Children's Services in Remote Australian Indigenous Communities: Practices and Challenges

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Developing effective and sustainable services for children in remote Indigenous communities has been a longstanding challenge in Australia and in other parts of the world. In this article the authors share insights gained from the Both Ways project, which was designed to be responsive to the unique characteristics of diverse remote communities in northern Australia.

Australian Indigenous research and perspectives on services for young children such as child care centers is rarely found in early childhood literature. Even more uncommon are the views of remote Indigenous community members about their services. Drawing on one of the few research projects to make remote Indigenous child care its focus, the Both Ways Children's Services Project, this article brings together insights into children's services practices and challenges in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, incorporating the words and perspectives of the people who are running them.

One reason for our lack of knowledge about remote child care is that formal, funded, and government-regulated nonschool services for young children of the sort most families in Western cultures use regularly are still a relatively new phenomenon in remote Indigenous communities in Australia. Another reason is the inability of Indigenous people to undertake their own research, having been "researched" for most of the last century by outsiders to their communities and only recently gaining access to the levels of education that would enable them to participate in research activities.

Indigenous peoples across Australia have raised and nurtured their children effectively for millennia without the need for formal child care services. However, the disruption, dislocation, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples brought about by the European colonization of Australia from the late 1800s have irrevocably changed the nature of Indigenous lives in communities.

The Both Ways project addressed this question: "What constitutes an effective and sustainable children's service in remote Northern Territory communities?" The project involved six remote NT Indigenous communities: Nguiu, Ikuntji, Gurungu, Barunga, Titjikala, and Galiwin'ku. In this article we discuss some of the practices that evolved in these children's services and the challenges encountered in adapting a mainstream model of child care for local community needs.

Both Ways Project Approach

The Both Ways Children's Services Project, funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, involved 10 researchers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, from the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and Charles Darwin University (CDU). The group worked collaboratively with 75 participants across six communities in remote areas of the NT using a participative action research approach that involved interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. The project took place over 18 months from July 2003 to December 2004. It was underpinned by a both-ways philosophical approach used at the Batchelor Institute that involves understanding the need for ongoing negotiation and mediation of knowledge drawn from diverse cultural domains. A critical sociocultural analysis was employed to understand how community participants constructed the notion of *child care* in a social and cultural sense. This approach recognized constructions of child care as a continual negotiation of what counted as worth doing in local sites that included an awareness of power relations and local contexts.

Project findings based on the views of Indigenous children's service workers are summarized below. (For a more in-depth analysis, see Fasoli et al., 2004.)

- Services were continually engaged in a balancing act as they negotiated internal community priorities with outside requirements.
- What counted as a children's service in each community was fluid, fragile, and changed with needs.
- Services in remote communities developed their own unique practices, but still felt and reflected the strong tug of the mainstream.
- A service for children was always about a community and what it needed in the here and now as well as in the future.
- A sustainable service for children was a whole-community affair that required long-term, appropriate, and targeted support from outside as well as inside the community.

The Northern Territory and Remote Indigenous Community Context

Some familiarity with the NT and remote community contexts that feature in this article is critical for interpreting the issues raised.

The NT occupies approximately one sixth of the land mass of Australia. Approximately 202,793 Australians live in this vast region as of June 2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) out of 20 million total Australian population. Nearly 60% of the NT population lives in close to 1,000 Indigenous communities, most of which are classified as remote or very remote by being located at a distance from major service centers and in areas difficult to reach by road or air. The Indigenous population is the fastest growth sector in the NT (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). One in four NT residents identify as being of Indigenous origin (Education Advisory Council, 2003) compared with one in 50 nationally. Indigenous children make up nearly 40% of those enrolled in NT government schools (Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education, and Training, 2005) and many of them speak a language other than English as their first language.

All the communities involved in the Both Ways' Children's Services Project are small, self-governing, and isolated. Each has a history of establishment based on originating either as religious missions set up by missionaries in the late 1800s or as feeding stations for cattle property workers set up in the early 1900s.

