed Surveys n		Response Rate %	
	2016	2017	2016	2017
Principals	28	31	75.7	83.8
Teachers	29	37	78.4	100.0
AIEOs	20	29	54.1	78.4
KindiLink families - Aboriginal ¹	83	71	24.1	18.3
KindiLink families - non-Aboriginal ²	30	31	20.0	24.2

¹ 345 and 388 Aboriginal families were registered in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

² 150 and 128 non-Aboriginal families were registered in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

Respondent profiles

Aboriginal families: The profiles of the Aboriginal families participating in 2016 and 2017 were very similar. As shown in Table 4, in both cohorts, most participants (92-94%) identified as female and more than three-quarters identified themselves as the mother of the KindiLink child. Only a few fathers were represented (4% and 6%), while aunts and grandmothers (combined) made up 12% and 14% of the 2016 and 2017 cohorts, respectively.

Table 4: Characteristics of the parents/carers of the Aboriginal KindiLink children (rounded percentages)

	Parents/Carers of Aboriginal Children ¹	
	2016 %	2017 %
Gender of survey respondent	%	%
Female	94	92
Male	6	8
Relationship to KindiLink child	%	%
Mother	81	76
Father	4	6
Grandmother	10	4
Aunty	2	10
Carer	1	3
Other	2	1
Language(s) spoken at home²	%	%
English	88	91
Aboriginal English	33	24
Kriol/Creole	7	6
Regional Aboriginal language	9	3
Other	1	-
Language(s) child speaks at home²	%	%
English	91	90
Aboriginal English	26	28
Kriol/Creole	4	6
Regional Aboriginal language	9	1
Other	3	-

¹ 2016: n=83; 2017: n = 71

² Multiple response item, hence total percentage is greater than 100

In terms of languages spoken at home within families and by the KindiLink child themselves, there was slightly more diversity in 2016 than 2017. English was one of the main languages spoken at home by approximately 90% of the 2016 and 2017 families. Aboriginal English was the second most prevalent language, spoken by between 33% and 24% of families in 2016 and 2017, respectively. As might be expected, the languages

spoken at home by the KindiLink children largely reflect those spoken within their families, with the exception of Aboriginal English which was less represented for the KindiLink children (26%) than for families (33%).

Information about the highest level of education achieved was provided by 71 parents/carers (i.e. 86% of sample) in 2016 and 62 parents/carers (87% of sample) in 2017. A breakdown of their responses is provided in Table 5 and shows that a slightly higher proportion of the 2017 cohort (50%) had completed Year 12 and/or achieved a tertiary qualification (e.g. trade certificate, diploma or degree) than the 2016 cohort (42%).

Table 5: Highest education level of parents/carers of the Aboriginal KindiLink children (rounded percentages)

	Parents/Carers of Aboriginal Children ¹	
	2016 %	2017 %
Primary school	1	-
Year 8	-	2
Year 9	3	-
Year 10	39	32
Year 11	11	11
Year 12	17	31
Certificate including trade qualification	17	14
Diploma	4	3
University	4	2
Other	3	5
TOTAL	100	100

¹ 2016 = 71 responses (86% of sample); 2017 = 62 responses (87% of sample)

Principals: A greater proportion of the 2016 cohort was relatively new to their school: more than half (54%) were appointed within the past 2 years compared to about one-third (35%) of the 2017 cohort. Principals who had served at least 9 years in their current school accounted for 14% of the 2016 cohort and 23% of the 2017 cohort.

KindiLink Teachers: Using the career phases described by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers as a basis for self-evaluation, most of the teachers (59% in 2016 and 55% in 2017) identified themselves as 'proficient', while about a quarter nominated 'highly accomplished' (24% and 26%), and a few identified as 'lead teachers' (7% and 8%) or 'new graduates' (7% and 11%). This was reflected in the teachers' collective years of teaching experience. In both 2016 and 2017, more than half (55% and 57%) had 9 years or more experience and only a few had 2 years or less experience (7% and 11%, presumably the graduates). In 2016 and 2017 there were similar levels of staffing stability, with 28% and 24% of teachers having been at their current school for at least 9 years. More than two-thirds (64%) of the 2017 KindiLink teachers indicated they had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2016.

Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers: The majority of AIEOS (60% in 2016 and 68% in 2017) had at least 9 years of experience in the AIEO role, and at least half (50% and 54%) had worked in their current school

9 years or more. Interestingly, 50% of the AIEOs in the 2016 cohort indicated they had a Certificate III in Education Support, compared to only 39% in 2017. However, 8 AIEOs (29%) from the 2017 cohort and only 1 AIEO (5%) from the 2016 cohort were actively working towards completing this qualification. KindiLink staffing was relatively stable with 68% of the 2017 AIEOs indicating they had also been the KindiLink AIEO in 2016.

Analyses

The KindiLink participant surveys contained between 15 and 24 items, and included a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions inviting comments. (Some items contained a multiple choice component followed by a request for 'other' or 'additional' comments.) Response rates to the questions were extremely high and the comment sections were well utilised.

The survey data were entered into Excel spreadsheets for analysis. Responses to the multiple choice questions were collated and presented in graphs. For the comments, thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes. The themes were presented in order of most to least commonly-mentioned. For this ordering, a count of the number of comments for each theme was undertaken, however this number is indicative only as there were frequent overlaps between themes. For the survey of KindiLink families, the data obtained were aggregated into those who identified as Aboriginal and those who identified as non-Aboriginal.

Kindergarten children's capabilities survey

Kindergarten teachers working in KindiLink schools were asked to complete a capabilities survey about each individual child in their kindergarten class. This survey was completed as the children were commencing Kindergarten, in Term 1, 2017 (for the 2016 KindiLink cohort) and Term 1, 2018 (for the 2017 KindiLink cohort).

The first group of survey items was designed to elicit information about the kindergarten teachers themselves, including: name, school, career phase, teaching experience, previous experience as a KindiLink teacher, and number of children in their class. The second group of items asked respondents whether they had met with the KindiLink teacher and/or the AIEO to discuss the KindiLink initiative and the children who participated in the previous year, and if they had made any changes to their practice based on their understanding of KindiLink. The third group of items asked about levels of engagement and/or confidence in Aboriginal parents and children who had participated in KindiLink compared with those who had not attended KindiLink.

The final section of the survey focused on the kindergarten children: that is, all kindergarten children enrolled at the 37 KindiLink sites including those who had participated in KindiLink and those who had not. Teachers were asked to complete questions about each individual child in their kindergarten class, including child's name, previous attendance at KindiLink, identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage, and the extent to which the child had so far demonstrated adequate social skills, emotional skills and behaviours, language-based skills and cognitive skills. Each skill group was measured using a 4-point Likert-type ordinal scale (i.e. 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', or 'consistently'). In the 2018 survey, a question about the location of the school was added: participants were asked to identify whether their school was classified as metropolitan, regional city, regional town or remote in order to identify any major differences in findings related to school location.

Survey responses

The survey was completed by 33 kindergarten teachers from KindiLink sites in Term 1, 2017 and 49 kindergarten teachers in Term 1, 2018. Across the 2 years of data collection, kindergarten teachers provided usable data for 555 children enrolled in the Kindergarten programs who identified as having Aboriginal heritage. Of these, 278 (50%) had participated in KindiLink and 277 had not. Hence, the KindiLink and non-KindiLink group sizes were very similar. As teachers were not always able to provide complete data for every child, differences in totals are evident for the kindergarten student results presented in subsequent sections of this report.

Respondent profile

Kindergarten teachers: Almost a quarter (24%) of the 2017 kindergarten teachers had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2016, while 21% of the 2018 cohort had also been the KindiLink teacher in 2017 or both 2016 and 2017. The kindergarten teachers were asked to identify their career phase, as defined by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. Proportionately, the 2017 participants were somewhat more experienced than the 2018 participants, with 52% and 33%, respectively, identifying as 'highly accomplished'. Stability of employment was indicated by the number of years the teachers had been at their school. In 2017, 42% of the kindergarten teachers had been at the school for 9 years or more compared to 29% in 2018. More teachers completed the survey in 2018, so perhaps the increased participation in 2018 allowed for a broader range of experience to be captured. Overall, the 2017 and 2018 survey respondents were relatively experienced kindergarten teachers. (Note that there is considerable overlap of the teacher samples, so it is not appropriate to combine and aggregate the data on teacher characteristics.)

Analyses

All the data were de-identified to ensure confidentiality and encourage authenticity of responses. A thematic analysis was conducted of the comments teachers made about their perception of levels of engagement and/or confidence in Aboriginal parents and children who had participated in KindiLink. Themes were categorised and presented in order of most to least commonly-mentioned. For this ordering, a count of the number of comments for each theme was undertaken, however this number is indicative only as there were frequent overlaps between themes. The kindergarten teachers' ratings of the capabilities of Aboriginal children who attended KindiLink and Aboriginal children who had not attended KindiLink were measured at the categorical or ordinal level. For this reason, inferential statistics were limited to non-parametric tests, namely the Pearson's chi-square test of independence. As is common practice in the social science, the statistical significance level was set at 0.05.

Registration and attendance data

Data on 2016 and 2017 KindiLink registration and attendance for all children and Aboriginal children only were provided by the Department of Education. Data were in the form of summary statistics (frequencies and percentages) rather than individual student data.

Further data on the 2016 KindiLink cohort were provided by the Department of Education in the form of numbers of 3-year-old Aboriginal children in each of the combined categories of KindiLink attendance in 2016 (six categories: 0-40 hours; 41-80 hours; 81-120 hours; 121-160 hours; 161-200 hours; and 201-240 hours) and subsequent kindergarten attendance risk in 2017 (four categories: 'severe', 'moderate', 'indicated' or 'regular') - thus equalling a total of 24 categories.

Analyses

Graphs and tables were constructed to summarise and display the registration and attendance patterns for Aboriginal non-Aboriginal KindiLink children in 2016 and 2017. Patterns of transition from KindiLink to Kindergarten and associations between KindiLink attendance and kindergarten attendance risk were also represented graphically and in tables.

The Pearson chi-square test of independence (suitable for categorical/ordinal data) was used to determine the degree of association between hours of KindiLink participation and categories of kindergarten attendance risk in 2016 and 2017.

Pre-primary on-entry assessment data

Aggregated pre-primary on-entry data for reading, listening and speaking, and numeracy were provided by the Department of Education. The On-Entry Assessment Program for pre-primary students is conducted during weeks 3-6 of Term 1 each year. The main purpose of the On-Entry Assessment Program is to provide teachers with information about the skills and understandings that a child brings to school (Department of Education, 2015). The focus of the assessment is on the literacy and numeracy skills and understandings considered critical to early and ongoing educational development (Department of Education, 2015). Pre-primary teachers work through a set of tasks and questions with each child in a one-to-one situation and record their responses online.

Analyses

The on-entry data were provided in the form of means and standard deviations grouped according to Aboriginality and participation/non-participation in KindiLink. Group comparisons were therefore limited to independent *t*-tests.

The findings from the on-entry assessment data are presented in Volume 2.

