Holding the Past, Creating the Future

Measuring what matters

Indicators, judgment and decision rights in culturally responsive early childhood evaluation

Holding the Past, Creating the Future



Dr Rowan Savage

Manager, First Steps Strategy and Policy, Aboriginal Early Childhood Outcomes

rowan.savage@det.nsw.edu.au



Jessica de Jesus

Manager, Early Childhood Evaluation and Insights, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

Jessica.DeJesus1@det.nsw.edu.au



Phillip Belling

Senior Evaluator
Early Childhood Evaluation and Insights
Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

phillip.belling@det.nsw.edu.au



Rowan Savage (Rowan Savage)

Context

First Steps 2026–2030: evaluating change in a live system

First Steps aims to strengthen early childhood outcomes through Aboriginal-led, culturally grounded work

- This includes work that is visible in conventional data:
  - Services, participation, activities and outputs
- But it also includes change that is relational and cultural:
  - Trust, belonging, cultural safety, confidence and legitimacy

First Steps in practice

Our programs include:

- Ninganah No More
  - Aboriginal Languages
- Aboriginal Families As Teachers
  - Wraparound support
- Cultural Responsiveness Framework
  - Corporate professional learning
- ACCO Growth and Expansion
- Aboriginal Workforce Pipeline



So for example... what do we want to know?

- How to make Aboriginal language programs sustainable?
- How do we ensure real service voice, without burdening the sector?
- What is the impact beyond the immediate funding period?
- If we train non-Aboriginal corporate staff, does this translate to program and policy delivery on the ground?

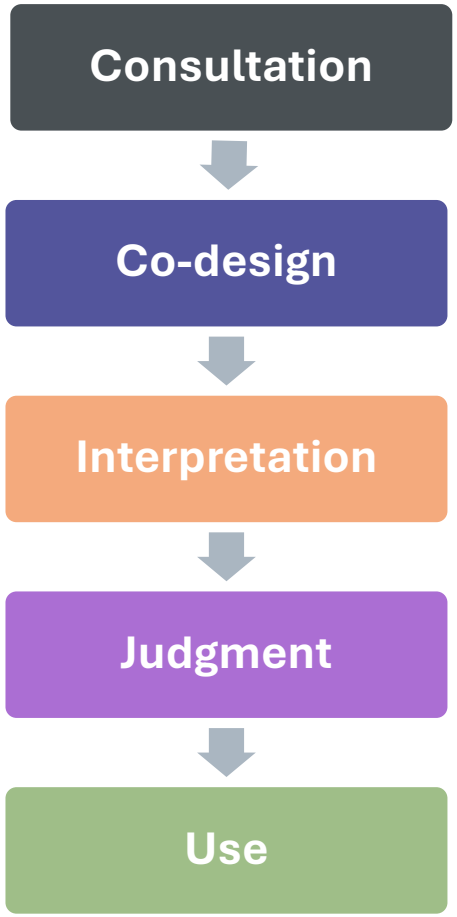
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Great questions.

Whose answers will be attended to?

Participation is necessary but not sufficient

- It's important to know who is consulted, but it's critical to know
  - Who holds the Wisdom?
  - Who has the expertise?
  - Where does power lie?
  - Who has authority to speak?



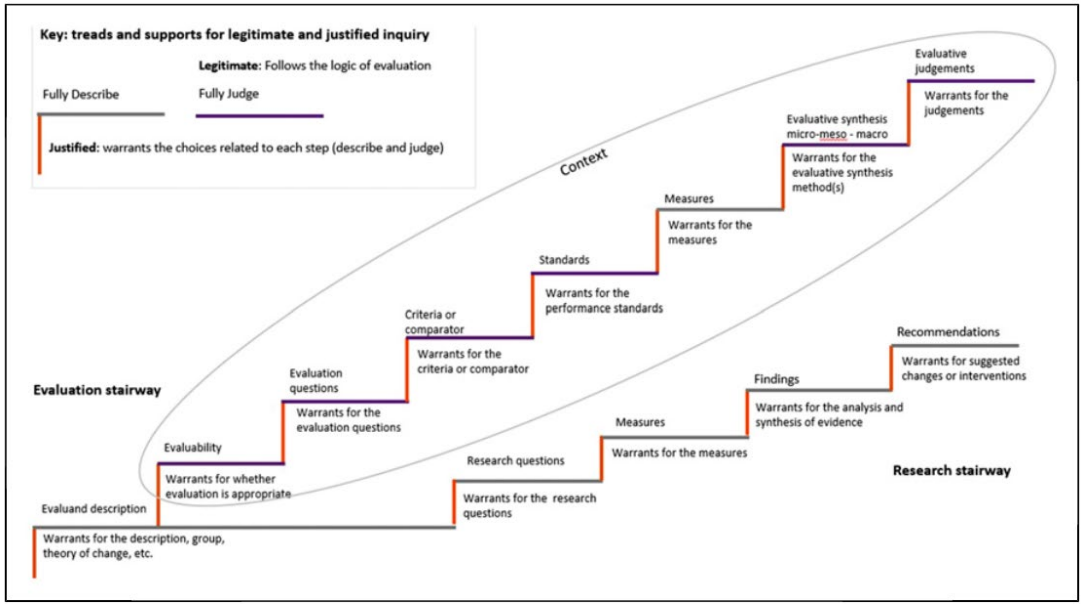
(Fama & Jensen, 1983; Hart & Moore, 1990)