Most communities have a health clinic staffed by local health workers and a nurse, with a doctor visiting as often as possible; a community council to run the business of the community, often managed by a non-Indigenous executive officer; a small store or take-out shop; an art center where local artists work; a women's center; sporting facilities; and a range of programs to support various activities with families, the elderly, and youth.

Population numbers ranged from the smallest community with 200 people to the largest with 1,800. In most of the communities children under the age of 15 comprised nearly 40% of the total population, and this proportion is rising. Shortage of housing was a major issue for each of the communities, with many young families having to share three-bedroom accommodation with their parents or extended family, making for crowded living conditions. Some houses had up to eight to 10 adults.

Accessing communities often meant driving at least four to eight hours on an unsealed, quiet, and lonely road. After heavy rains roads become wet, slippery, and corrugated. Two communities were accessible only by air or ferry. Community roads and airstrips became closed frequently during the wet season, which falls between November and April, isolating the communities even further. Phones and faxes were the most reliable forms of telecommunication, with the Internet frequently breaking down.

Competence in English varied from community to community. English was the second, third, or fourth language spoken by most of the people. In two of the communities only the older people still spoke their traditional

languages. As many as 22 dialects were spoken by people from one of the participating communities.

All the communities had a primary school staffed mainly by non-Indigenous teachers and Indigenous education workers (IEWs). Some schools had qualified Indigenous teachers from the local community. Four schools had adequate numbers of 3- to 4-year-old children to warrant a preschool program with a designated preschool teacher. Student numbers ranged from 30 primary school students in the smallest community to over 100 in the largest.

Alcohol restrictions applied to five of the communities profiled in this study. One community had limited-hours access to a club where alcohol was served, and another had a pub on the highway near the community.

The term *community* is something of a misnomer. These small settlements were more often than not the result of artificial groupings of varying clan or family groups. Many of these would not be living together today if not for this history. This profile means that all the communities were dealing with multiple and substantial challenges in the development of their children's services. The devastating effect of problems associated with substance abuse, poverty, unemployment, crime, and overall poor health on Indigenous Australian children, families, and communities is well known (Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Daly & Smith, 2003; Fasoli, 2004; Pocock, 2004). These factors profoundly affected how the children's services operated and what they tried to achieve. In the communities involved in this study, children's services were seen as a key source of support for families experiencing these kinds of problems.

Each service with which we worked operated primarily as a child care center in that the service was offered every day to groups of children in one location, but no two services were the same. Each service had evolved in response to its local situation and so reflected the priorities and values of these situations. For this reason we have resisted summarizing or generalizing their practices or challenges as if they were universal. Recurring themes and issues did emerge from their stories, but each has played out differently in each community. It is possible to learn from these unique stories of practice when readers take away with them those ideas that make sense to them and inform their own practice.

In the following section we describe two key practices that we isolated as critical for understanding the nature of these programs and some of the challenges they encountered. We refer to each of the communities by letter (A, B, C, D, E, & F) to preserve privacy and anonymity.

Children's Services Development and Provision: Stories of Practice
The stories that run through the following section were gleaned from interviews and conversations with Indigenous community members as they reflected with us on their children's service. Other relevant sources

documenting community perspectives were also used. Although there were many practices, only two were chosen to focus the discussion, and others had to be put aside due to space limitations. These key practices are:
- Staffing practices—Who works in the service?
- Practices for working with children—What are services doing with children?

These practices included some that were clearly borrowed and adapted from mainstream child care and others that had evolved in response to community perspectives and realities, including their unique challenges and solutions. These practices may be most interesting to the other Indigenous communities and provide tangible examples of practices that have worked for people in their local communities.

Staffing Practices—Who Works in the Service?

Who should work with the "little kids" was an important issue in each community, and finding appropriate staff to work with the children was always challenging. We group the issues in the following categories: trustworthy employees; grandmothers as employees; staff absences; recruiting employees; family relationships; men in child care; directors/mentors and community control; and employment and culture.

Trustworthy employees

In any community the people who work with the youngest children must be seen above all as trustworthy. Simply put, unless the community trusted the children's service, they would not use it.