Case studies

Case studies were undertaken across four sites in 2017 to provide descriptive accounts of the implementation and outcomes of the KindiLink initiative. They aim to complement the survey data and describe the lived experiences of participants in the implementation of KindiLink. The Early Childhood Branch assisted with the sampling process, and the four sites were chosen to ensure the sample was representative and adequately captured the variation in contexts. Considerations included: geographical location (regional, remote or metropolitan), the presence or not of a Child and Parent Centre, the demographic profiles of families invited to register for KindiLink, and the number of Aboriginal children attending. The four case study sites are geographically diverse with one remote school, one regional, and two metropolitan schools. Although all 37 KindiLink sites are unique, it was thought that choice of case study sites based on these variables might offer some insights into differences in the implementation and outcomes of KindiLink. A summary of the characteristics of the four case study sites is provided in Table 6.

Participants in the case studies included: the principal, KindiLink teacher, AIEO, attending families, community representatives and the kindergarten teacher. Each participant signed an informed consent form after reading an information letter explaining the research project. For some participants, there was provision of a translator and/or a verbal account of the research project and verbal agreement was sought. Participants were also asked to give signed informed consent to photographs being taken.

The case study data were collected over a period of 2-3 days in Term 3 by two researchers at each site. The methods of data collection used included interviews, informal conversations, observations of families, children, staff and the environment, as well as analysis of school documents (such as planning and attendance register documents). To create a sense of trust and to ensure that cultural and linguistic protocols were observed, researchers adopted an informal conversational approach to seeking information. Where appropriate, each researcher yarned with family members either individually or in small groups while having morning tea or playing alongside families.

Table 6: KindiLink case study sites

Name	Location	CPC on-site 2016-17	Families		KindiLink Registrations				KL ¹ teacher same in 2016 & 2017	Teacher same for KL and Kindy		Aboriginal 4 year olds in Kindergarten			
			2016-17		2016		2017			2016	2017	2012-14 Average		2014-16 Average	
			ATSI ²	Other ²	ATSI #	Other #	ATSI #	Other #				#	%	#	%
Grevillea	Metro	✓	✓	✗	16	0	17	0	✓	✓	✓	6.0	16.0	8.7	18.6
Coojong	Regional Town	✓	✓	✓	1	1	17	0	✓	✗	✗	14.3	82.6	18.3	88.7
Boronia	Regional City	✗	✓	✓	15	6	17		✓	✗	✗	23.3	43.1	14.7	37.0
Eucalypt	Metro	✗	✓	✓	9	5	18		✓	✓	✓	9.3	28.7	9.7	27.6

¹ KL = KindiLink

² Due to space restrictions, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander has been abbreviated as ATSI. 'Other' means non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

More formal interviews involved semi-structured interview questions sent to staff before the interview. For the observations, researchers focussed on the interactions between the educators, families and children and level of engagement in activities. Photographs of the KindiLink environment and families engaged in activities were taken to add visual evidence to the data and were analysed in accordance with the Early Years Learning Framework and the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines. All case studies, including photos, were returned to schools for verification and permission to publish.

Analyses

The interviews were transcribed, revealing the complexity and richness of each case. To create some coherence across the case studies and identify differences and similarities, each researcher documented their findings under the same headings. These headings were created after a first analysis of the data and related (approximately) to the research questions. Findings were illustrated and enhanced by photographs, documents, quotations and observations.

The case studies are presented in Volume 3.

Reflective journal

A reflective journal was written by teachers and AIEOs across all 37 sites in Terms 2, 3 and 4, and collected in weeks 5 and 10 during 2017. The journals prompted teachers and AIEOs to reflect on what they do, why they do it and how these reflections can be used to improve their practice and achieve the best outcomes for children and families. In their reflective journals, teachers and AIEOs also captured significant 'events' or 'moments' in relation to relationship-building between the family, school and community, developing capabilities of children, increasing the capacity and confidence of parents, and any other issues that arose in relation to the implementation, pedagogical practices and outcomes of the program. The journal prompts were loosely structured around the four research questions, with many opportunities for participants to provide explicit examples and scenarios. The examples helped to illustrate and illuminate their overall perceptions of KindiLink.

Analyses

As soon as the comments were completed (in weeks 5 and 10 of Terms 2, 3 and 4) they were extracted from the electronic journal. Responses from the KindiLink teachers and AIEOs were collated under each question that prompted their reflections. A researcher took responsibility for the analysis of the comments in relation to three of the reflective questions. Each set of comments was analysed through a process of thematic analysis which seeks to identify patterns or themes across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each researcher undertook the following process:

1. Counting the number of comments under each question, to gain a sense of the significance of the question.
2. Familiarising themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the comments related to their first question and noting initial ideas.
3. Creating initial codes by systematically identifying the same concepts across all the comments and colour coding.
4. Identifying potential themes by collating the codes under a theme.
5. Checking for coherence by reviewing the 'fit' of the codes under each theme and moving codes and/or noting overlap.
6. Naming the theme and writing a summary of each theme.

As far as possible, each researcher analysed the same or similar questions across each term in order to identify changes over time. Table 7 documents the percentages of teachers and AIEOs who wrote comments across the three terms.

The findings from the reflective journals are presented in Volume 4.

Table 7: Percentages of teachers and AIEOs who wrote reflective journal comments across the three terms

2017 Term	Week	Kindiink teachers %	AIEOs %	KL teachers & AIEOs ¹ %	Total %
2	5	33	2	64	99
2	10	40	3	51	94
3	5	37	6	51	94
3	10	42	3	55	100
4	5	47	3	50	100

¹ Completed in tandem

1.4 Limitations

Extensive consultation with and guidance from the Early Childhood Branch on a regular basis, attendance at and discussion with principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs at professional learning workshops, ongoing discussion with the Advisory Committee, and an awareness of the complexity of the cross-cultural context of KindiLink helped to secure robust evidence about the impact of KindiLink. However, it is acknowledged that inevitably there are limitations to this research.

- **Cross cultural context:** Perhaps the most significant limitation was cross-cultural complexity, which included issues of world view, culture and language/dialect. This entailed going beyond the idea of researchers' cultural competence but instead engaging cultural sensitivity to capture lived experience within a cultural understanding of the issues being researched. While every attempt was made to develop understanding from the families' lived experience through a culturally appropriate lens, it is acknowledged that 'yarning' with families took place in the KindiLink context (i.e. on a school site) and with a non-Aboriginal researcher.
- **Self-report data:** The strong reliance on self-report data was a further limitation. As self-report data was dependent on families being willing to 'yarn' with the researcher and complete the survey on-line or with the support of the KindiLink teacher or AIEO, this may have led to some families opting out due to a number of reasons including cultural, linguistic and English literacy levels. For teachers and AIEOs, self-report data was dependent upon the participants' reflection, recall and documentation of events, and it may have also been liable to social desirability bias in which participants are more likely to respond positively. It is also possible that those who chose to complete the survey were more positive than those who did not participate. It is important to note, however, that the response rates for principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs were relatively high for 2016 and 2017 (over 75%, with the exception of the AIEOs in 2016 – 54%).

- **Kindergarten children's capabilities survey:** Lack of moderation of the items on the capability survey was recognised as a limitation. However, the relatively high level of the kindergarten teachers' teaching experience, length of time at the school, experience as the KindiLink teacher and the fact that most of the kindergarten teachers had met with the KindiLink teacher and/or AIEO to discuss KindiLink and the children and families who participated, suggests they were able to make judgements about 'adequate' levels of social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities on commencement at Kindergarten.
- **Timing of data collection:** It was necessary to collect most data at a time when the KindiLink initiative was still being established and when understanding and expectations as well as patterns of interaction for all participants (children, families, teachers, AIEOs, principals) were still being formed. This is especially significant for an early childhood initiative with Aboriginal families where mutual trust and respect is the gateway to positive relationships and building shared understandings. Collecting data at the beginning of the initiative could be seen as both a limitation and an advantage as it provided insights into the early establishment of KindiLink.

Although it is important to recognise these limitations, it is arguable that the measures built into the evaluation design and the triangulation of data allow for an acceptable level of confidence in the veracity of the data. Where possible the effect of these limitations has been minimized through the use of longitudinal data (reflective journals), repeated cross-sectional measures (surveys) and in-depth site-based exploration of KindiLink (case studies). However, it is recognised that, ultimately, interpretation of data is always the result of the researchers' perceptions and world view and their findings may not necessarily reflect those of the participants.

2. Overall Findings

2.1 Impact on Aboriginal Children's Capabilities

Q1 How effective has KindiLink been at improving the social, emotional, language and cognitive ability of Aboriginal children upon entry into Kindergarten?

The **KindiLink participant surveys** asked staff and families about the impact of the program on the children's capabilities. Principals felt that development of language and social skills had helped '*bridge the gaps*' in learning and mentioned the importance of exposure to 'school type activities'. Teachers in 2016 indicated that language and social skills had improved, and in 2017 many specifically mentioned improvements in the cognitive skills of the KindiLink children. Across all four capability domains – social, emotional, language and cognitive – more than 85% of teachers in 2016 and 2017 indicated that KindiLink was highly or moderately effective in supporting Aboriginal children's capabilities. Comments provided by the AIEOs in 2016 and 2017 reinforced this conviction that the Aboriginal children's capabilities had improved. In particular the AIEOs highlighted the language development amongst those children for whom English was not their first language. Some families felt that the children had improved their preliminary reading and numeracy skills and indicated that they had been able to transfer the KindiLink activities to their homes, in particular the reading of books.

Almost all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that KindiLink had supported their child's learning. In 2016 and 2017, families described how KindiLink had supported the development of social, emotional, language and cognitive skills and mentioned the new learning opportunities KindiLink had provided. In 2017, families sought information about how to support their child's (and older siblings') development. Interestingly, many families described the positive benefits that their younger child(ren) gained from coming to KindiLink.

These observations were reinforced by the **case study** data in which all KindiLink and kindergarten teachers spoke of children's gains, particularly in oral language and social and emotional development. Data from the four case study sites when considered in relation to the outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework and the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines support these findings and demonstrate that outcomes were met in children's learning, development and wellbeing. However, it was evident that the teachers found it more difficult to show development in the cognitive area. Again, in the case studies, some of the teachers and parents described how children who spoke a different language or dialect at home were speaking more English as the year progressed. It was also observed at one site that children learned how to '*code switch*' by observing their families in the KindiLink and school environment. Mention was also made of how KindiLink gave the teachers an opportunity for early identification of children with additional needs.

The findings from the case studies and survey data were further confirmed by the comments in the **reflective journals**. Teachers commented on the many ways language skills were being developed through children code switching, the use of language rich environments, encouraging the families to talk with their children and early intervention. They felt that the social skills of the Aboriginal children were being developed through interactions and by the children learning, sharing and playing in the group activities. The improvements in the children's social skills also paved the way for assisting with their emotional development

as teachers could discuss expectations and provide choices and support where needed. The teachers and AIEOs found developing the cognitive skills of the children to be a greater challenge at the beginning of KindiLink but towards the latter part of the year they felt more confident about helping children explore more complex concepts.

