Integrated services for Aboriginal children and families

Libby Lee-Hammond
Murdoch University

THIS PAPER DISCUSSES AN EMPIRICAL research study based on a community consultation process for the development of an integrated children and families centre. Conducted in Western Australia in 2009, the consultation was designed specifically for the Noongar Aboriginal community, drawing on Indigenous research methods and sociocultural theory. The paper discusses the study's findings, considers its Australian policy and international contexts, and explores challenges to providing integrated child and family services for Aboriginal families. It identifies key elements of successful service delivery and highlights the significance of consultation and collaboration in developing culturally appropriate services. The paper concludes that the widely recognised need to 'close the gap' in Indigenous health and education services is not being met with sufficient funding, and notes the ever-widening gap between purported policy imperatives and the process of addressing inequalities.

Introduction

In 2008, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Incorporated (SNAICC), in its submission to the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, commended the Labor Government's commitment to improved Indigenous life outcomes. However, SNAICC offered some important advice on Aboriginal and Islander childcare services being conceptualised outside the standard regulatory frameworks. The submission noted, in particular, that a 'useful and culturally relevant' framework will have to 'look further than how services look after children. It will need to address how services work at a community level' (SNAICC, 2008, p. 4).

This paper reports on an investigation of one community's attempt to navigate this landscape. This community-based study explores the intersection between the early years political agenda and the identified need to develop services for Aboriginal people from a standpoint of cultural relevance, awareness and appropriateness. In any attempt to work effectively with Aboriginal communities, it is essential that service providers are completely clear about the wishes of the communities they intend to serve. Without adequate consultation, checking and clarifying, any resulting service will fail to be effective (McRae et al., 2010).

The overall aim of the paper is to report the findings of an empirical research study using Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). The study was designed to consult members of the Noongar Aboriginal community in Perth, Western Australia, about the types of family and children's services they wished to access and the manner in which they wished to access them. In addition to reporting the findings of the study, the paper locates the research within the Australian policy context.

The first section of the paper explores the Australian Labor Government's position on and implementation of integrated early years services. It also situates this research within the international context. As considered below, there is a substantial body of academic literature that considers the establishment and implementation of an integrated model for the early childhood care and education needs of children, their families, and carers. It is therefore not the intention of this paper to reiterate the benefits, potential hazards and challenges of developing an integrated service in detail, but to provide an overview of them in order to provide the necessary context for the subsequent discussion.

The second section explores, through a review of relevant literature, the current challenges to providing integrated child and family services specifically for
Aboriginal children and families. It also draws together lessons on the key elements of successful service delivery and highlights the significance of developing culturally appropriate services in consultation and collaboration with the local Aboriginal community.

The third section of the paper describes the approach and methodology and discusses the findings of the empirical study. As previously noted, the study draws upon Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) that decolonise western imperialist notions of both research and community service provision (Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Smith, 1999). Further, the study takes a perspective grounded in socio-cultural theory with regard to the child and family who are the focus of this project (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Rogoff, 2003).

The final part of the paper draws conclusions on the ever-widening gap between purported policy imperatives and the process of change and innovation at the coalface. The study highlights that a widely recognised need to ‘close the gap’ in Indigenous health and education is not being met with sufficient funding to enable real change to happen. The efforts and intentions of those working for change in the community are at the behest of funding and political expediency. This concluding section also reflects on the importance of using Indigenous research methods in order to elicit authentic responses from Aboriginal participants.

Background

The national early years agenda

Since 2008, the Australian Government’s commitment to the early years has provided support and opportunities to develop projects in line with funding priorities; ‘Investment in the early years is the best possible use of government money’, stated Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education and Deputy Prime Minister. She highlighted the need to give ‘every Australian child the best possible start in life and the best prospect of success in life’ (Gillard, 2008).

In a subsequent speech made in July 2008, the Hon Maxine McKew MP, Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Care, discussed the Prime Minister’s 2020 vision of ‘one stop shops’ for parents with young children (2008). She described an integrated family centre, combining parenting support, health services and early childhood care and education. The idea of an ‘integrated family centre’ is one that brings together services to support children, their families and the wider community.