We like to find somebody who treats the whole family well, keeps their family healthy, looks after their house, has a good character, is a good mother, is a good role model in the community, is committed to things and is aware of cultural values and protocols. (Indigenous Director, Community B)

In one community a local Indigenous graduate from a child care course sought work in the children's service. Although no other trained workers lived in the community at that time and they were seeking a qualified employee, she was not chosen to work with the children because she was known to drink alcohol. She told us about how she asked for work but was not hired.

Grandmothers as employees

Grandmothers and older aunts have been the traditional caregivers for young children in remote Indigenous contexts (Willsher & Clarke, 1995), and they continue to be. Older women have always been valued for their traditional role in "bringing up little kids." In every service there appeared to have been a conscious effort to staff centers with a mixture of older and younger staff members. For example, Community A talked about its rationale for employment of staff.

Our emphasis on the role of grandmothers is deliberate and is an acknowledgement of the place of grandmothers in traditional child rearing practices. Secondly, the [service]

organizes and coordinates training and education options for the mothers. (Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs, 2003, pp. 4-5)

In Community B, the Indigenous Director described the benefits of having older workers.

Well they would probably be bringing lullaby songs. They be bringing shell for children to play and other things, you know? They bring relations between the old ladies and the child. And they got more, the old people got ... sense, to think how to look after children. Because these young people, their children have been brought up by Grandma. See?

An older woman in Community F who was employed in the service as a nutrition worker talked about the importance of working together with younger women in traditional ways with the children, taking them hunting and teaching them about traditional food practices.

Mothers, grandparents bring their children to childcare centre.... Mothers and grandmothers taking the childcare kids for hunting or picnics for witchetty grubs or goannas. (Indigenous Nutrition Worker, Community F)

An Indigenous education worker in this community talked about the skills that made this woman a desirable child care worker:

She cooks really good, she knows everything. She knows how to cook kangaroo and she knows bush tucker. (Indigenous Education Worker, Community F)

The introduction of a center-based approach to child care in remote communities has been a significant departure from traditional roles for these women. The work is significantly harder than working with children at home; the hours are long, and the ways of working are monitored and directed by others both inside and outside the community. In many cases older women have taken up opportunities to train in teaching and nursing and subsequently obtained employment that made them unavailable for work in the children's service. A number of people mentioned the more favorable working conditions and entitlements for staff working in the education and health sectors. In comparison, work in the children's service was a relatively second-best option. For these and other reasons, some communities found engaging older women in the service difficult.

Staff absences
Finding enough staff on the day was often problematic, due at least in part to pressures that staff experienced in their own lives. Cultural obligations, illness, and other issues often caused staff absences. The fact that many of these staff were related to one another also meant that groups of staff often had to be away at the same time. Having a pool of rotating staff in Community E helped to ensure that sufficient staff were always available to take the place of absent staff. Innovative and culturally responsive staff management practices evolved to enable the complex work of the center to run smoothly. The Director explained why this system had been adopted in their center.

You know, the long-term staff get a bit tired or burned-out, so they leave for a while and then come back. Quite a few staff, people in the community, have worked, had a break and come back next year ... You can't, like in the mainstream, say, "Oh I don't have enough staff. Let's call up this relief." Instead we employ more staff than required to meet licensing, to ensure that there are enough staff, in case any staff are sick. (Non-Indigenous Director, Community E)

Sometimes a lack of staff attendance in services has meant that the service had to close. In all the communities where we worked, the staff were not paid when they did not attend unless prior arrangements had been made. In Community D, staff kept a "leave record" on a wall chart that showed graphically the daily hours worked by every staff member and the number of leave days of various forms. It was color-coded to record reasons for absence (blue for sick days, red for cultural/personal days, and yellow for holidays). This made it clear to staff when they had been away, why, how many hours they had worked each week, and for which days they could expect to be paid. When staff had to be away for an extended period such as for a funeral, they could still be paid for some of these days off, but at a lower rate.

Staffing was often disrupted in many services because most of the women who worked there were employed through the Community Development Employment (CDEP) funding. Child care-specific funding was never enough to employ all the people necessary to run the service. As a result staff tended to move in and out of positions in various community organizations and/or businesses run by the community council because their CDEP pay could move with them easily without loss.

