

Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children

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Abstract *This research contributes to an issue of importance in the current Australian political and research climate - that of the engagement of disadvantaged and marginalised groups of people with early childhood education and care settings. More specifically, this research seeks to understand the barriers and facilitators of engagement for Indigenous families in NSW. Research in this area is important because of recent studies supporting low levels of participation in early childhood services for Indigenous families. A qualitative approach was adopted to capture the experiences of 15 mothers of preschool aged children (3 – 5 years). Thematic analysis revealed a number of themes, the most important across the group being the notion of trust. This research also sought the perspectives of preschool aged children. In total 10 children were interviewed. A clear theme emerged from the child interviews around the importance of feeling connected with an adult worker at the centre they attended. This research also supports the importance of resisting the common practice of viewing Indigenous families as a homogeneous group.*

Introduction and Literature Review

Early childhood education and care is an issue high on the current political agenda in Australia as the Rudd Government pursues initiatives to invest in early childhood services. Their goal is to achieve

affordable universal access to quality early childhood programs for all four year old children by the year 2013 (Gillard & McKew, 2008).

These government initiatives have been driven by the ever growing body of research to support that quality early childhood education potentially contributes to positive outcomes for both children and their families. Participation in quality early childhood settings may significantly enhance a child's general developmental outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and promote the development of their cognitive, language, social and pre-academic skills (Burchinal et al., 2000; Harrison & Ungerer, 2000; Wake et al., 2008). The benefits of early childhood settings extend to families and whole communities as engagement provides parenting respite, information, social networks and models of positive adult-child interaction (Press et al., 2006; Scott et al., 2005). Early childhood services are one important element in addressing issues of equity and social inclusion and a key combatant to disadvantage and a lack of social cohesion (National Health and Hospital Reform Commission, 2008; Vinson, 2007; Yuksel & Turner, 2008).

Given the research and policy emphasis on the importance of early childhood education, it is concerning that Indigenous Australian families have low levels of engagement. The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services Provision (SCRGSP, 2009) distinguishes between *enrolment* rates and *attendance* rates. They recently reported that the enrolment of Indigenous children in early childhood services is quite high. Nationally, the representation of Indigenous children in preschools (4.9%) is very similar to their representation in the wider community (4.5%). Figures from NSW show more of a discrepancy, with Indigenous children representing 3.7% of children in preschools and 4.1% of children in the wider community. Nonetheless, the enrolment of Indigenous children is comparable to the enrolment rates of the wider community. These recent figures from SCRGSP (2009) are very encouraging as reports on earlier figures cite much lower enrolment rates (e.g. Australian Education Union, 2007; Biddle, 2007; Dockett et al., 2007; Kronemann, 2007). The profound differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children come when examining the SCRGSP (2009) figures related to attendance rates. The national figures indicate that there are high levels of non-attendance by Indigenous children (34.5%) compared to non-Indigenous children (16.2%). Whilst there may not be barriers to enrolment for Indigenous children, there certainly seem to be barriers to participation.

There has been some research within the Australian context that has contributed to an understanding of the low participation rates of Indigenous families, and highlighted the importance of understanding the potential incongruence between the culture of an early childhood setting and the cultures of different

Indigenous groups. The cultural barriers that have been discussed within the literature are summarised below.

i. *Fear* that engagement within early childhood settings will undermine Aboriginal culture. Parents may see early childhood settings as “purveyors of the dominant macro-culture” (De Gioia et al., 2003). Indigenous parents may also fear being observed and having their child removed from them. This fear is founded both on historical context and current practices. We know, for example, that Aboriginal children are still six times more likely to be removed from their homes than non-Aboriginal children (SNAICC, 2002).

ii. Indigenous parents may feel *judged and misunderstood* because of their ways of communicating with each other and some of their cultural practices, such as sleeping with their babies (Andrews, 2008).

iii. Non-Indigenous professionals may make *misguided and offensive* attempts at teaching Indigenous culture. It is essential that early childhood professionals consult with local elders and communities (SDN, 2005).

iv. Lack of respect for *Aboriginal ways of knowing*. It is important to embrace a notion of ‘multi-literacies’ in which knowledge is passed down through songs, poems, stories, dance and music (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; Power, 2004; Townsend-Cross, 2004).

v. Lack of respect for *kinship networks*. Kinship is not only about the connections, but also the roles that people play. For example, an older child may take pride in their responsibility in caring for younger kin, making the common practice in early childhood settings of dividing children according to age group quite inappropriate (Ford & Fasoli, 2001).

vi. Early childhood staff may not understand *Aboriginal childhood* and the expectations associated with this. For example, if a child has been taught that all possessions should be shared it may be confusing when they are required to ask permission before using someone else’s things (DEST, 2001).

vii. Parents may avoid early childhood settings because of a concern that their children may experience *racism* within this setting. Staff and other children may make racist remarks (Cassady et al., 2005) or stigmatise the child as the result of stereotypes (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

viii. Lack of *Aboriginal leadership and involvement* (Biddle, 2007; Cassady et al., 2005; Pocock, 2002; Windisch et al., 2003).