This vision was articulated within a policy context in which the Australian Labor Government had made commitments to specifically address the social and economic disadvantage experienced by the majority of Aboriginal families:

Labor believes that there must be comprehensive coverage of parenting and early development services for Indigenous parents and their babies. These services help families through the challenges that raising children often present, and provides support and assistance. This form of early intervention service enables young families to make sure their young children are on the right track, right from the start (Rudd, Macklin, Roxon & Smith, 2007, p. 13).

With regard to this, the Labor Government officially committed to two major targets:

■ halving the gap in mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade, and
■ halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement within a decade by introducing a comprehensive package focusing on Indigenous children’s early years (Rudd et al., 2007, p. 11).

In 2009 the Federal Government announced the 36 centres that would be established around Australia as part of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development. The program set out to provide programs specifically targeting the needs of Aboriginal families who stood to ‘gain the most’ (DEEWR, 2010, p. 1) from early childhood services.

The need to prioritise early childhood care and education is noted by the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), which acknowledges that: ‘Indigenous children are less likely to participate in early childhood education. Without preschool learning opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to be behind from their first year of formal schooling’ (FaHCSIA, 2011).

Implementation of early years services

The Australian context

A range of integrated services has been implemented in different states of Australia. One highly successful example is the South Australia’s Learning Together Centres (DECS, 2011). A particularly successful Learning Together Centre known as Café Enfield is located in an area of Adelaide with high unemployment, a large proportion of single parents, and families under financial stress. The café is described as:

1 Throughout the paper, I use the term Aboriginal in favour of the term Indigenous as the preferred nomenclature of the Aboriginal people who participated in this study.
... a unique and successful partnership between health, education and parents, which reflects and sustains the community’s commitment to the learning and development of young children and families. It is a ‘family friendly, family driven’ centre where children and families feel welcome to drop in and participate in activities or network with others from the community (Galwey, 2005, p. 1).

Programs in other states offer similar focus and program types. Generally these are driven by government agencies. In some areas, partnerships with charities such as The Smith Family exist to harness the resources and expertise of these organisations.

How programs are offered in Australia has proven to be just as significant as what programs are offered, as Moore (State of Victoria, 2008) found in his review of the literature for the State of Victoria. There are benefits and barriers to a multi-agency structure. Moore found that when agencies are co-located this proves to be more promising for truly integrated services than a model where services are merely using the same facilities in rotation and come and go without reference to one another. It has been shown that successful multi-agency working must begin with strong relationships between staff in co-located teams (State of Victoria, 2008).

The international context

Integrated services for families have been developed in numerous locations internationally. Nine OECD countries have combined early education and care systems for children under six years. (Corter et al., 2006). There is a substantial international body of academic literature which considers the establishment and implementation of an integrated model for the early childhood care and education needs of children, their families and carers (Anning, 2005; Bennett, 2008; Corter et al., 2006; French, 2007; Hawker, 2006, 2010; Lepler, Uyeda & Hallow, 2006; Percy-Smith, 2005; Siraji-Blatchford, 2007; Tunstill, Aldgate & Hughes, 2006; Valentine, Katz & Griffiths, 2007; Worsley, 2007).

In Canada, early childhood services offer a range of Indigenous-specific early childhood programs. These services utilise a holistic, community-oriented approach to working with local children and families (Sims et al., 2008a, p. 2). This is epitomised in Toronto ‘First Duty’ (City of Toronto, 2011), an early education model that is an integrated service with professional teams of educators, carers, and health professionals. A unique feature of this Canadian model, particularly relevant to the study reported in this paper, is the involvement of community members, especially elders, in developing a generative curriculum based on cultural and community priorities.

The United Kingdom’s approach to integrated services for children and families is best exemplified in the Every Child Matters: Change for Children Program (HM Government, 2004). This initiative seeks to provide integrated services in support of families. The notion of a ‘joined up’ service in the UK has manifested in the Sure Start Centres, established to ‘provide early education integrated with health and family support services, and childcare from 8:00am to 6:00pm’ (HM Government, 2004). This model has relevance for the Australian context where a number of services operating in isolation have restricted client use and fail to meet the needs of a changing workforce (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011).