Recruiting staff

A formal interview processes for employing children's services personnel (i.e., advertising the position publicly, short-listing applicants, interviewing, and using standard selection criteria) was not the usual way of finding staff for any of the children's services. Finding the right people to work in the service required other, more culturally sensitive practices. In one community, for example, community women who had previously worked in child care when it was a play group were seen as the most suitable people to work with children. As proven staff members, they were more likely to be appointed to staff the child care center.

In Community D many of the new workers employed at the service were themselves young mothers chosen as much for the support that child care could provide for them in their new roles as mothers as for their abilities.

It's good to have young mothers with their kids. [The children] can walk around with their mothers and they can help put them to sleep. (Indigenous Education Worker, Community D)

One of the Indigenous child care workers in Community A told us that many young mothers were at home bored with nothing to do, just as she

had been until she discovered that working could be satisfying and rewarding. It was through attending the child care service with her children that she learned about work and about her preference for working with young children.

You see them sitting in the house all day doing nothing … after I … we have our boys, when I started bringing them [to the service], that's when I started get interested in working.… I keep coming here every day, watch my kids, bring them every morning, have to sit there with them right up to … after school, then I decided to come here to work.… That's why I did get this job. I don't like sitting around at home. In the end I love working here. [Nothing to] do for me at home. (Indigenous Child Care Worker, Community A)

Family relationships

Staff who worked in child care in many of the communities tended to be related to each other, which is not surprising in such small communities. They liked to work in a place where they knew the other staff and already had established relationships. However, family relationships could be problematic when there was more than one clan or family group in a community. In Community B this presented problems for the local Indigenous Director, who did not have the authority to discipline another staff member from another family group. Although she had positional authority through being the Director, she did not have cultural authority. Traditional authority rules were at odds with the hierarchical management structure. The solution they found was to bring in an outsider to mediate, someone with no community affiliations, in this case a non-Indigenous worker in a government department. This person was able to sort through the staff problem in a way that honored traditional relationships but enabled the impasse to be removed.

Local women were important to the service because relatives had the authority to tell children what to do, whereas non-relatives or outsiders even when they were the director or mentor were not in a position to exercise this authority. For example, the Indigenous Director in Community A talked about staffing in relation to managing children's behavior, something she found challenging because she was not originally from the community.

We are glad she [one of the Indigenous staff members] came along because we were getting about 15, 16 kids.… Now that she came, and she knows, she's related to most of the kids, she can discipline them too because we get, well I do, I'm very cautious about disciplining the kids much. I'm not related to them … 'cause she is she can growl at them and tell them what to do. I might get in trouble.… But they are really good with her. You know, they listen to her. They got respect for her so they listen to her, them kids. They stop and they do it.

Having the right relationships with children and families was a key characteristic of potential employees.

Men in child care

Most of the services expressed the view that only women should work with young children. Hardly any men in the services were involved in this

study; only one service employed a young man. Nevertheless, all the services recognized the importance of men's involvement. In Community C they depended on the men to help with various projects and regularly invited them to the center during their morning or afternoon work breaks. In Community B men also visited regularly to eat lunch with the children. This program also invited men to share the results of their hunting and fishing trips. They were seen to serve as work role models for the young children, as well as a way of bringing cultural food knowledge into the service.

They normally catch fresh fish and they [bring it to] childcare ... fish, turtles and crab.... Some of them learning things as well, when they look at that in the Yolngu way and in the Balanda [Yolngu people's word for white people] way, how it works. They [the kids] can listen to the words and "I see that real fish there." (Indigenous Child Care Centre Director, Community B)

In addition, most of the services were run by committees with men as members.

Directors/mentors and community control
In many cases service directors or mentors (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) had been hired in the early days from outside the community to help a new service to get going. Where this occurred, every service talked about the importance of ensuring community control of employing local women.

It was a point of pride that Community B service was managed entirely by local people and that these staff members had achieved trained status.