Concern about the engagement of Indigenous families with early childhood services led to attempts to overcome the barriers. One very significant initiative to begin addressing the imbalance was the implementation of Multifunctional

Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). Established in 1987, MACS centres have provided an array of services to Indigenous Australian children and families including child care, playgroups and parent support (Sims et al., 2008). Many Indigenous families have accessed MACS centres over the last 22 years, and the establishment of these centres is potentially the most important contributor to the decrease in the discrepancy between the rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous enrolment in early childhood services. However, as stated earlier, a strong discrepancy still exists in relation to active participation rates. Not all Indigenous families have access to a MACS centre, and not all Indigenous families will necessarily want to engage with MACS centres. Because MACS centres exist does not diminish in any way the responsibility of all early childhood services to provide a culturally safe and relevant learning environment for all children and families, including Indigenous children and their families.

The research presented here contributes to the existing body of knowledge in exploring the barriers to participation for Indigenous families. It seeks to increase understanding by exploring parent perspectives and their experiences related to engaging with early childhood settings. This research makes a particularly unique contribution by including the perspectives of children and seeking to understand engagement from their point of view.

Methods and Procedure

The research presented here is part of a much larger study examining the barriers to participation in early childhood settings for 100 disadvantaged families across NSW. Within the larger sample of 100 there were 15 families who identified themselves as Indigenous. This paper presents the qualitative thematic findings from the interviews with these 15 families and their pre-school aged children.

Recruitment

Posters and pamphlets advertising the research project were sent to early childhood settings, NSW Department of Community Services offices, playgroups, parenting programs and non-Government family support programs in targeted areas across NSW (Mt Druitt, Wollongong, Nowra, Broken Hill, Bathurst, Taree and Tweed Heads). These areas were selected because they have been identified as disadvantaged in the Vinson report (2007), and to ensure a sample representative of suburban, rural and remote locations. In addition, some Indigenous academics from Warawara- Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, distributed pamphlets throughout their own Indigenous

networks. Interested families were invited to return an expression of interest slip in a reply paid envelope to the research team. Recruitment only commenced once the research had been approved through the Macquarie University human ethics committee.

Methods

The parent interview

Interviews were arranged for a time and place most convenient to the family. In most instances the interview was conducted in the family home. Wherever possible the interviews with Indigenous families were conducted by an Indigenous researcher (the first author on this paper). In the case of four families, the interview was conducted by a non-Indigenous researcher because it was not known in advance that the family was Indigenous. In each case families were asked if they would like to reschedule the interview with an Indigenous researcher, and in each case the families said that they were happy to go ahead with the non-Indigenous researcher. Families who were and were not enrolled in early childhood services were invited to participate as it was important to capture a diversity of experiences.

Interviews began with the completion of a questionnaire which gathered demographic information and rated level of satisfaction with services. This was followed by a semi-structured interview. The parent interview guide was developed using Ecocultural theory (Gallimore & Goldeberg, 1993). This theory focuses on daily activity settings as the critical units of analysis, and seeks to understand how families construct their lives in a way that is sustainable and meaningful to them (Weisner, Matheson, Coots & Bernheimer, 2005). Applying an ecocultural approach meant that we started with the hypothesis that families would only engage with early childhood settings if their daily routines and activities accommodated ongoing engagement, and if they attached enough meaning to these settings that they were willing to develop routines around engagement. Interviews, therefore, focused on the ways in which families organised their daily lives, and how they assigned meaning to their activities.

Some examples of the questions included: What does a typical day look like in your family? Who is responsible for most of the decisions about the children? Do you access any services for your children and, if so, why did you decide to use these services? What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of using early childhood services? Who are the people who help you most as a parent? The interview schedule was reviewed by the first author who is an Indigenous researcher, and piloted on three Indigenous families.

The child interview

With the permission of the parent, children aged 3 – 5 years were invited to participate in an interview. The purpose of the interview was explained to the child in simple terms (for example “I am wanting to talk to children so that I can learn more about what they do in their day”). The interview proceeded only when the child gave their verbal consent. Children were assured that they could stop the interview at any time and that there were no right or wrong answers. The interview took place in the presence of the parent, and in a location chosen by the child (e.g. sitting on the lounge-room floor). Before the interview commenced the researcher took time to build rapport with the children by chatting with the child about general things (e.g. asking the child about a toy they were playing with) or playing a game the child invited them to play. The children were asked if they would like the researcher to answer any questions they might have, and these questions were answered in a manner respectful to the child. The interviews were conducted in a very flexible and conversational manner, with the researcher taking the lead from the child as much as possible.