Integrated family and children’s services
for Australian Aboriginal children and their families

Current challenges

A re-imagining of family and children’s services for families is a necessity in the twenty-first century, where family life is more complex than at any other time in history (Hayes, Weston, Qu & Gray, 2010; Walsh, 2012). A partnership between families and services is supported by Whalley (2006) who notes that the aim of Children’s Centres is to develop the capacity of children and parents to be competent:

… users of services—not just ‘clients’ passively receiving generous dollops of welfare state services but equal and active partners in developing and reviewing the effectiveness of what’s on offer’ (p. 1).

Partnerships and relationships appear to be the key ingredients of successful service delivery in the new millennium (O’Donnell et al., 2010).

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) recognises that families identified as most vulnerable are those in poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse families, Aboriginal families, young-parent families, and families where one parent has a disability, a mental health issue or engages in substance abuse. Where more than one of these conditions applies to a family they are considerably less likely to seek support (CCCH, 2010). Aboriginal families in Australia often experience these multiple layers of vulnerability and, because of barriers well documented in the literature (State of Victoria, 2008), they may be even less likely to access support than are non-Aboriginal families. Major barriers at the service level include: insensitive or judgemental attitudes, failure to build on family strengths, lack of awareness of cultural sensitivities, and inability to create a situation where parents feel at ease. On the part of families, barriers may include a lack of confidence to engage with professionals, being intimidated by staff or other parents, and a fundamental lack of trust in services (CCCH, 2010).
In their report *Indigenous Child Care—Leading the Way* (2008a, p. 56), Sims and colleagues note that the ‘most effective changes arise from interventions in the early years’. Further, they identify seven strengths-based capacity-building service areas for Aboriginal families and children. These areas are: nutrition, health, transport, play and leisure, early learning and development, cultural program, and family support (Sims et al., 2008a). They note that:

*Indigenous children need services that support a strong cultural identity to enable them to move into the schooling system and experience success. Services need to be accessible and to reflect the needs of local communities, families and children. This means that services in different communities will look quite different; one size does not fit all (Sims et al., 2008a, p. 58).*

There is strong research evidence to support the ‘wrap-around’ or ‘joined up’ services that reflect local, community-based, holistic approaches to children and families (Brechan-Toussaint & Kogler, 2010; Haffon, Uyeda, Inkelas & Rice, 2004; Hawker, 2006, 2010; Valentine et al., 2007; Whalley, 2006; Wyles, 2007). One such service, the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service (MACS) has been operating for nearly 20 years in Australia. MACS services were set up in recognition that Aboriginal communities were entitled to design and operate their own childcare services. The MACS services also varied in the scope of provision, depending on specific local needs. Some services might include before- and after-school care, homework clubs, vacation care, long day care, playgroups, and buses to transport children between the service and school. A hallmark of the services is that they are culturally ‘safe’ places for families to entrust the care of their children (Indigenous Professional Support Unit, 2011). The Labor Government’s policy initiative regarding one-stop shops for families could well have drawn on the quality practices already in place in the MACS model. However, funding for new services based on this model is not being made available.

**Key elements of successful service delivery for Aboriginal families**

**Culture**

The SNAICC submission to the Federal Government’s *National Quality Framework* (2008) outlines a number of principles required in the development of culturally appropriate services and facilities. They include:

1. Recognition of Indigenous values, culture and tradition.
2. Recognition of the different approaches to child rearing by Indigenous and non-Indigenous childcare services.
3. Consideration of how services work with families who never attend child care, and how these services can support the development of their children.
4. Recognition of Indigenous community kinship networks where children are placed with different members of the family, who are involved in different aspects of raising the children.
5. Indigenous childcare services see their role as a contributor to the family’s responsibility to ensure constant care of children (SNAICC, 2008).

In addition, Sims et al. (2008a; 2008b) highlight the following significant points for consideration:

1. Indigenous children’s services provide strong cultural identity to assist children to successfully progress through the schooling system.
2. A culturally appropriate location is essential in the successful implementation of such services.
3. The involvement of elders and other community members is required in the development of curriculum and service provision and governance.