The staffing over at the centre is entirely local staffing, people who have gone off and on the certificates 1, 2, and 3 in childcare [in] the last three or four years. They are the core of the trained people in the childcare center. Now there are issues about attendance at work and things like that, at the same time it is run completely by local people. (Non-Indigenous Chief Executive Officer, Community B)

The employment of non-Indigenous workers played a major role in the development of many children's services involved in this study. In Community E a non-Indigenous director had worked in the service for a long time before she had taken on the role of Director. Her experience enabled her to work with staff sensitively and respectfully. Although she had acquired a legitimate role in the community through marriage into one of the local families, she saw her role as the Director of the child care service as temporary. Her aim was to help local women to learn the skills necessary to take charge of their service.

A non-Indigenous mentor was hired to support the development of the child care service in Community D. She was neither experienced nor qualified in child care and had no children of her own. In some ways this should have been a major disadvantage, but she believed her lack of knowledge was an advantage. She had to learn along with other staff members how to *do* child care. From this position she recognized that the

women who had raised children, who spoke the local language, and who understood cultural expectations of the community had knowledge she would never have. She was clear from the beginning that her role was temporary, and she set out to help staff develop the same skills that she was developing. This orientation seemed to work well. A close friendship that developed between the mentor and the director also created a foundation on which they could build an understanding of the kind of child care service that suited the community.

Employing Indigenous or non-Indigenous mentors in child care was not an automatic solution for supporting a new service. Indeed, as Priest (2002) points out, the track record for mentoring relationships in some remote Indigenous children's services has not been good.

Existing mentoring programs, which aim to transfer skills to Aboriginal community members, have achieved limited success. For example, various mentoring programs have been available for Aboriginal people in central Australia for up to 20 years. These programs have had little, if any, impact on the staffing arrangements of funded organisations which continue to be dominated by non-Aboriginal people. (p. 1)

However, with appropriate support and clear intentions, non-Indigenous mentors have been critically important in the initiation of many remote Indigenous children's services in the NT.

Employment and culture

One of the challenges in training and keeping staff at the service was that child care employment may have been the first paid employment that some of these women had experienced. The normal working hours of parents in most of the communities were from about 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., which required the children's service to operate for longer hours. In addition, employees in the service had many other responsibilities to fulfill apart from their paid employment. They talked about the pressures they felt from their other responsibilities.

We have to look after the children. It's like looking after your own kids. You have to sit with a kid to train kids. You have to teach, cuddle the kids. You've got to make them happy. When you go back home, then you've got another job there with your own kids and that's the biggest job in the child care that we ever come across. Like parents, like the carers here, the ladies, I think that they find it very difficult. It's a lot of work. Sometimes I can't do my other things because I have to be here all the time, look after the kids. (Indigenous Child Care Centre Director, Community B)

Staff often prioritized community or cultural responsibilities above working in the children's service. In one case a staff member was literally incapable of coming to work for cultural reasons. A funeral in the community and her relationship with the deceased person meant that she could not walk or be near a house in the same a street as the child care center. This time away from work for honoring cultural responsibilities to the deceased, known locally as *Sorry Business*, often lasted for many weeks. Understanding and respecting these responsibilities was often challenging

for non-Indigenous mentors or directors. An Indigenous director spoke about her different attitude toward these kinds of staff attendance issues:

You [can] tell straight away ... if a person stays home. Because I know the background of [my] people. Aboriginal people, if they stayed home, there's a reason. (Indigenous Child Care Centre Director, Community B)

The practices reviewed here show the importance of Indigenous leadership in determining staffing practices for remote Indigenous children's services. The examples provided by each of these communities illustrate the complexity of working effectively within cultural protocols, various funding regimes, and local contexts. Each community developed staffing practices that met their specific needs and dealt with their unique challenges in a range of innovative ways. Some of their experiences will be relevant to other communities, although it is clear that there are no universal rules or prescriptions. It is clear that mainstream employment expectations, values, and world views must be modified to include more diverse and responsive approaches that suit local community needs and aspirations.

Practices for Working with Children: What Are Services Doing with Children?
Staff in each of these services developed varying ways of working with their children to suit their community's needs and priorities. How this mix of practices for children evolved depended on many things. In this section we discuss the effect of the vision for the children's service that communities held; the alliances they made with other services; the resources available to them; and the skills, knowledge, experiences, and training of the people who worked there. All these factors exerted pressure and support that helped shape the kind of service offered to children.