From warrants at every step to decision rights at every step

- Meldrum & Gullickson (2026)
  - Warrants at every step

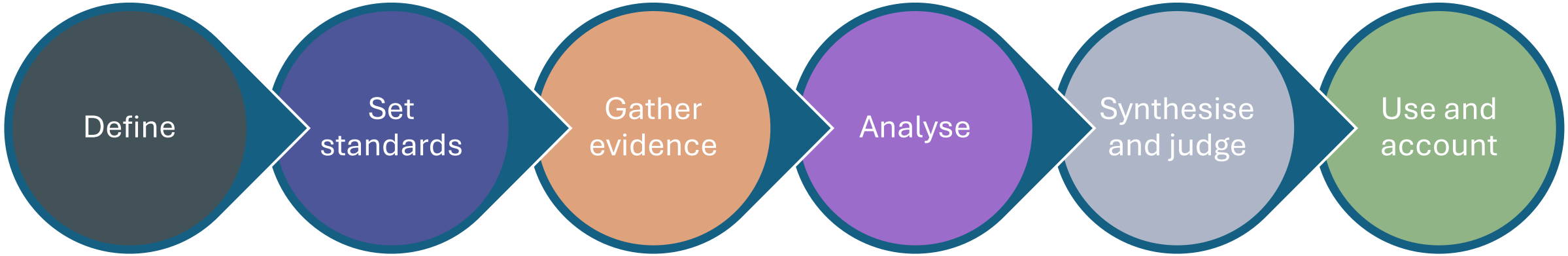
- We add:
  - Who holds the relevant decision rights at each step?

- Warrants justify the reasoning. Decision rights make authority explicit.



(Meldrum & Gullickson, 2026)

Decision rights across the evaluation lifecycle



Decision rights should be explicit at each stage, and be allocated according to the expertise and accountability the task requires.

Training has reach, but has practice become more culturally responsive?

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Define the construct	Analyse the evidence	Reach a judgment	Decide use and accountability
• What does culturally responsive practice mean beyond completing training or reporting greater confidence?	• Higher confidence may indicate change, but does it translate into changed practice?	• Is change meaningful, embedded and sufficient? • Who has standing to judge that?	• If change is weak or uneven, where does responsibility sit: participant, manager, organisational conditions, program design?

FSS P1 longer-term outcome: More early learning services provide ongoing, locally grounded Aboriginal language and culture learning opportunities