These latter considerations by Sims et al. (2008a; 2008b) are particularly relevant for the study reported here. The location of the proposed centre in an iconic place for Aboriginal people in Western Australia is a key component of the consultation process.

**Multi-agency structure**

To date, various government and philanthropic services have operated in a parallel manner in Australia. Some of the dilemmas this poses include overlap of services, issues about transport to access services in different locations, and a lack of communication between services regarding particular families. There is a risk that conflicting information or advice may lead to confusion or withdrawal by vulnerable families. As noted by Corter et al. (2006, p. 6), ‘parallel streams impede, rather than enhance access for families’.

Historically, government- and church-based agencies have been largely responsible for the removal of children from families associated with the Stolen Generations (Australian Government, 1997) and hence a lack of trust of these providers exists among the Aboriginal community (Bowes, Kitson & Burns, 2010, p. 3). As a result, families in need of support are reluctant to access assistance from these agencies.

For integrated services to be relevant and successful, particularly within Aboriginal communities, it is essential for the community who will utilise their support to determine which agencies participate as well as the level of their involvement (De Gioia, Hayden & Hadley, 2003; Guilfoyle, Sims, Sagger & Hutchins, 2010; Hutchins, Martin, Sagger & Sims, 2007). It is also noted that, where the Aboriginal community is the
intended clientele, it is essential to provide appropriate spiritual and cultural activities (SNAICC, 2008).

The study

Context, stakeholders and facilitators

Context
The study was undertaken as part of a broader feasibility study for the establishment of an integrated children and families centre at the site of the former Sister Kate’s Children’s Home, Western Australia. The research prioritised consultation and collaboration to ensure that any proposed development for families at the site was culturally appropriate and supported by the Aboriginal community.

Sister Kate’s Children’s Home
The Sister Kate’s site has special significance for Aboriginal people as a former home for children forcibly removed from their parents and families under government policy in the 1900s. History has recorded that many of the children who ultimately lived at Sister Kate’s were taken from loving families and that some were subject to various types of abuse during their residence there (Australian Government, 1997).

The children who lived at Sister Kate’s between 1933 and 1974 are described as members of the Stolen Generations (Australian Government, 1997). The term Stolen Generations is used to describe those children of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who were forcibly removed from their families by the Australian State and Federal governments under Acts of Parliament. Some church missions also engaged in the removal of children. Nationally, the removals occurred between 1869 and 1969, although in some places children were still being taken in the 1970s.

Beananging Kwuurt Institute (BKI)
In 2007, BKI was established to provide services to Aboriginal people from the site of the former Sister Kate’s Children’s Home at Queens Park in Perth. One of the Institute’s key objectives is to provide direct relief to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from poverty, suffering, destitution, misfortune, distress, helplessness and all other related matters (Beananging Kwuurt Institute, 2009). BKI funded the feasibility study reported in this project as part of their commitment to the above objectives.

Methodology: Theoretical context and research methods
Bronfenbrenner (1992) offers a useful model for understanding the child in the centre of a family, community and cultural and political context, and this aligns well with Indigenous research (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) since the child and family are viewed as members of a microsystem that is in constant interaction with culture, history and values (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

The study uses Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) utilising qualitative semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal ‘yarning’ (Mann, Knight and Thomson, 2011) as data collection tools. The latter is an authentic way to involve Aboriginal people in research, enabling them to participate in ways that are familiar and feel safe for them; usually yarning is accompanied by a cup of tea in an informal setting such as a front yard, under a tree in a local park, or at a kitchen table. In order to enable a non-threatening and informal context for participants, researcher field notes alone were utilised rather than audio recording of conversations. Hence, direct quotes from participants are not cited in this paper. Summaries of the notes were circulated to participants for checking and confirmation prior to analysis. Content analysis was used to identify themes from interviews and focus groups; categories were developed to describe the ‘key elements’ the participants identified (Krippendorff, 2003).

Participants
The fieldwork involved collecting and analysing data provided by those already engaged in service provision in the community. This was essential in order to ascertain what services were already working well, where gaps in provision existed, and provided an opportunity for those working in the community to share their vision of ‘ideal’ services for the Noongar community. A total of 33 individuals participated in the study. Each participant was identified by BKI as representing an organisation that was meaningfully engaged in existing service provision within the Aboriginal community.