Visions for the service
An emphasis on certain kinds of practices for children seemed to stem most often from broad community expectations and visions for addressing the perceived needs of their children.

The role of the service as a first step in preparing children for their future in the community was important in Community B. An Indigenous council member talked of a long-term view that started with young children and their families in the child care center.

There's one thing ... and it's really important. The early childhood, the childcare and beyond that.... That's why I said, "Put emphasis on the family, to start supporting that child development." You're talking about life.... It's a life, precious to us, that can lead us ... be [an] active leader one day. If we start concentrating and focusing on ... the community, to start looking the way it should, as communities should look ... the child development will shape the community.

The Indigenous Director from the same community expressed it this way.

That's why I like to see my vision, because children have to get education here. I like to see children get their education.... Starting earlier so that when they grow up go to preschool,

they know, knowing that there's no, like how to say their numbers, recognize their names or use the help items, fitness, know how to look after their bodies.... We can't just look after the children and that's all. We have to do other things. We have to clean. We have to keep childcares clean and how can we, as childcare ... look after ourselves so we can look after the other children. (Indigenous Child Care Centre Director, Community B)

The program of activities reflected these visions, with many staff talking about the importance of preschool-like activities in the child care service. Health and hygiene practices were also critically important to staff.

Alliances.

The alliances built between the children's service and other services in their community also had a strong influence on the service's practice priorities and orientation. The services most closely aligned with their schools often promoted a clear education focus for children, whereas a close alliance with the health center promoted more attention to health practices. Often children's needs for food, hygiene, and safety were a high priority at the beginning of the service, and attention to educational goals came only later. Where health needs were great, meeting these needs took up most of the day.

In Community F the workers talked about how they had started out.

We had a few teething problems, we made a few mistakes, we had some good experiences, we learn from our mistakes. We helped care for many children every day, we kept them clean, gave them good healthy tucker. We made our crèche a safe and happy place to be (Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs, 2000).

In the early days of their service, they saw their main job as providing the children with a healthy morning meal of fruit when they arrived and a hearty lunch. That was all they could manage.

In child care kids get fruit instead of lollies.... I think it's really good, it is really good. (Indigenous Child Care Director, Community F)

They also focused on teaching children to wash their hands before they ate. At that time their service was a one-room building with no washing facilities.

The kids know how to wash hands in a bucket. (Indigenous Child Care Director, Community F)

As the service evolved, it began to offer a preschool program located in the child care service. The school had developed a whole-community education plan and involved the child care center as one of the key sites for education. The goal was for children to learn some of the behaviors expected in the school. A preschool teacher was located in the child care center rather than the school to achieve this goal. Children learned to sit at tables and take part in activities with their teacher such as coloring and painting. They had access to some books, puzzles, games, and toys, al-

though the preschool had little early childhood equipment. An awareness of child care as a stepping stone for easing children's transition to school was clearly evident in Community F.

Child care's good because they won't be frightened to come to school. (Indigenous Education Worker, Community F)

Community A also became involved in health and education alliances that helped shape their practices. The health care professionals in the local clinic located across the road from the service provided a daily health and nutrition program for all the children, which included daily vitamin and iron supplements, breakfast, a nutrition education program conducted by the teachers in the school, and a general health check weekly. Anemia had been identified as a major problem for most of the children in the community. The staff were proud of their role in providing children with healthy food and improving their health.

That's why … they usually walk around with junk food, the kids, and usually a can of Coke. But since, like when they, because they do the iron program their iron is pretty good. (Indigenous Director, Community A)

The service in Community A moved on to develop its role in helping children to prepare for school as their service was located in the school. They gained much support for keeping the program running through their alliance with the school. Coming to the service was also seen as a good way to induct children into the practices of the school.

Sometimes, you know, you'll find some of the kids don't like to come to school. But if they come here and see that it's fun, they might be like, you know … [I] encourage all the kids to come. Another one might go home, like some of the kids go home with their pictures and their paintings, and all their little brothers and sisters, they see it, and they want to do it too. Sometimes they come with them. (Indigenous Director, Community A)

These services have clearly taken on practices associated with the partners that worked with them in the community to support children. Services were both supported and pressured by these alliances in terms of what practices they promoted. Services within and beyond their community such as those provided through government departments and training organizations are not mentioned here, but these also exerted their mainstream pull that acted to nudge services toward certain ways of working with children.