In the **kindergarten children's capabilities survey**, just over two-thirds (68%) of kindergarten teachers in 2017 and almost all (83%) in 2018 reported that they had noticed differences in the level of engagement and/or confidence in the Aboriginal children who had attended KindiLink and those who had not attended. They noted that the KindiLink children appeared to have stronger social, language and cognitive skills and demonstrated an understanding of the routines and expectations of Kindergarten. They also reported that the KindiLink children appeared to settle quickly and were able to separate from their families with little anxiety. This perhaps suggests that in the second year, as KindiLink became more established, the teacher and AIEO began to focus on learning as well as relationships, and families and children became more comfortable and involved in KindiLink which then transferred to Kindergarten.

In terms of the ratings of kindergarten students' capabilities, Aboriginal students who had attended KindiLink were more likely to be rated by kindergarten teachers as having 'consistently' or 'often' demonstrated adequate social, emotional, language and cognitive skills on commencement of Kindergarten than those Aboriginal children who had not attended KindiLink. This was particularly so for the 2018 cohort where the results of comparisons between the KindiLink and non-KindiLink Aboriginal children across all four capabilities (social, emotional, language and cognitive skills) were statistically significant (based on Pearson chi-square tests of independence).

A visual display of the kindergarten teachers' ratings of the Aboriginal children's capabilities on commencement at Kindergarten in 2018 is presented in Figure 1. This shows that, overall, social skills were the most highly rated of the four capabilities, followed by emotional skills, cognitive skills and language skills. The lower rating of (English) language skills may be due in part to multiple languages being spoken within families and/or the community which may initially delay the typical language milestones in early childhood.

Whilst not evident from Figure 1, the response rate for cognitive skills was somewhat smaller than the other skill groups, perhaps suggesting that kindergarten teachers were less confident or willing to form a judgement about this aspect of their students' capabilities relatively early in the Kindergarten program. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the difference between the KindiLink and non-KindiLink children was the greatest for this skill group, with 55% and 28% of the children, respectively, identified as consistently or often displaying adequate cognitive skills.

Collectively, the evidence from the KindiLink participant surveys and kindergarten children's capabilities survey suggest that KindiLink has made a difference to the capabilities of the children who attended KindiLink compared to those who did not attend. Developing the cognitive abilities of the KindiLink children seems to have presented a greater challenge than developing their social, emotional and language capabilities. While progress in the first year of the KindiLink pilot (2016) was not strongly reflected in kindergarten teacher ratings of the children's capabilities on entry to Kindergarten in 2017, the diligence, hard work and determination of the teachers, AIEOs and principals from the beginning of KindiLink brought about more significant outcomes in social, language, emotional and cognitive capabilities for KindiLink children entering Kindergarten in 2018.

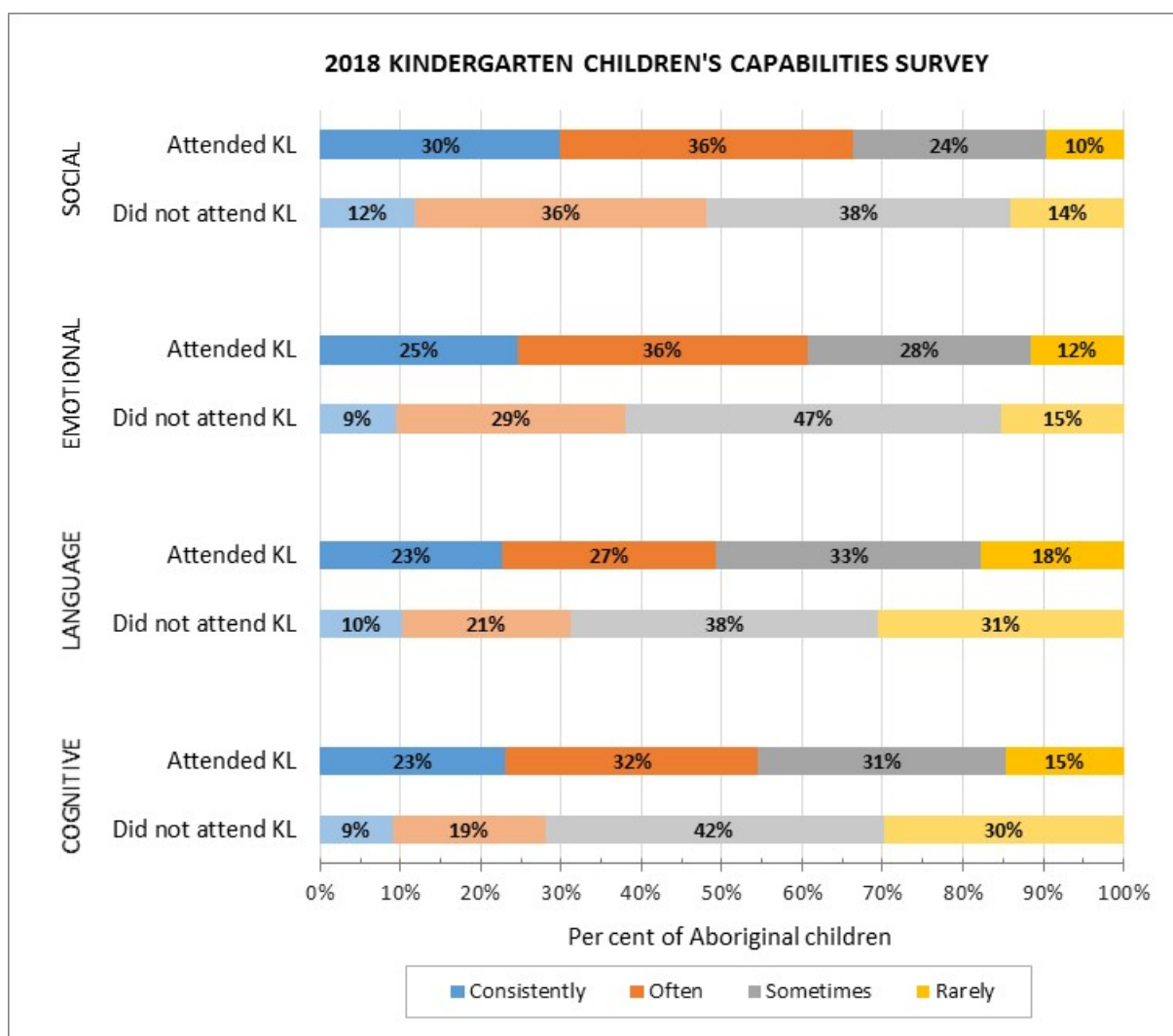


Figure 1: Kindergarten teacher ratings of the extent to which Aboriginal children demonstrated adequate social, emotional, language and cognitive skills on commencing Kindergarten at KindiLink sites in 2018, according to participation in KindiLink

Some insight to the longer term progress of the Aboriginal children who attended KindiLink in 2016 is provided by the **pre-primary on-entry assessment data**. Table 8 shows the average raw scores for reading, listening and speaking, and numeracy of the Aboriginal children enrolled in pre-primary at the 37 KindiLink sites, broken down according to prior participation in KindiLink (2016 cohort). Consistent with the pattern of results seen for the children’s capabilities on-entry to Kindergarten in 2017, KindiLink children had slightly higher average scores on-entry to Pre-primary (at the 37 KindiLink sites) than the non-KindiLink children. While the largest difference (i.e. 13.9) in the mean scores for the KindiLink (M=42.7) and non-KindiLink (M=28.8) children is evident for listening and speaking skills, the results of independent *t*-tests show that this difference is not statistically significant. Accordingly, the results for reading and numeracy are also not statistically significant.

It is not possible to generalise from these results, however, it is interesting to speculate whether the KindiLink children’s relatively higher average listening and speaking score in pre-primary is indicative of the emphasis on language development as reported by the KindiLink teachers and AIEOs in 2016. Given that the results of

the Kindergarten children’s capabilities survey were more positive for the second year of the KindiLink pilot than the first year, it will be important to continue tracking the KindiLink children to determine the longer term impact of the KindiLink program on children’s social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities.

Table 8: On-entry assessment results of Aboriginal children enrolled in pre-primary at the 37 KindiLink sites in 2018 according to KindiLink participation in 2016 (means and standard deviations)

	Reading			Listening & Speaking			Numeracy		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
KindiLink	137	47.2	115.7	137	42.7	129.1	141	78.2	100.3
Non-KindiLink	335	41.5	112.5	335	28.8	131.5	337	67.4	102.0
Independent t-test	$t_{(470)} = -0.45, p = .621$			$t_{(470)} = -1.05, p = .295$			$t_{(476)} = -1.06, p = .289$		

2.2 Impact on Attendance

Q2. What impact has KindiLink had on improving attendance among participating children during their schooling?

Although it is not possible to identify the impact of KindiLink on future schooling, the KindiLink attendance data gives insights into habits of attendance across two years, and the kindergarten attendance data gives insights into the possible contribution KindiLink has made to kindergarten attendance. It is important to note that as a supported playgroup, sessions were consistently offered for 6 hours per week spread across either 2 days or 3 days and families had the freedom to choose how many sessions they attended. This gave families some flexibility and choice without feeling ‘shame’ if they could not or chose not to attend.

When looking across all the KindiLink data, however, it was evident that the principals, teachers, and AIEOs felt strongly that attendance played a critical factor in the success of the KindiLink program and that poor attendance was a significant barrier to achieving outcomes. It was evident that an enormous effort was made to attract and retain families into the KindiLink program. The staff used notice boards, message boards, word of mouth, home visits, social media and other social services to attract families to the program. In particular, the staff were concerned about attracting those Aboriginal families whom they felt would benefit most from the program.

The **KindiLink participant survey data** showed that despite the efforts made by the principals, teachers and AIEOs involved in 2016 and 2017, many expressed disappointment that they had not been more successful in overcoming attendance challenges. In particular they felt they had not been successful in attracting and retaining those families who they felt would benefit most. While the AIEOs and teachers extended their efforts and changed their strategies over time, they continued to feel that attendance had not been as high or as regular as they would have liked. They pointed to the social conditions of the families, poor health, lack of transport and in some cases the sensitivities of the Aboriginal families being required to mix with the non-

Aboriginal families as reasons for the low attendance. They also found the fluctuations in attendees made planning difficult.

The principals likewise worked extremely hard to sustain attendance in the program and found, to their disappointment, that the attendance was not what they had hoped for. Nevertheless, there were pockets of success and four principals felt that their enrolment numbers had increased and the families were becoming more confident in attending KindiLink. Overall, the principals, many of whom were very experienced in their schools, were more philosophical about this issue and suggested that they were in this “*for the long game*”. The principals, teachers and AEOs were determined that persistence, resilience and the investment of resources would allow them to succeed in encouraging more families to commit to KindiLink.

Those families that attended KindiLink commented on why they attended KindiLink and almost a third of Aboriginal families indicated that they had attended KindiLink in 2016 as well as 2017. Reasons for attending KindiLink included the enjoyment of engaging with their children and supporting their learning, watching their child socialise with other children and meeting new and other families. In addition, in 2016 and 2017 almost all families (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) reported that they would recommend KindiLink to other families. In 2017, over half of the Aboriginal families and almost a third of non-Aboriginal families reported that they brought younger children to KindiLink. The majority of families described the positive benefits that their younger child gained from coming to KindiLink and these included increasing social, emotional, language and cognitive development as well as great enjoyment. Being able to bring a younger child had enabled some families to attend KindiLink. A few families mentioned that their younger child was sometimes difficult to manage and distracted other children and one family mentioned that they did not like other families talking negatively.