Well-respected Elders working for BKI facilitated the non-Aboriginal researcher’s access to key Aboriginal participants. These Elders established a level of trust and openness between the researcher and the participants that enabled the richest possible data to be collected. It seems important to note this since it was a critical factor in determining access and authentic participation.

Individual participants were drawn from government agencies and departments, community service providers such as Anglicare, The Smith Family and Aboriginal services such as Yorganop and Yorgam. Two-thirds of all participants were Aboriginal. Twenty-five of all participants attended a half-day focus group where they discussed and documented their vision for the development of a fully integrated family and children’s service for Aboriginal people. The remaining eight participants were invited to share their ideas and experience in an informal interview or a ‘yarn’ (Mann...
et al., 2011). The researcher also attended community events such as National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebrations and Christmas events to informally consult community members, including children, about their hopes and priorities for an integrated service for children and families. This follows Clark and Moss’s Mosaic Approach (2001) utilising a range of sources, including children’s drawings, to elicit the richest possible data. This approach is also consistent with Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

Demographic data provided by the Department for Communities, Western Australia (DFCWA) revealed that approximately 700 Aboriginal children under four years of age were living in the immediate suburbs surrounding the site at Queens Park (DFCWA, personal correspondence), and up to 20 per cent of children within those suburbs were deemed to be developmentally vulnerable according to the Australian Early Development Index (Australian Government, 2011).

Presentation of data to participants

The researcher drew on the Aboriginal cultural practice of storytelling as a means to convey the major findings of the research. Presenting the findings in this manner was intended to make the data highly accessible and to bring clarity to a complex set of findings. Wilson refers to Indigenous research as storytelling and notes in his own research that the ‘... main obligation is to make as many connections or relationships available as possible and to respect the reader’s ability to take in what they are ready to receive’ (Wilson, 2008, p. 133). The story as a means of conveying findings thus brings together important messages and priorities from the participants in a culturally appropriate way.

Findings

The themes identified through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) are grouped in three major categories, and then sub-categories are addressed. The researcher has labelled these ‘key elements’ to reflect the elements considered by the community to be essential in an integrated children and families centre. There are three main categories arising from the data:

1. A clear vision for an Aboriginal children and families centre.
2. Essential services, programs and facilities.
3. Key cultural considerations.

These categories are presented in the following three tables, with key elements explained by accompanying descriptions.

Table 1: Theme one: A clear vision for an Aboriginal children and families centre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>A service that is culturally appropriate and safe for Aboriginal children and their extended family and community and uses the Aboriginal child’s learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcomes for Aboriginal families</td>
<td>Happy children, happy families, healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequately resourced</td>
<td>Human resources: Appropriately selected and culturally competent staff Adequate and ongoing funding Facilities are culturally safe and promote inquiry, discovery and belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community focused and in the community</td>
<td>A place where families could come and feel comfortable. Service sees the child in family, in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic service provision</td>
<td>Interagency support and net working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning, management and review systems</td>
<td>Noongar consultation, control at every level (inclusive of parents, community and interagency partnerships) Quality Assurance of the services and a strength-based program designed to be flexible and meet the needs of the community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Theme two: Essential services, programs and facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Integrated services and programs</td>
<td><strong>Services</strong>&lt;br&gt;Holistic care&lt;br&gt;Education (parenting, nutrition, social, emotional, strengths)&lt;br&gt;Information, advocacy and referral for Government agencies&lt;br&gt;Assistance with accessing birth certificates and family history (e.g. photographic records kept with names for family access)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Programs</strong>&lt;br&gt;Early years education and care programs that meet national quality standards&lt;br&gt;Teaching Noongar language and culture&lt;br&gt;Programs on domestic violence, support and prevention&lt;br&gt;Playgroups for mums, dads, and grandparents&lt;br&gt;Support services for families in crisis&lt;br&gt;Health and nutrition, breakfast programs for school kids&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Physical space</strong>&lt;br&gt;Accommodating Aboriginal law (e.g. separate entrances for family members, men’s and women’s business)&lt;br&gt;Less sterile environment than traditional centres&lt;br&gt;Signage in Noongar and English&lt;br&gt;Outdoor fire place for story telling&lt;br&gt;Library with internet access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service delivery and outcomes</td>
<td>Education supported by Aboriginal teachers and assistants&lt;br&gt;Training and employment outcomes&lt;br&gt;High quality and high expectations&lt;br&gt;Promoting capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who provides services?</td>
<td>Aboriginal people who are appropriately trained or working towards qualifications&lt;br&gt; Governments agencies and other service providers in conjunction with Noongar community&lt;br&gt; Cultural competence is essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are services provided?</td>
<td>Friendly, welcoming environment&lt;br&gt;Accessible, affordable and inclusive&lt;br&gt;Cultural care plans&lt;br&gt;Confidentiality of records maintained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Theme three: Key cultural considerations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Meet mainstream standards for care while considering cultural needs and sensitivities&lt;br&gt;Acknowledges diversity among Aboriginal people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community involvement</td>
<td>Identify and involve the local Aboriginal people especially Elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals</td>
<td>Invest in a really visible celebration of Noongar culture but also welcome to the range of people who will use the facility&lt;br&gt;Regular rituals of celebration of culture and respect&lt;br&gt;Recognition of the history of the site (memorial for instance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for children</td>
<td>Development of cultural support maps for children (i.e. identify who are the family and community members children can seek guidance or help from)</td>
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</table>
Discussion