Resources

The availability of certain kinds of toys, furniture, outdoor play equipment, and other items ensured that some practices were used and not others. In services that were well supplied with typical early childhood resources, many more typical early childhood activities took place. The examples below from Communities D, F, and B show the diversity of approaches.

In Community D, a washing routine was the first activity of the day in child care. Their large washing machine and shower in the bathroom made this possible. Washing machines and functioning shower facilities were largely unavailable in most family homes. Children wore crèche clothes while their own were washed.

When the kids come in the morning we take care of them … [washing them].… We wash their clothes, their own clothes for afternoon so they can take child care clothes off and put their clean clothes back on.… We used to have those kids with scabies before and now not much. (Indigenous Centre Director, Community D)

Children in Community D played in self-directed ways that did not include many typical early childhood activities. They found their own games and activities without asking adults to help them. When they arrived each day, they went straight to the big locked storage units on the veranda, and the only help they needed was an adult to unlock the containers. They helped themselves to the small range of toys that they wished to play with. Rarely were there disputes about who played with which toys.

Food preparation and eating were central practices in most of the services. Community resources varied, but most had a kitchen containing the necessary tools and equipment such as a stove, fridge, freezer, pans of various sizes, potato mashers, and so forth. This range of equipment and the range and types of food found in the children's service were rarely available in most people's homes. This made the services attractive to both adults and children and the meals an important punctuation point in the day. It also meant that cooking and eating activities often took up a large part of the time children spent in child care.

In Community D every staff member learned how to cook nutritious meals for the children. They developed a set of recipe cards for making various meals with step-by-step instructions illustrated with photographs. Meals included spaghetti, tuna Mornay, and chicken bake. At first the children were not enthusiastic and would not eat vegetables, but slowly they got used to new kinds of food. Eventually they would eat virtually everything that was served to them.

As this section illustrates, the types of resources available to staff and children to use affected the kinds of practices that evolved.

Skills and culture

The people who chose to work in the services brought their own unique blend of skills, knowledge, experiences, and training, all of which produced some forms of activity rather than others. The fact that all the services were staffed primarily by Indigenous people meant that their work was underpinned by cultural values relevant to the community.

Kinship relationships were emphasized as important for children to learn in child care in Community E.

We have cultural activities and group time ... staff talks to the kids about kinships, and when they playing together or if they fight, we say, "You're related to that, that boy or girl is your nephew or cousin." (Indigenous Family Coordinator, Community E)

An explicit language and cultural program also supported specific practices in Community E. The Director explained that if the children were spoken to in English, they were encouraged to respond in English. If they were spoken to in the local language, they were encouraged to respond in the local language. Each child was taught to dance his or her totem dance, and these activities were conducted in the local language. Each day the children practiced their dances during a group time activity. The staff in the center danced with the children, teaching them the dance.

One of the older staff members talked about the importance of teaching culture to the children in the center. She was worried about loss of culture for the older children and teenagers. She hoped that by sharing cultural activities with the younger children she could pass on her knowledge.

They have their own way, you know? They have their own way like when we encourage young people to get up and dance, they too shy. They dance not really like us when we dance. We really mean it when we dance in our way, in our culture.... You can be strong ... but it's changing today amongst the young people. They have their own way.... I want them to learn everything from me.... We have lots to teach. And we still have some ladies at our community who are doing weaving ... pandanus. They go and get some pandanus and some dye and they make baskets.... They [the children] learn culture.... From little, little, they learn culture right up to when they grow up. (Indigenous Child Care Worker, Community E)

Maintaining language was not prioritized in all services, particularly services where adults believed they could not pass on language to their children because they had lost too much of it themselves. In some services where the local language was still strong, it seemed to be taken for granted that children would learn language incidentally, without the need to plan for or emphasize it.