The **case study** data about attendance was more positive. This may be because those teachers who agreed to participate in the case studies were more confident about what they were doing. Again, it was evident that the KindiLink staff were vital to sustaining the attendance and engagement of families. The case study teachers felt that attendance at KindiLink was regular for a core group of families at each site, while for other families it was intermittent. They described how many families could identify the benefits of KindiLink for their children’s learning, development and transition to school and this was the main reason they attended. Some teachers felt there was strong anecdotal evidence from attendance registers and kindergarten teacher observations that KindiLink assisted children in a positive transition to Kindergarten. They described how the KindiLink children had adapted to Kindergarten more effectively than those who had not attended KindiLink because they were more confident and participated more readily in the routines. These teachers felt that effort, perseverance, time and commitment were necessary to ensure that the program worked.

The **reflective journals** suggested that some teachers and AEOs experienced success with registrations and attendance for their site and had seen an increase over time. Conversely there were other teachers who were despondent about the spasmodic attendance of the participants. The explanations for poor attendance were similar to those provided in the surveys, including the issue that some Aboriginal families were uncomfortable about mixing with the non-Aboriginal families. Other teachers felt that the pilot program needed to be extended beyond 3 years to gain momentum and become an established part of the community. However, the teachers all felt that when they were able to attract families who attended regularly the outcome was very positive and helped encourage the enrolment of children in Kindergarten. Examples were also provided that demonstrated how committed some families were to KindiLink and how they overcame difficult personal circumstances to ensure that their child could attend KindiLink.

KindiLink enrolment data⁴ in the form of a summary of the number and proportion of 3-year-old Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children enrolled in KindiLink programs in 2016 and 2017 indicated a slight increase in overall enrolments from 2016 to 2017 (495 -> 516) and the proportion of Aboriginal children increased from 70% to 75%. In 2016, a total of 495 3-year-old children (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) were registered for KindiLink (Table 9).

Table 9: Numbers and proportions of 3-year-old Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children participating in KindiLink, 2016 and 2017

	2016		2017		Total (2016+2017)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Aboriginal children	345	69.7	388	75.2	733	72.5
Non-Aboriginal children	150	30.3	128	24.8	278	27.5
Total	495	100.0	516	100.0	1,011	100.0

Figure 2 shows the total hours of attendance (up to a maximum of 240 hours) at KindiLink by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in 2016 and 2017. Attendance hours have been categorised into six groups: 0-40 hours, 41-80 hours, 81-120 hours, 121-180 hours, 161-200 hours and 201-240 hours. The order of the categories is reversed in the graph to aid in interpreting the proportion of children that had high levels of attendance. From Figure 2 it is evident that fewer than 20% of the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal children attended at least half of the KindiLink sessions (i.e. 121-240 hours). The majority of Aboriginal children attended only 0-40 hours in 2016 and 2017 (61% and 60%, respectively), compared to 53% and 45% for the non-Aboriginal children. The proportion of Aboriginal children who attended at least 81 hours of KindiLink increased from 19% in 2016 to 24% in 2017, and for non-Aboriginal children from 30% to 34%, suggesting a slight overall improvement in KindiLink attendance rates.

⁴ The registration and attendance data used for the KindiLink evaluation was focused on the 3-year old children only. Younger or older siblings were not included.

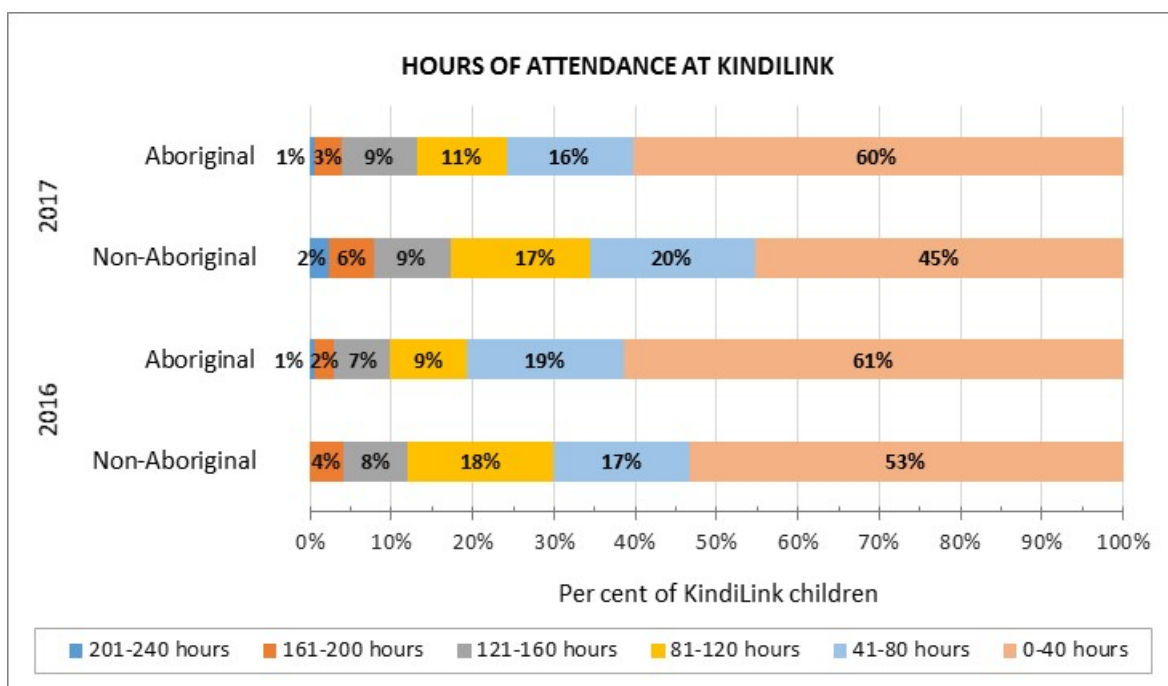


Figure 2: Total hours of attendance at KindiLink by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in 2016 and 2017 (per cent per category)

Kindergarten registration data indicated that of the 495 children registered for KindiLink in 2016, 258 (52%) were reported as having enrolled in Kindergarten at their KindiLink school site in 2017. As shown in Table 10, the ‘transition rate’ from KindiLink to Kindergarten at the same school site was higher for Aboriginal KindiLink children (57%) than non-Aboriginal KindiLink children (41%).

Table 10: Transition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children from KindiLink in 2016 to Kindergarten at the same school site in 2017

	2016	2017	
	Registered for KindiLink (KL) N	Enrolled in Kindergarten at same site N	Transition rate (KL to Kindy) at same site %
Aboriginal children	345	196	56.8
Non-Aboriginal children	150	62	41.3
Total	495	258	52.1

Kindergarten enrolment data for the 37 KindiLink sites show (in Table 11) that whereas ex-KindiLink children made up more than a (35%) third of the Aboriginal kindergarten students, they were only 7% of the non-Aboriginal students.

Table 11: Enrolment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the 2017 Kindergarten program at the 37 KindiLink sites by participation in 2016 KindiLink

	KindiLink		Non-KindiLink		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Aboriginal children	196	34.6	371	65.4	567	100.0
Non-Aboriginal children	62	7.4	778	92.6	840	100.0
Total	258		1,149		1,407	

Kindergarten attendance risk data were provided by the Department of Education for 184 of the 196 Aboriginal children who participated in KindiLink in 2016 and subsequently enrolled in Kindergarten at the same site in Semester 1, 2017. This was presented according to the six categories of KindiLink attendance (i.e. 0-40 hrs, 41-80 hrs, 81-120 hrs, 121-160 hrs, 161-200 hrs, 201-240 hrs) and four categories of kindergarten attendance risk:

- Severe attendance risk: < 60% attendance
- Moderate attendance risk: 60 to < 80% attendance
- Indicated attendance risk: 80 to < 90% attendance
- Regular attendance: ≥ 90% attendance

The number and percentage of Aboriginal KindiLink children in each of these categories are presented in Figure 3. It is interesting to note that more than half (52%) of the Aboriginal KindiLink children were considered 'regular' attenders or only at 'indicated attendance risk' with kindergarten attendance rates of 80% or greater. As might be expected, the Aboriginal children who had low KindiLink attendance (0-40 hours) were more likely to be classified as 'severe' kindergarten attendance risk in 2017. However, it is notable that 58% of the Aboriginal students who were categorised as 'regular attendance (≥ 90%)' at Kindergarten had nevertheless had relatively low attendance at KindiLink in 2016 (i.e. 0-80 hours). Given that three-quarters of the Aboriginal KindiLink children had attended only 0-80 hours in 2016, this may suggest that even relatively low exposure to KindiLink can have a positive influence on kindergarten transition and attendance. Some support for this was evident in the comments from kindergarten teachers who felt that Aboriginal KindiLink children had a higher level of confidence and engagement in Kindergarten than in previous years.

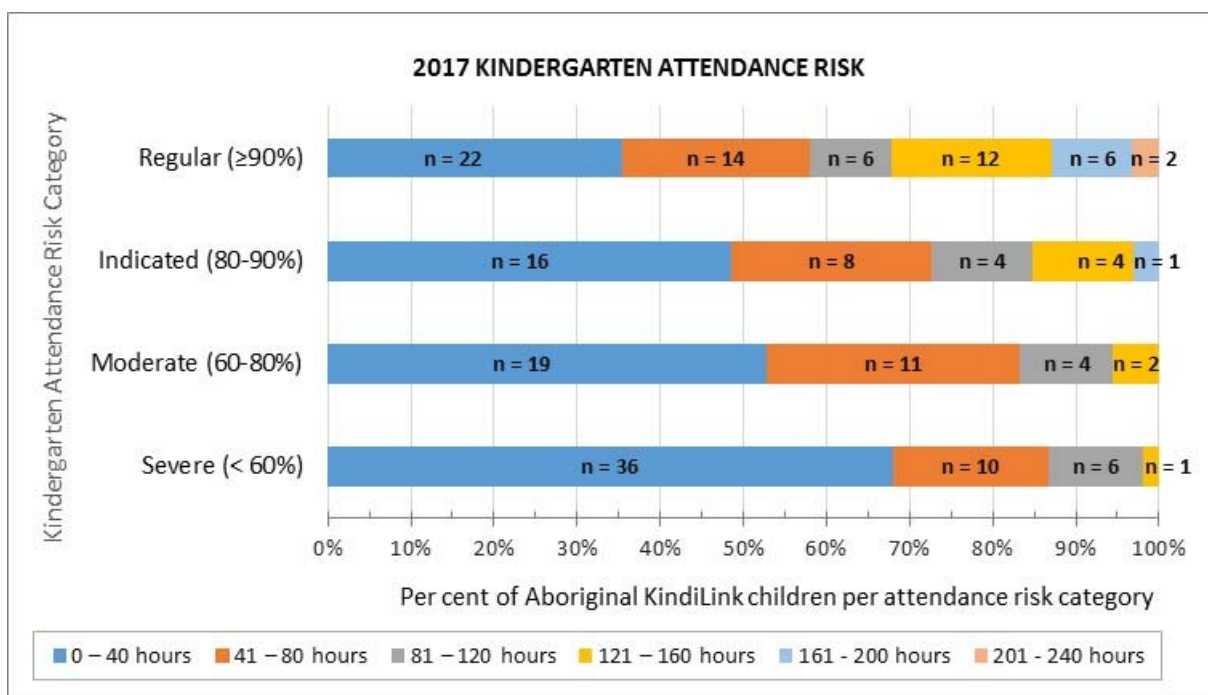


Figure 3: Proportion and number of 2017 kindergarten children in each attendance risk category according to the number of hours they attended KindiLink in 2016

2.3 Impact on the Capacity and Confidence of Families/Carers

Q3. How effective has KindiLink been in building the capacity and confidence of families as their first educator?