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Definitions

Ongoing = regular delivery over time, interpreted in context

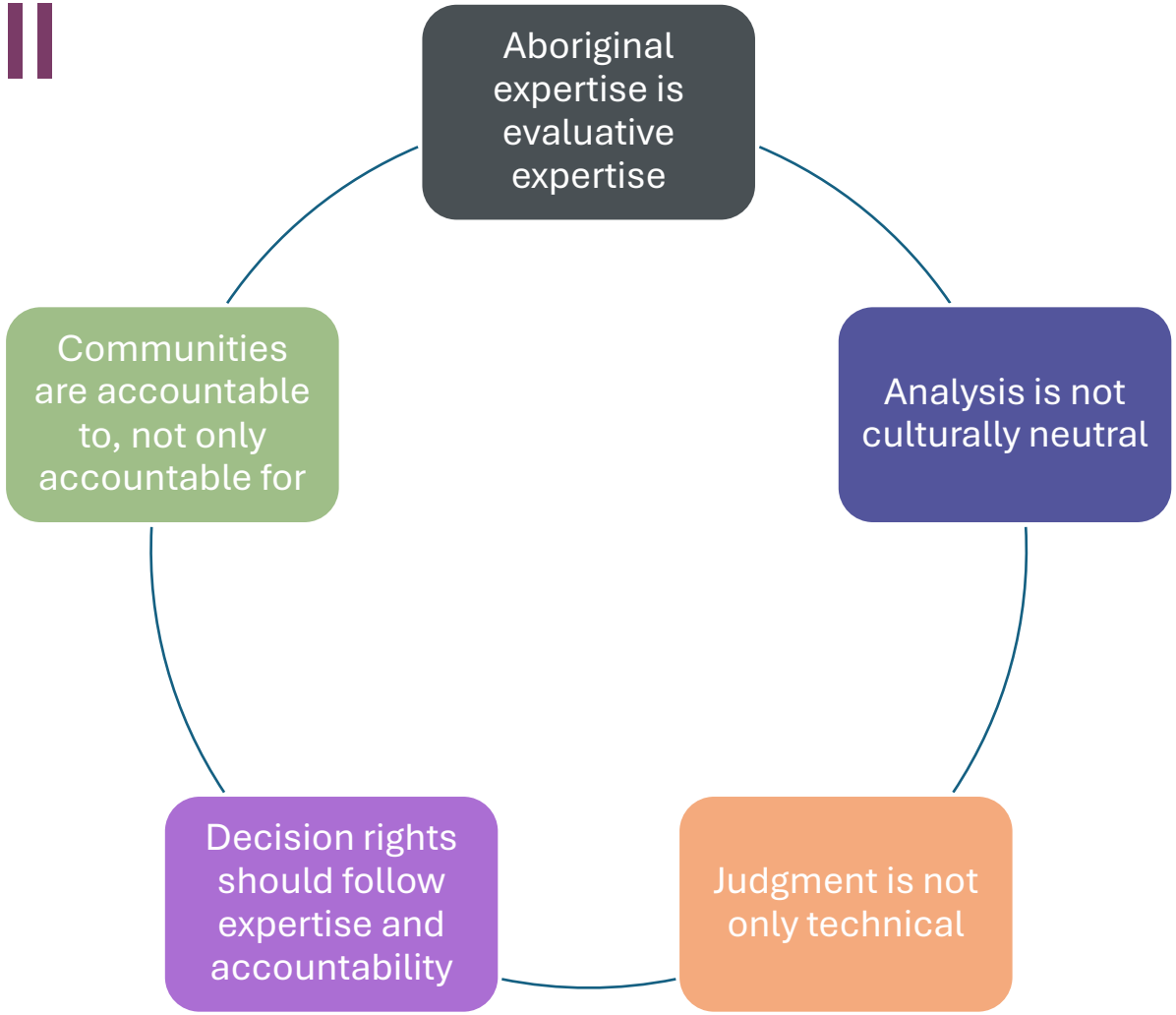
Locally grounded / authorised = guided by community-endorsed language educators and appropriate local cultural authority

Sustainability = relationships, routines, capability and authorised resources support continued appropriate delivery