Historically, missions and children’s homes were set up to educate and evangelise Aboriginal people who were perceived as morally, socially and intellectually inferior (Haebich, 1998). Since this is relatively recent history, many Aboriginal people today are deeply suspicious of government agencies and church-based welfare services (CCCH, 2010; Bowes et al., 2010, p. 3). This project offered an alternative, taking an approach that afforded the members of the Aboriginal community the opportunity to determine the design and implementation of a centre for Aboriginal children and families. A self-determining approach is fundamental to the effectiveness of services and programs for Aboriginal people (Australian Government, 1997, Chapter 26). In a policy context where ‘closing the gap’ is a national priority, a study of the type undertaken and funded by an Aboriginal organisation is a crucial source of locally relevant information for government to implement effective programs. However, when this thoroughly researched proposal was put to government, the BKI centre concept was not funded. Funding for one urban Aboriginal children and families centre was awarded to another site located in a marginal political seat, and BKI has not yet realised its vision. In this case, the Federal Government appears to have made a politically expedient decision, which overlooks the extensive efforts to effect change and self-determination for a reputable grassroots Aboriginal organisation.

Conclusions

It is clear that a joined-up service connecting programs and services to the people who will use them is vital for families in disadvantaged communities. Whalley (2006, p. 10) describes the need to have provision for families within ‘pram pushing distance’ from home. In the case of BKI, a local service for Aboriginal families following a ‘one-stop-shop’ model would enable families to access programs, services, training, and employment opportunities in culturally relevant ways. Two worthwhile outcomes of this project are that the community-based research has provided detailed information about the types of services and program considerations deemed important by the local Aboriginal community. It may be that similar views are held in other communities, and this is worthy of further research. Methodological implications point to partnerships between Aboriginal Elders and researchers as a fruitful means to obtain authentic data that captures the communities’ values and beliefs. This approach to consultation and research is essential if ‘closing the gap’ is to be a reality.

There is another considerable ‘gap’ to be addressed in twenty-first century Australia. This is the gap between government policy and the necessary action required to address Aboriginal disadvantage at a community level. Culturally relevant and properly resourced facilities for Aboriginal children and families are crucial. However, as was recently noted in A practical vision for early childhood education and care, ‘despite policy attention, systems for early childhood services—particularly for ECEC services—continue to reflect the models of the past more than the needs of the present and future’ (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011, p. 10). This study illustrates how some of those Aboriginal organisations that support approaches to self-determination have their efforts thwarted by the Government’s failure to fund the services that are essential to address Aboriginal disadvantage.

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References