Findings from across the data sets showed families who were committed to KindiLink and attended regularly gained in confidence in themselves as their child’s first teacher and increased their capacity to encourage, support and engage with their child in learning.

The findings from the **KindiLink participant survey** had slightly more emphasis on KindiLink’s ability to increase families’ confidence, perhaps because capacity is harder to quantify, and confidence and capacity are closely interrelated. When participants, especially teachers and AIEOs, speak of confidence they are often referring to families’ ability to be actively engaged in the learning journey with their child – which most likely also points to an increased capacity to support their child’s learning.

As shown in Figure 4, proportionately more of the 2017 principals, teachers and AIEOs indicated KindiLink had been effective in building the capacity and confidence of Aboriginal families than the 2016 cohorts. This was particularly evident in the teacher responses where 39% of the 2016 cohort stated KindiLink was ‘highly effective’ in building families’ capacity compared to 53% in 2017. Interestingly, as a group, the AIEOs were the most positive in their responses, and placed slightly greater emphasis on capacity than confidence in 2017.

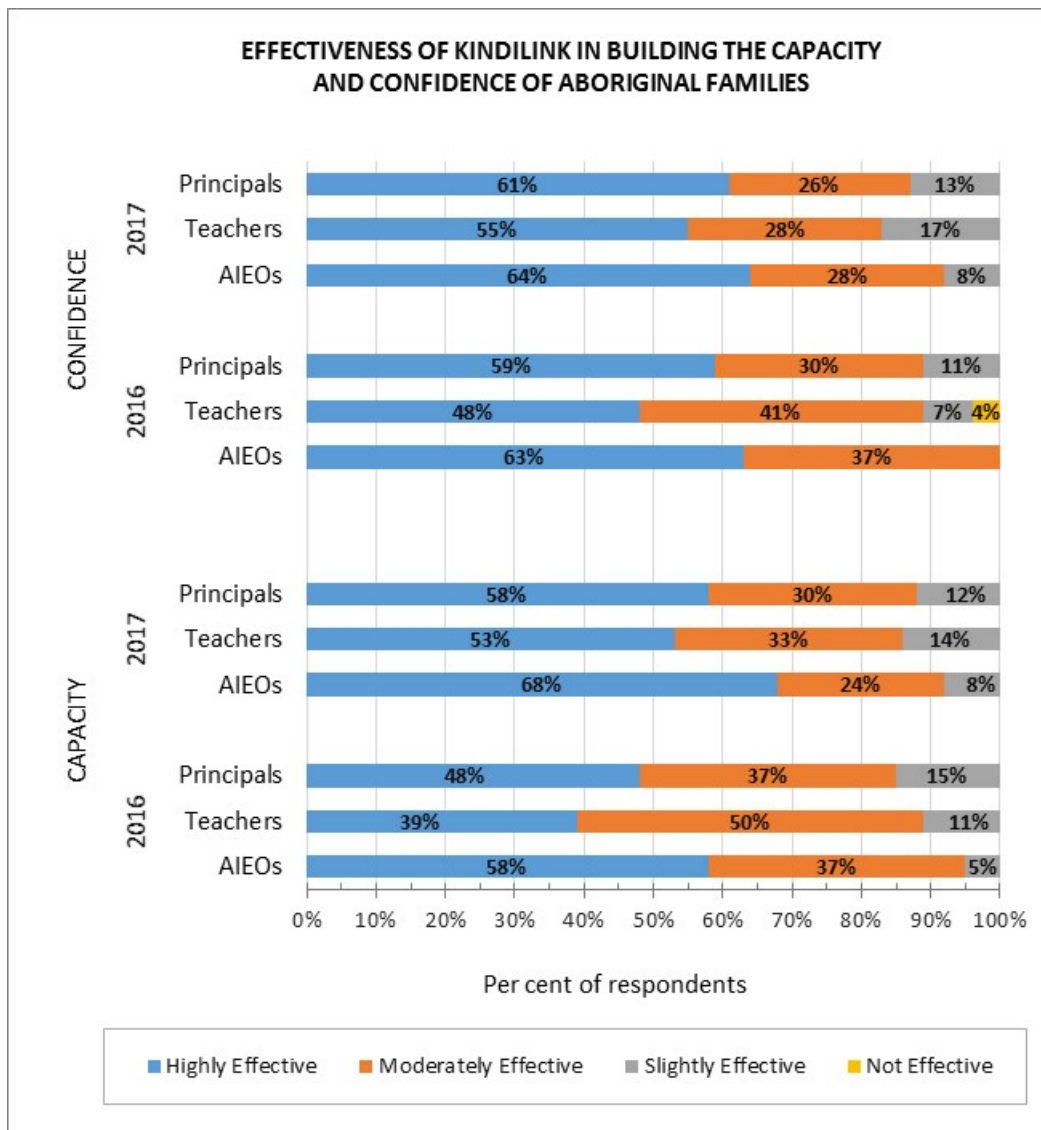


Figure 4: Comparison of principals’, teachers’ and AIEOs’ views of the effectiveness of KindiLink in building the capacity and confidence of Aboriginal families as their child’s first educator, 2016 and 2017

Many of the 2016 cohort’s comments regarding confidence were about families starting to be more engaged in the activities. The 2017 cohort expressed an extended view of confidence through their comments, encompassing the families’ demeanour, their leadership abilities, increased curiosity and desire to better understand childhood learning, their interest in events and assuming roles in the school outside of KindiLink, and taking on professional learning and development opportunities. All of these changes can be linked to increased knowledge and skills indicating increased confidence and capacity.

Notwithstanding these positive comments, in both 2016 and 2017 principals and teachers indicated that it was difficult to know if families who did not attend KindiLink regularly and families that were ‘reluctant’ to engage with their children were increasing in their confidence and capacity. One principal pointed out that although some families may not have been necessarily developing their capacity, they were increasing their awareness of their role as their child’s first teacher by being at KindiLink and observing and talking about their child.

In both 2016 and 2017 almost all Aboriginal families either ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that KindiLink had increased their confidence in supporting their children’s learning (Figure 5). They described many learning opportunities their children had experienced and their engagement with their child and other children in these activities. Incursions and excursions were also mentioned as positive shared learning experiences. It seemed apparent that this increased confidence and capacity was transferred to the home environment as families implemented some of the KindiLink activities at home. In both 2016 and 2017 families mentioned a range of activities that they transferred from KindiLink to their home environment. In particular reading or telling stories was mentioned by almost half of families in 2016 and over a third in 2017. Families also indicated how they had contributed to KindiLink activities and how KindiLink had modified some activities for them to take home.

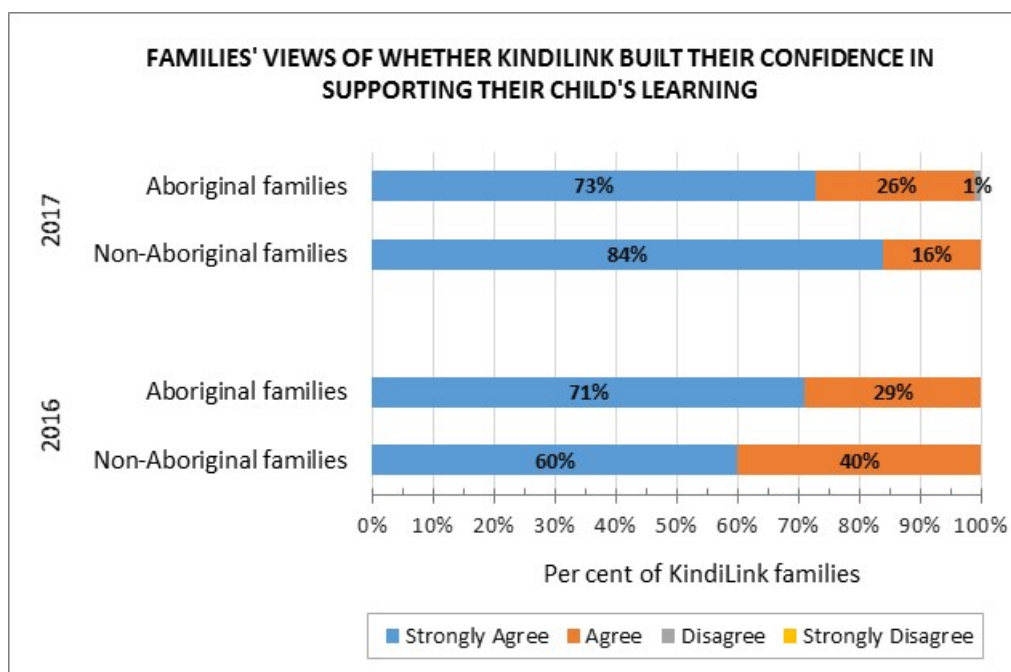


Figure 5: *Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families’ agreement about whether KindiLink had increased their confidence in supporting their child’s learning, 2016 and 2017*

Observations undertaken at the case study sites highlighted the skills families developed through their engagement in activities with their children and how these were (in some cases) transferred to home. These skills extended beyond social, emotional, language and cognitive and included supporting physical development and parenting practices, and helping to overcome some families’ sense of ‘shame’ when their children did not appear to behave appropriately. Although LearningGames® were undertaken, families appeared to enjoy art and craft, and early literacy and gross motor activities the most. Some teachers/AEOs modified the LearningGames® to take into account the families’ skill and literacy levels, thus building on rather than undermining their confidence and capacity. Families’ growing confidence and capacity was also indicated by the ways they contributed new ideas about activities and suggestions for including their language and culture. For some families, meeting with other families was given as a main reason for attending KindiLink. The support and networking opportunities boosted self-efficacy as families shared their concerns and enjoyed ‘yarning’ with other families. In addition, informal visits from support agencies seemed to give

some families the confidence to seek support from outside agencies, providing evidence of increased confidence in knowing their child's needs.

The **reflective journals** also provided similar descriptive evidence of increasing confidence and capacity in families. Families reportedly transformed from merely observing and being shy and reserved to becoming active participants in their child's learning. As families grew in confidence they became involved in giving suggestions and initiating activities. By the end of the year many families were proactive, taking resources home, bringing in resources and leading activities. For some families, this included giving expert advice about the language and culture and finding ways of integrating this into the KindiLink curriculum. Trust and respect in the KindiLink environment combined with warmth and safety was at the heart of this developing sense of the self as a first educator. Families also supported each other as they shared experiences, met outside KindiLink, shared transport and encouraged other families to attend.