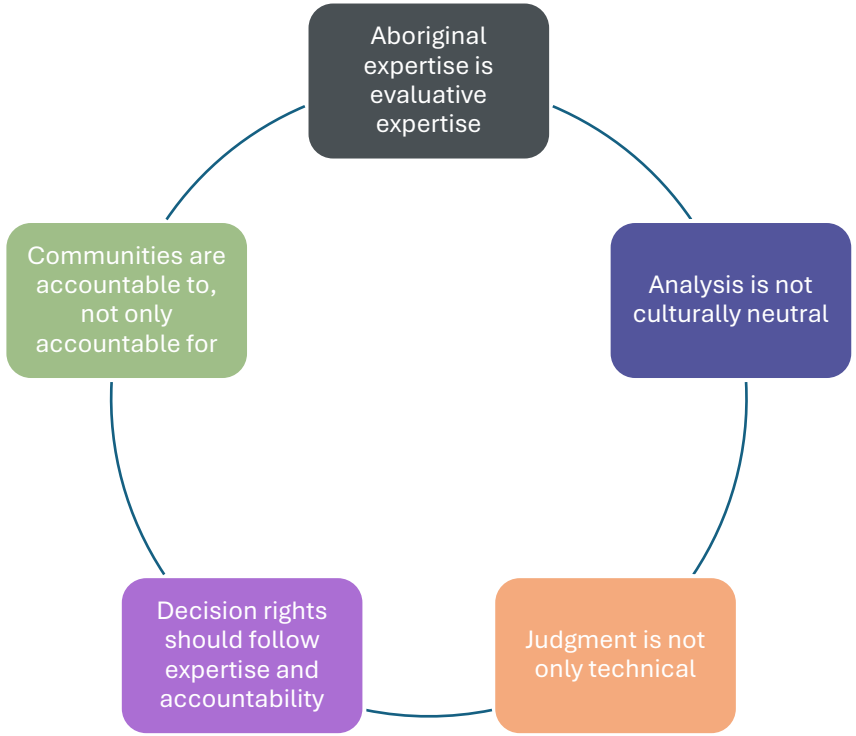
Decision rights

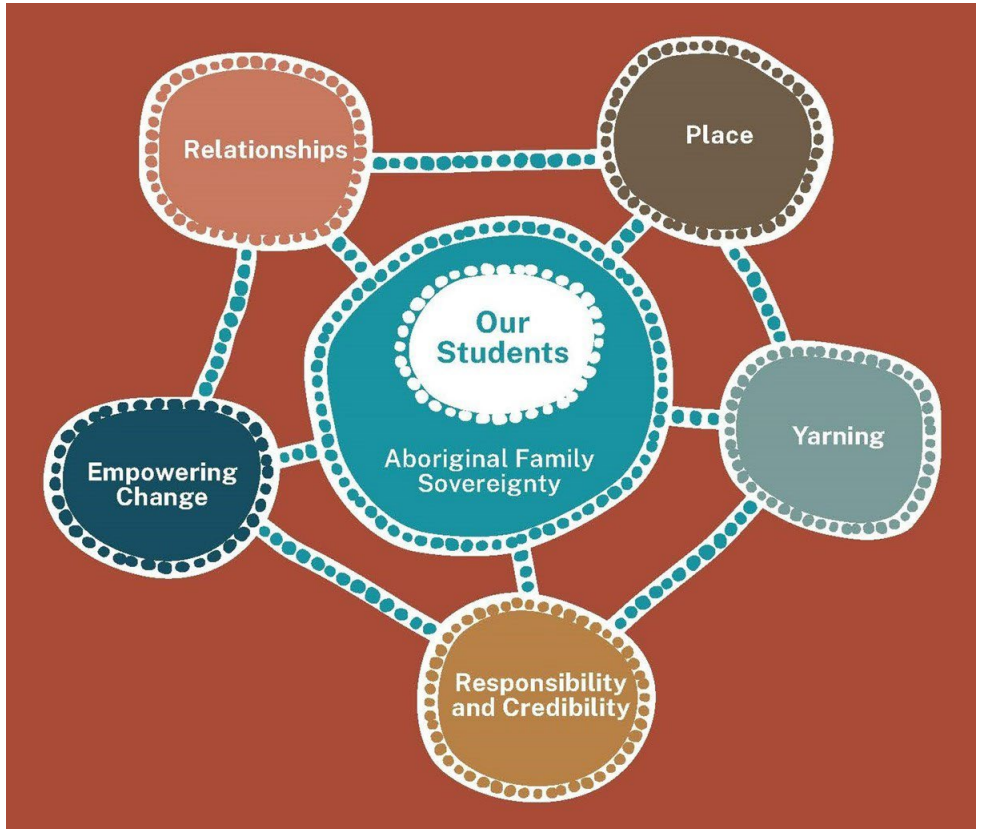
- Aboriginal expertise has standing in defining what counts as locally grounded and sustainable

Five principles for assigning decision rights well



Five principles for assigning decision rights well





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Partners and dialogue

- Carers, kin and communities

- ACCOS
  - 42 across NSW
- Other early learning services (especially with high numbers of Aboriginal young people)

- Peaks
  - NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
  - SNAICC

- Governance bodies
  - Gudjagang Gulgul (Aboriginal Early Childhood Education and Care Committee)

To measure what matters, we'll need:

- Culturally meaningful constructs
- Evidence capable of supporting warranted judgment
- Explicit decision rights over meaning, judgment and use

What would this require in your context?

Comments / Questions

Dr Rowan Savage
Manager, First Steps Strategy and Policy, Aboriginal Early Childhood Outcomes
rowan.savage@det.nsw.edu.au

Jessica de Jesus
Manager, Early Childhood Evaluation and Insights, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
Jessica.DeJesus1@det.nsw.edu.au

Phillip Belling
Senior Evaluator, Early Childhood Evaluation and Insights, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
phillip.belling@det.nsw.edu.au

NSW Department of Education

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