Staff in Communities F and D spoke to children almost exclusively in their own local language. Staff in the other services believed that children's attendance at the service provided an opportunity for learning English and that this would be an advantage when they went to school. Staff told us that they spoke to children in English for this reason and valued non-Indigenous staff members for their ability to teach the children proper English. However, in most communities this practice sat alongside a concern for children's loss of their local language or languages. In Community B the Director spoke about how the children were no longer learning "strong" language, but she was unsure of how to reverse this situation although both local languages and English were used explicitly in the service.

As often as possible most services attempted to take children "out bush," to swim in water holes, to look for bush tucker, to share knowledge about the bush, or simply to get away from the center and spend some

time in the bush. This was an important practice that every service spoke to us about because it was a chance for staff to share their cultural knowledge with each other and with the children.

The poster in Figure 1 made by the Director of one of the services shows the importance placed on sharing and learning cultural knowledge associated with bush foods.

Given these strong views, it is unfortunate that most services found it difficult to undertake these important practices because of lack of transport. A vehicle devoted to the use of the children's service was rare.

Practices in children's services were geared primarily to the needs of children in the community and evolved over time as the service developed. Both children and staff in the participating communities were learning how to do child care in ways that made sense to them and that fitted their community context.

Conclusions

The services discussed in this article do not exist in isolation from what else goes on in their community. They were all embedded in the life of their communities, with varying attachments and relationships among various individuals, groups, and organizations; therefore, each developed a unique type of service. The size of the community, its remoteness, access to funding, physical resources, qualified staff, training, professional program support, and the overall well-being and capacity of the community have all affected how the service evolved and the types of challenges encountered.
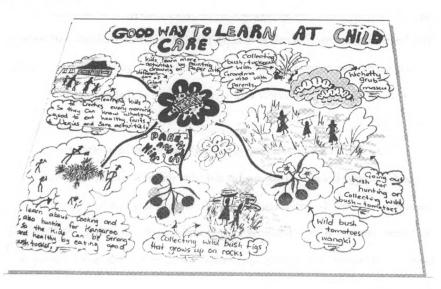

Figure 1. Poster made by a service director (by Rene Douglas, 2003).

These services have had few opportunities to learn from each other, having emerged in relative isolation from one another and other similar services (including mainstream services). Nevertheless, they have developed many practices typical of mainstream services. Although these practices are making the lives of their children healthier and happier, some appear to be at odds with other priorities they are trying to achieve culturally. This is particularly the case for language practices, where many of the communities seemed to take for granted that children would learn their Indigenous language without much need for explicit provision.

Visitors from outside the community such as support agents, licensing officials, and research teams can play a role and have a responsibility to reflect back to services the valuable and effective things they can see happening. As outsiders, visitors create the need for local people to become more self-conscious and so more aware of the value of what they are doing. Remote community children's services in their isolation often have little awareness of their own uniqueness or of the creativity of their local practices, solutions, and innovations. Undertaking research and documenting practices in tangible ways can create such a reflective opportunity.

The children's service was always a different kind of place from the home or community environments in which these children were growing up. Although this is also the case for children and adults in a mainstream service, it is unlikely that the dissonance between the two would be as marked as it was in these communities. Children were rarely the sole or main focus of daily activity for adults outside the service. Adults went about their business, and children were included, engaging in everything that went on but not the main focus. Mainstream models of children's services can be seen as rather artificial and alien environments when the main purpose of adults' activity is to work exclusively with and for children all day.

The issue of the type of program to be provided for children always contained tensions between local expectations for a program and prevailing mainstream ways of doing things. What counted as a "locally appropriate" children's service had to be continually reaffirmed, particularly when it did not reflect what counted as appropriate from mainstream perspectives.

Perhaps the most challenging issue for child care workers in these communities was the dual roles they played in relation to the two world views represented in the child care services. Zanet (1997), who worked with some of the same communities involved in the Both Ways Project, explains this dynamic well in relation to Yolngu culture. The same could be said for any of the participating communities.

It is likely that child care workers will have two systems of law to follow (Balanda and Yolngu)—both exist and both have social, legal and ethical implications. (n.p.)

As these services develop, they need to be supported as they negotiate the balance between practices valued in their culture and those they wish to adopt and adapt from the mainstream world.

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