The teachers and AIEOs used a range of strategies to engage families in their child's learning. These included modelling and explaining the purpose of activities, providing information about activities and how to do these at home using easily sourced materials, and integrating the language and culture of Aboriginal families into their KindiLink program in consultation with families. Ensuring the environment reflected the needs of families and children and created opportunities for families to engage with their children across the curriculum was also identified as central. Several resources were developed for families to take home and teachers and AIEOs indicated that some families began to ask questions and seek information about their child's learning.

Some teachers and AIEOs expressed concern, however, that not all families became involved in their child's learning. Lack of attendance inhibited engagement and it appeared that some families thought it was the responsibility of the teacher to engage with the children. Teachers also noted that some families wanted space to talk to other families or watch their child. This may have reflected the way in which some Aboriginal families engage in learning, rather than a lack of participation.

2.4 Impact on Building Productive Relationships

Q4. What impact has KindiLink had on building productive relationships between the family, the school and the community?

Findings from all the data sets indicate that building relationships appeared to be one of the most celebrated achievements of KindiLink. Perhaps because the gains could be clearly observed, but also, as many principals, teachers and AIEOs pointed out, building relationships was seen as crucial to the success of KindiLink in all other areas. Both the implementation and the impact of KindiLink were determined to a large extent by the quality of the relationships that had developed.

Establishing, sustaining and extending relationships in a school community and beyond to the wider community is a complex and delicate process. It takes time and careful negotiation. Navigating cross-cultural understandings and creating an environment where families feel safe, respected and able to contribute was a primary aim across the KindiLink sites. The AIEO played a fundamental role in the development of relationships and in some sites their knowledge and expertise enabled them to create a third cultural space where all participants could learn and grow. Some participants indicated that ensuring the AIEO was from the local community was crucial to the success of KindiLink, as this would ensure in-depth knowledge and understanding of the community and the language/dialect and culture of the Aboriginal families.

Placing KindiLink on a school site provided a safe, warm and welcoming space for Aboriginal families, while also providing different opportunities to build relationships with the broader school community, including the kindergarten teacher and principal. As relationships became established, some families became involved in school events and began to take an active role in the school. For those children with older siblings it also seemed (in some cases) to increase their attendance and enabled parents/carers to meet with their class teacher. The consistency of the days and time KindiLink was offered also provided some stability and enabled families to make a commitment to KindiLink. Thus, the actual placement of KindiLink seemed to be central to building productive relationships.

Findings from the **KindiLink participant survey** data revealed that a significant majority of Aboriginal families, AIEOs, teachers and principals strongly agreed that KindiLink had been highly effective in building relationships between Aboriginal families, the school and the community, and more agreed in 2017 than in 2016 (Figures 6 and 7). However, there were small numbers of participants (including Aboriginal families, but excluding AIEOs) in both 2016 and 2017 who indicated that KindiLink had not been effective in building relationships. Attracting families to KindiLink and engaging and sustaining interest was difficult, and for many KindiLink sites, contacting families took considerable time and effort. Maintaining contact was identified as particularly difficult in a regional town with many different family groups. A deeper look at the data reveals some distinctions. It appears that KindiLink is very effective at building productive relationships with families who do attend regularly, but efforts to reach out to and establish new relationships with others in the community were not always successful.

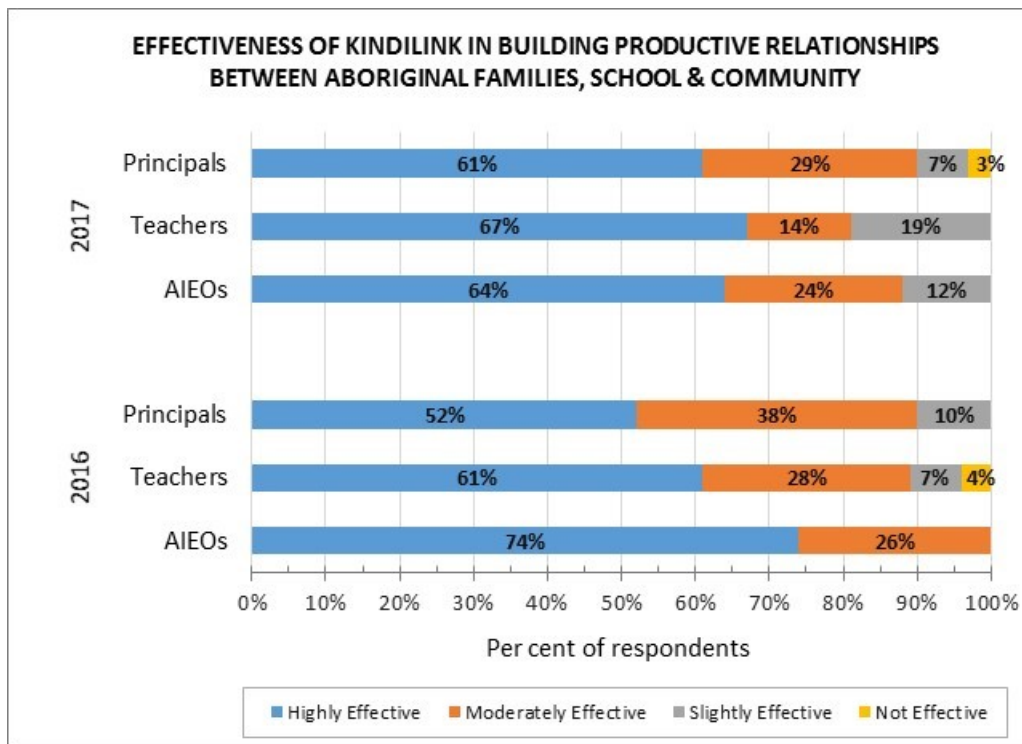


Figure 6: Principals', teachers' and AIEOs' views of the effectiveness of KindiLink in building productive relationships between Aboriginal families, the school and the community

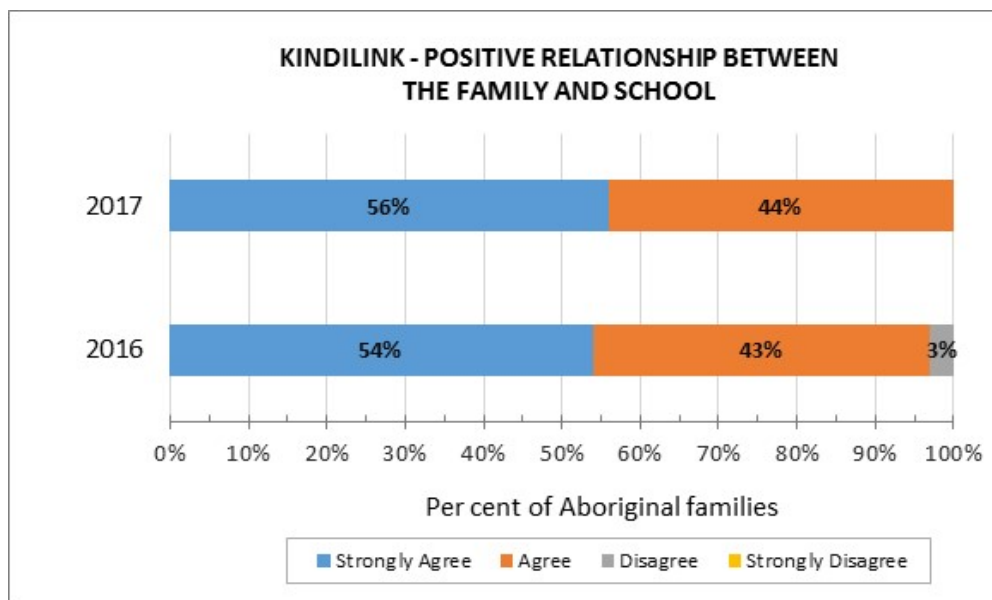


Figure 7: Aboriginal families' level of agreement about whether KindiLink supported a positive relationship between the family and school, in 2016 and 2017

For principals, meeting with Aboriginal community members, community organisations and KindiLink staff was an important part of establishing relationships. The frequency with which meetings took place varied between weekly, monthly and once per term, but the overall frequency declined slightly in 2017. This may reflect the initial relationship building that principals undertook as KindiLink was being established in 2016. Over half of the principals in 2016 and just under half in 2017 met with the KindiLink AIEO and teacher once a week, others met monthly or once a term. In addition, many principals (including those who did not have formal meetings) indicated that they made contact in informal ways, these included '*dropping in*' to KindiLink, having a regular presence at KindiLink and frequent '*chats*'. Conversations (both formal and informal) helped clarify ways of promoting/improving KindiLink, planning for the next year, supporting struggling staff and finding ways of helping families get to KindiLink.

Meetings between the KindiLink teacher and the AIEO ensured planning was inclusive and reflected the language/dialect and culture of the families, developed shared understanding of the needs of families and enabled a team approach to working with families and children. Meetings between the KindiLink teacher and the kindergarten teacher were equally important in terms of getting to know children and families and sharing expectations and pedagogical practices.

Communicating with Aboriginal families was an important consideration. It was a means of promoting KindiLink activities, keeping in touch with families to encourage regular attendance, and establishing new relationships. Multiple methods of communication were used across sites. This included traditional methods (face-to-face, newsletters (school and Aboriginal) posters/flyers, home visits, telephone and social media), outreach methods (letter drops and putting up flyers in the local shopping centre, libraries, infant health centre, and community facilities) and involving local community services (CPC, ABC radio, hospitals, allied health services and Aboriginal corporations). Walking the streets looking for new family members was also mentioned. In terms of listening to and involving Aboriginal families who attended KindiLink, informal everyday '*yarning*' was identified as the most productive means. In some cases staff also incorporated structured processes to gain perspectives, ideas and feedback from families. By being responsive to families through active listening and incorporating their ideas, communication increased and families became more '*open*'.

Inclusivity of the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families was a significant aspect of the success of KindiLink in building relationships. The survey data suggested that the majority of Aboriginal families felt that aspects of their language/dialect and culture were positively integrated in KindiLink, although 11% did not feel these were well represented. The majority of families felt that they and their children were supported in speaking their language/dialect and that their children were learning about aspects of their language/dialect and culture. Some families expressed a desire to extend and include more aspects of their language/dialect and culture in KindiLink as a means of helping their children learn. Almost two thirds of Aboriginal families indicated that they talked with the KindiLink teacher and/AIEO about their language/dialect and culture. This included sharing information about language/dialect and linking home and school activities. Some families mentioned how this supported their learning and also how they felt KindiLink was supportive and committed to doing '*the best*' for families.

The majority of teachers indicated that they incorporated a range of activities and resources in consultation with Aboriginal families and the AIEO into the KindiLink curriculum to create inclusivity. In terms of language, this included two-way language resources, use of a bilingual dictionary, translating songs into the local language and encouraging the AIEO to use the language with which families felt most comfortable. Promotion of and participation in Aboriginal community events and excursions was also seen as an important part of ensuring inclusivity. Overall, teachers and AIEOs nominated families as their main source of

information about Aboriginal families' language/dialect and culture. Teachers regarded families as the 'experts'. However, 14 teachers also mentioned the AIEO as one of their main sources of information, while others indicated that the AIEO acted as the link between families and KindiLink. A few teachers mentioned the use of external sources of information such as the internet and language centres as means of supplementing other sources of knowledge.

Teachers described how they derived support from Aboriginal families, community guests and cultural performers to create an inclusive curriculum. In some KindiLink sites a partnership model was developed, while in other sites the teacher felt the need to maintain their overall leadership. Some teachers indicated that they fostered 'open communication' with families speaking with them about an inclusive KindiLink curriculum each time they attended, once a week or once a term. Others created a more formal approach using surveys to ask families what they did and did not like. Several barriers to incorporating the families' languages/dialects were identified, these included families and the AIEO not speaking the local language, families speaking different languages/dialects, and families not being interested in the local language. In addition, families did not necessarily know how their language is written (as an oral tradition, this is to be expected). However, a teacher did indicate that although some of the families felt they were *'lacking in cultural knowledge especially language'* she was working with families to learn *'some basic language together'*.

Case study findings reinforced the idea that building respectful, reciprocal relationships was central to engaging families in KindiLink. It involved perseverance and knowledge and understanding of individual families. The success of family engagement was evidenced by the number of families who regularly attended and felt comfortable not only to engage with all aspects of KindiLink but to offer input to KindiLink and seek advice and support if necessary. Two-way communication facilitated through a range of communication strategies ensured that KindiLink staff were aware of family and community events, home learning environments and language/dialect and culture, and families were informed about and involved in KindiLink. Families described a gradual increase in their trust and involvement in KindiLink as well as the school. As families became familiar with the school environment, they attended school events and felt more confident approaching the principal. In addition, relationships between families created a supportive framework as families moved through school together. This was further enhanced in sites where the KindiLink teacher was also the kindergarten teacher.

Positive relationships helped to cement links between home and school. This enabled AIEOs and teachers to develop insights into family circumstances, offer advice and support (when sought from families) and create a flexible curriculum to accommodate different family needs, culture and contextual variables. It also provided opportunities to build on home learning environments by incorporating the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families into KindiLink and supporting families to engage in KindiLink activities at home. Families, AIEOs and teachers reported on the success of some of the LearningGames® (for some families) and activities that were taken or replicated at home. Perhaps most important of all was the way in which a small number of sites had begun fostering a two-way learning process, embedding diverse Aboriginal perspectives into KindiLink through relationships with children, families and the broader community.

Findings from the **reflective journal** overwhelmingly suggested that the majority of families who attended KindiLink were thinking positively about school and embracing the opportunities this presented for them and their children. In defining their most rewarding moments, teachers and AIEOs identified strong and enduring, mutually-beneficial relationships with families. It seems that the early establishment of trust and confidence in KindiLink had a ripple effect. Families built relationships with the teacher and AIEO which fostered

connections with other KindiLink families and gave families confidence to enter into and take part in the wider school world, while also accessing support services when necessary.

Findings from the **kindergarten children's capabilities survey** indicated that 24% of the 2017 kindergarten teachers were KindiLink teachers in 2016 and that 25% of the 2018 kindergarten teachers were the KindiLink teacher in one or both of the previous years. In addition, many of the kindergarten teachers described how they had engaged with the KindiLink families and got to know them before they came to Kindergarten. This suggests that to some extent KindiLink families were connected to school through their familiarity with the kindergarten teacher before they actually enrolled their child in Kindergarten.

The outcomes of these relationships were multifaceted and seemed to form the foundation for achieving the other intended outcomes of KindiLink. Firstly, these developing relationships enabled families to contribute to KindiLink, engage in teaching and learning with their child, ask for support and access help and advice (if necessary) and ultimately in some sites begin a journey of co-ownership. Secondly, some families became active participants in their school through joining the Parents and Citizens committee, volunteering and taking up employment. In a few families, this increased their participation in and the attendance of their older children at school. Thirdly, families' regular participation in activities such as NAIDOC Week and Harmony Day and engagement in community social activities helped to boost their confidence, gain social recognition for the families' skills, build friendships, and acquire knowledge of and access to community resources and services.

Although many AIEOs and teachers described how successful they had been in building relationships, many still faced challenges. This included reference to sporadic attendance, families bringing their child to KindiLink (but not engage) and families disengaging because of personal or family issues beyond the control of the KindiLink staff. Ultimately, teachers and AIEOs indicated that these relationships formed the foundation of a productive and sustainable partnership that has the potential to influence families' attendance and active engagement at school into the future.

2.5 Additional Findings

Benefits, positive stories, challenges and suggestions for change

The **KindiLink participant surveys** suggested that in 2016 and 2017 the majority of principals, KindiLink teachers and AIEOs perceived that KindiLink had been either highly or moderately beneficial for children and their families. Principals were consistently positive in 2016 and 2017, whereas teachers and AIEOs grew more positive over time about the benefits of KindiLink. In 2017, 82% of KindiLink teachers (compared with 69% in 2016) and 79% AIEOs (compared with 58% in 2016) indicated that KindiLink has been highly beneficial for children and their families (Figure 8).

In 2016, comments about the benefits for families and children from all participants included the increased engagement of families in children's learning, and families' increased and positive involvement in the school community and awareness of support services (including Aboriginal support services) in ways that enhanced children's development. In 2017 there appeared to be a greater emphasis on awareness of learning and development and the impact of this on the transition to Kindergarten, alongside the benefits for Aboriginal families and children of incorporating Aboriginal language/dialect and culture into KindiLink.

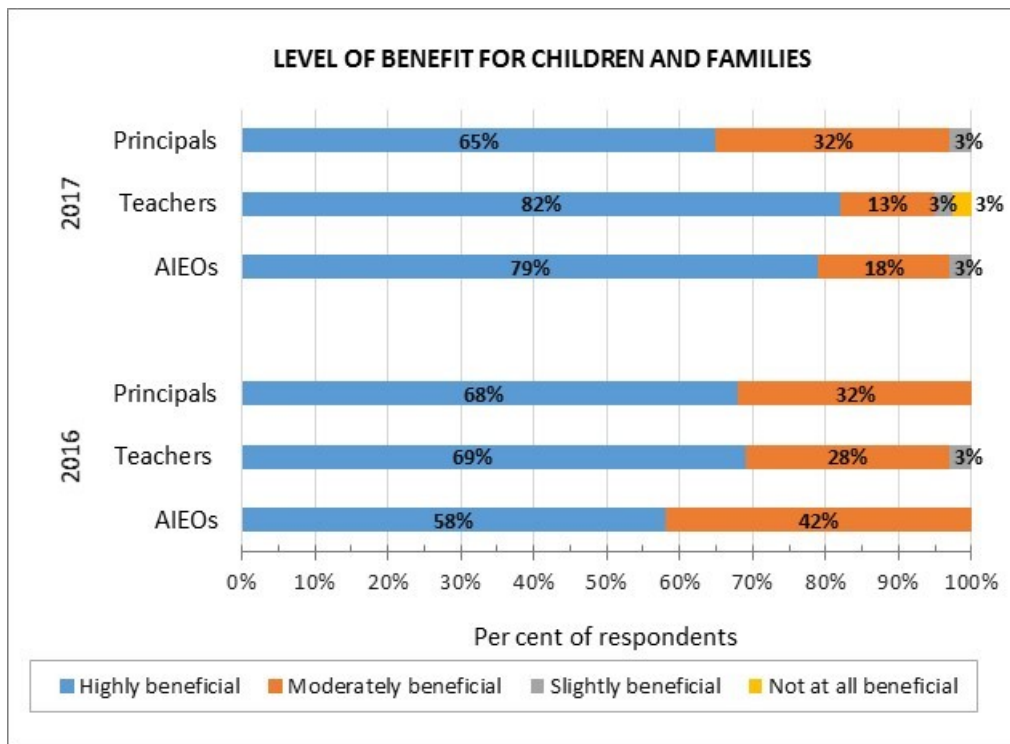


Figure 8: Views of principals, teachers, and AIEOs on how beneficial KindiLink has been for children and their families, 2016 and 2017

There were numerous and detailed positive stories about the success and impact of KindiLink. These included families increasingly engaging in their child’s learning and recognising their child’s development and their place as the first educator. This led to involvement in the school community and experiencing the school in positive ways which in turn supported the transition to Kindergarten and home school links. Families connecting to support services was also seen as a positive development as families accessed early support for their child and increased their knowledge about early learning and development. Finally, several stories described the way in which working with families had enhanced their knowledge and understanding of families’ language/dialect and culture and how they felt a partnership with families had enhanced and enriched their implementation and experience of KindiLink.

Although there were many positive stories, the majority of participants found implementing KindiLink moderately challenging. Fewer teachers and AIEOs indicated implementation was challenging in 2017 than in 2016, whereas the reverse was true for the principals. Interestingly, in 2016 almost half of the AIEOs found it highly challenging to implement KindiLink, but this changed to only 21% in 2017. This perhaps suggests that some of the initial issues were overcome and community relationships became more established in 2017, and that the trust and confidence built in KindiLink made implementation easier. The challenges noted by participants related to operational and management issues, including a lack of resources, staffing, the lack of a permanent venue and the impact of competing programs. In some cases these ‘teething’ problems were difficult to resolve and continued into 2017, which is possibly why more principals reported difficulty with implementation in 2017 than in 2016. Challenges were also identified in relation to supporting families and children and included recruitment and attendance, engagement of families and pedagogical differences between KindiLink and Kindergarten.

Despite a number of difficult and ongoing challenges, the majority of staff were able to build on and extend the multiple strategies developed at KindiLink over time. Participants expressed a strong sense of determination to overcome challenges. Continuing to nurture family, school and community relationships was at the heart of overcoming many challenges. Also mentioned were listening in more depth to families, providing transport, employing effective staff, gaining support from the Early Childhood Branch and accepting younger children into the program (although accepting younger children was part of KindiLink in the majority of sites). Working together as a team with the teacher/AIEO to plan, respond to families and to communicate with families were also strategies mentioned in 2017.

Participants put forward changes and new ideas as suggestions for enhancing the implementation and outcomes of KindiLink. The increased promotion of KindiLink, linking with other KindiLink staff as a means of sharing ideas and support, having more time to liaise with families/community and planning together, as well as having a permanent venue, were all mentioned. The further inclusion of language and culture of Aboriginal families and reviewing the LearningGames® to make them more suitable for Aboriginal families were also seen as important aspects of inclusivity and helping families take some 'ownership' of KindiLink. Changing reporting requirements to capture the complexity of attendance patterns was also mentioned along with more flexibility around hours and days of operation. Three new ideas were suggested; these included a breakfast program, health checks at KindiLink, and a KindiLink school uniform.

Participants also presented some dilemmas when considering improvements that would optimise the KindiLink program. The question about whether to include non-Aboriginal families or make KindiLink exclusively for Aboriginal families was raised. The options of locating KindiLink on or off school sites were spoken of with both positive and negative connotations. Starting KindiLink at a younger or older age was considered, as was the question of involving families less to give children time to develop independence, or involving families more to develop their capacity and confidence. Remote communities also indicated the need to be flexible in staffing, and to enable the AIEO to deliver KindiLink if the teacher was absent.

In order to ascertain aspects that may be limiting family attendance and participation, families were asked what they did not like about KindiLink. However, the majority of comments were overwhelmingly positive with only seven comments about the aspects families did not like. Four of these appeared to be relatively minor and easily solved (dish washing roster). However, three aspects seemed more universal: one related to difficulty with reading to their child (due to parental dyslexia), another mentioned managing their child's behaviour and another was concerned about negative comments between families.

2.6 Insights for the Future

The **KindiLink participant survey** asked for any additional comments about KindiLink and insights that might inform the future of KindiLink. Additional comments reiterated previous thoughts on the outcomes of KindiLink. There was overwhelming support for KindiLink indicating that attendance and engagement in KindiLink had made a difference to children and families. Children had gained in a range of capabilities, families had become more engaged in their children's learning and relationships between families, the school and the community had been enhanced. Although registration and attendance was still an issue for many schools, there seemed to be a perception that attendance at KindiLink led to improved attendance at Kindergarten and potentially future schooling.

In terms of insights, participants indicated that it was important to recognise and promote the success and value of KindiLink for Aboriginal families and the wider community. The impact of KindiLink went beyond the

educational context into supporting families in their everyday lives. Families and participants highlighted the critical importance of early childhood trained, experienced, knowledgeable and committed staff. Building trusting and reciprocal relationships formed the foundation of KindiLink. Teachers also mentioned the ongoing need for support and guidance in working alongside families in ways that went above and beyond the usual role of an educator. This was linked to comments from teachers about the insights they had gained into the culture and language of Aboriginal families from working closely with families and the AIEO at KindiLink. Many teachers felt working with families was a privilege which had enabled them to grow in their understanding and confidence about incorporating some aspects of the culture and language of Aboriginal families into KindiLink. Many saw this 'learning' as an essential component of KindiLink. The AIEOs, who were the interface between the families and the school, also expressed deep satisfaction in their work with the KindiLink families, feeling a sense of pride and achievement.

Conversely, some participants felt KindiLink would be better placed in other schools and communities. A range of reasons were given for participants deeming KindiLink unsuitable to their local context, for example:

- schools with low Aboriginal registration and attendance;
- schools that were not fully committed to KindiLink;
- schools with an established pre-kindergarten program;
- schools with changing demographics and a declining Aboriginal population; and,
- schools in communities where they were already many family services, such as day-care and a library.

The uncertainty of ongoing funding was a cause for anxiety and the potential lack of continuity meant that some staff were considering alternative employment. Many participants, including families, commented on the importance of continuing KindiLink as a significant service to the Aboriginal community and other non-Aboriginal families as a means of closing the gap and creating intergenerational change. The need to monitor the long-term impact of KindiLink was also identified as an additional but key component of future implementation of the KindiLink program.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Aboriginal (and other) children who attended KindiLink derived considerable learning, and social and emotional benefits from KindiLink, which positively influenced their transition and attendance at Kindergarten. Those families who fully participated in KindiLink enjoyed their experience and gained considerable confidence and capacity in working with their children. Participants felt that KindiLink had supported their children's capabilities, confidence and growing independence and facilitated their transition to Kindergarten. There appeared to be four key elements to the success of KindiLink, as summarised below.

3.1 Staffing

The principal, teacher and AIEO were vital to the success of KindiLink. The consultative nature and active cultivation of relationships in conjunction with guidance and commitment from principals embedded KindiLink into the school community and helped families to become familiar with the school environment, while enabling principals to establish ongoing relationships with families. The experience and early childhood training of the KindiLink teachers and AIEOs ensured they were familiar with working with families and in teams. However, for some, this necessitated additional skills and/or a conscious re-framing of practice to work with adults to support them to build their understanding of and skills as their child's first teacher. Notably, more than two-thirds (64%) of KindiLink teachers and AIEOs had worked in the same role at KindiLink in 2016 and 2017 and 50% of AIEOs and 43% of teachers had been in their current school for six years or more. In addition, over half of the teachers in 2016 and 2017 considered themselves as 'proficient' or 'highly accomplished' and over half of the AIEOs in 2016 and 2017 either had a Certificate III in Education support or were working towards it. This experience afforded them greater knowledge and understanding of the community and enabled them to foster warm and trusting relationships with families over time while developing the KindiLink program. Although working alongside families with 3-year-olds and younger children was new to many of the teachers, over time they implemented changes to their pedagogy and practice, re-orientating their focus from Kindergarten to KindiLink. The AIEO provided the interface between KindiLink and the families and ultimately the school community. Their knowledge, understanding and ability to reach out to families helped to engage families in KindiLink and encourage registration and sustained attendance. The importance of the AIEO coming from the local community was seen as crucial by some participants: their knowledge of the community and deep insights into the language/dialect and culture of Aboriginal families helped to establish mutual trust and respect and develop an inclusive program. The support from the Early Childhood Branch was also identified as a significant part of understanding the goals and implementation of KindiLink and was deeply appreciated by many schools.

3.2 Families and Children

Perhaps two of the greatest groups advocating for KindiLink were the children who attended and their families. The children's constant reminders to adults about going to KindiLink, coupled with their enthusiasm and pleasure was noted by many families as an incentive to attend. The networks that families formed with other families through KindiLink seemed to provide opportunities to share experiences, develop support for travelling to KindiLink, work with other children and encourage on-going and new families to attend KindiLink. In many sites, families helped to shape KindiLink through their sharing of language/dialect and culture, involvement in cultural events and, for some families, leading activities. As families became more secure in their confidence and capacity as their child's first teacher, they engaged in learning with their child and incorporated some aspects of KindiLink in their home learning environment. Many families found KindiLink a conduit to community and children's services to assist in supporting their child; families felt more

comfortable on the school site and also influenced their parenting practices with older children particularly in relation to attendance at school.

However, it was evident that some families had not fully participated in or attended KindiLink regularly. Clearly the greatest challenge was implementing KindiLink in such a way as to engage many more families and obtain commitment from those already involved to attend regularly. For many families, their circumstances appeared to be a major challenge to attending KindiLink, although it is important to acknowledge that even in the most difficult contexts some families were determined to attend. Interestingly, no matter where families lived across the 37 sites, the challenges in attracting and maintaining attendance were the same. Registration numbers and sustained attendance continued to be a significant issue for KindiLink staff.

3.3 Site and Program

Positioning KindiLink on a school site provided a safe, warm and welcoming space for Aboriginal families as well as giving them the opportunity to become familiar with the Kindergarten and the school in general. It also gave families the opportunity to meet the principal and kindergarten teacher, become involved in school events and in some families, to take an active role in the school. For those children with older siblings it also seemed (in some cases) to increase their attendance and enable parents/carers to meet with their class teacher. Thus, the actual placement of KindiLink seemed to be central to building productive relationships. Having a permanent and designated site was identified as important for the implementation and sense of ownership of KindiLink. The consistency of the days and time KindiLink was offered also provided some stability and enabled families to make a commitment to KindiLink. As a supported playgroup, families had the freedom to choose how many sessions they attended. This gave families some flexibility and choice without feeling 'shame' if they could not or chose not to attend. The program was structured and yet flexible enough to accommodate families' needs. The increase in children capabilities and families' confidence and capacity is evidence of the success of KindiLink and elements of the program. Particular activities were enjoyed and taken home, including sensory and early literacy activities, which included shared book reading and that has been found in other research to be a strong predictor of future literacy success. However, the LearningGames® had mixed success. In some sites, they appeared to be incorporated into each session and modified when necessary, while in others the LearningGames® were not taken up by families or used at home. The KindiLink routines allowed for effective transition to Kindergarten, incorporating continuity of practice, knowledge and understanding of expectations and enhancing already established relationships.

3.4 Culture and Time

Incorporating culture and language/dialect of Aboriginal families into KindiLink was seen as essential to creating joint ownership and inclusivity. This was achieved in many different ways and acknowledged as important by families. Understanding and respecting ways of being and knowing was also important and guided interactions and expectations. For example, for many Aboriginal families watching may have been a central part of their learning style and supporting families to engage with their children without 'shame' required time to observe and 'yarn' about additional ways of 'being' at KindiLink. However, it is acknowledged that the creation of a 'third space' that incorporates Aboriginal families' perspectives and school-based perspectives is complex and will take time and perseverance. Many KindiLink staff were at the beginning of this journey, sensitively finding ways forward through consultation with families and an awareness of appropriate expectations, interactions, activities and resources.

3.5 Additional Outcomes

The outcomes of KindiLink appear to have increased beyond the original aims. First, families talked about how bringing their younger children to KindiLink had enabled them to attend with their 3-year-old and how their younger children were learning and developing through KindiLink and becoming more independent as they engaged in the KindiLink activities. This appeared to reinforce parents'/carers' developing sense as their child's first teacher as they engaged with their younger children and observed how KindiLink motivated and excited their children. Second, teachers indicated that some parents/carers appeared to bring their older child to school as they were coming to KindiLink and this created sustained attendance. Third, some parents/carers undertook roles in the school community, while others went on to further education to train as AIEOs, which may be related to their growing confidence, capacity and relationship with the school community. Fourth, some families indicated that they had discussed concerns about their child with the teacher and/or AIEO and as a result had accessed early childhood support services. For some families, this had resulted in the early identification of potential problems and support for their child's growth and development. Finally, some teachers reported how privileged they felt working with the AIEOs and Aboriginal families and how much they had learned about the language/dialect and culture of the Aboriginal families. This was in addition to increasing their skills and knowledge about working with families to support their confidence and capacity.

3.6 The Future of KindiLink

Ultimately, it appeared to be the relationships that drove the success of KindiLink. Initially, it appeared much of the energy of the principals, teachers and AIEOs was focused on building relationships and maintaining attendance to ensure continued participation in KindiLink. This had a ripple effect as families engaged with KindiLink, the Kindergarten and the broader school environment. In the second year, the teacher and AIEO were able to build on their experience, relationships and cultural and linguistic knowledge and focus more on engaging families in their child's learning and development. It appears that the gains from the first year of KindiLink were further established and increased in the second year. However, despite the commitment and hard work of all parties, registration and attendance of families had been difficult. Nonetheless, the commitment of many personnel suggests that gaining the confidence of all families will take time, but with perseverance those efforts are likely to be successful. Participants indicated that they would not give up and were committed to KindiLink into the future as KindiLink gains momentum over time. While this will require investment in resources and effective personnel who are committed to such an initiative, potentially the outcomes will be of significant value. We end this report with a comment from one of the participants:

It is important not to decide the value of KindiLink and whether it continues at a site without an extensive discussion with Aboriginal community members, school staff and local organisations that are involved with KindiLink. A lot of KindiLink sites are influencing sometimes 10 or 20 years' worth of negative or unsure feelings towards schools, so a program needs extensive time to establish trust in a community. Also, a lot of the positive stories from KindiLink are where the true indication of a site's success happens, not the [registration] data as this is not reflective of the positive influence it is having on a community...(KindiLink Teacher 2017).

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