The interview with the child was also built on Ecocultural theory, and so the focus was on daily routines. Questions included: What do you like to do during the day? Can you tell me about what happens when you arrive at preschool (if relevant)? What are your favourite things to do at preschool (if relevant)? Is there anything you don't like to do? For a full description of the development of the child interview and discussion of ethical issues relating to the participation of children in research please see Grace & Bowes (in press).

Data analysis

All demographic data was entered into, and analysed by, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. All interviews were analysed using a two-stage process known as ‘constant comparative analysis’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare and contrast between and within each interview. First, each interview was analysed individually and the main themes within the interview identified. Second, themes from individual interviews were compared across all of the interviews to establish common themes, identify variations in the themes, and consider the grouping of families according to different variables (e.g. looking at whether or not there was a clear division in themes between those families who did and did not attend early childhood services, or grouping around the importance given to cultural identity, etc.). This two-stage process resulted in an in-depth analysis of each participant's interview while developing a thematic structure. Both of the researchers leading this project independently analysed all of the interviews, and then came together to establish agreement on the primary themes.

Participants

Fifteen parents participated in this interview. In every case the parent who nominated themselves to be interviewed was the mother. One of the mothers was not the biological parent but was the long-term foster carer of the children. The average age of the mothers was 33.8 years (range: 19-46). There were 18 children who served as the target children in this research because they fit within the 3 – 5 year age range. Eight were male and ten female. The average age of the target children was 3.6 years. Of these, only 10 participated in an interview. Six children were not interviewed because they were not present at the time arranged for the researcher to visit the family home. The two foster children in this study did not participate because of concern about the appropriate avenues in terms of establishing consent. The participating children are noted in Table 1 with a tick. A summary of the family demographic details is presented in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis: The parent interviews

The themes arising from the analysis of the family interviews are represented in Diagram 1. In discussing the barriers and facilitators to participation in early childhood services for these families, four main themes were identified. The most dominant theme was trust, and it became very clear that all of the issues pertinent to engagement in an early childhood setting were filtered for families through the lens of trust. Perhaps the strongest overarching finding of this research was that it is not meaningful to group Indigenous families together and assume that there are any elements that are always barriers for families. This research found that a barrier for one family may not serve as a barrier for another family, and may even be a facilitator.

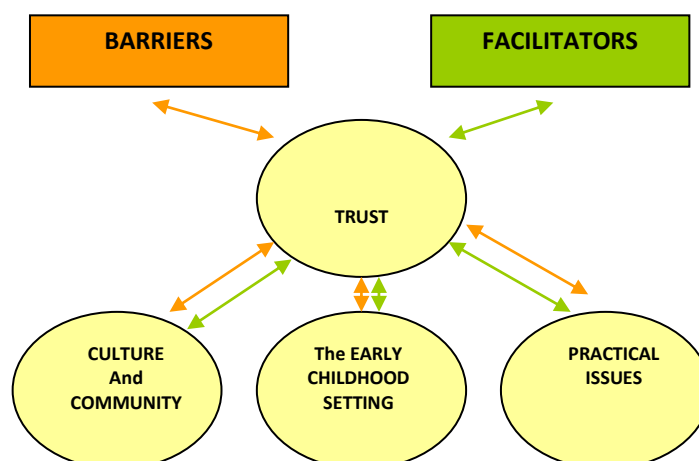


Diagram 1: Themes from the family interviews

The four main themes from the family interviews are discussed below.

Trust

It is fair to say that the issue of trust was dominant in all of the family interviews. Not surprisingly, every parent wanted their child to be with early childhood workers that they could trust. The differences lie in how families decided who was worthy of their trust and who was not.

Trust in the local Indigenous community and kinship networks

Some families felt that it was much easier to establish a trusting relationship with carers who were also Indigenous (e.g. families 1, 2 and 7).

“Aboriginal people like to see an Aboriginal face.” (Karen)

Trust in the early childhood setting was even stronger if a relative worked in the centre.

“It’s good she has an Auntie there, so she knows she’s got family there. . . It’s a big trust thing!” (Karen)

They argued that Indigenous preschools should be more widely available or that an Indigenous early childhood worker should be employed in every mainstream centre.

The importance of Indigenous early childhood workers to the engagement of Indigenous families is supported in research. For example, Biddle (2007) found that an Indigenous early childhood worker at an early childhood centre is likely to increase the number of Indigenous children attending preschool. However, less than 30 percent of Indigenous children live in areas where there is an Indigenous early childhood worker (Biddle 2007).

Trust born out of perceptions of competence

Just as many families dismissed this notion (e.g. families 3, 8 and 9). They emphasised quality of care and establishing relationships of trust with workers based on their perceptions of competence. These families did not want to link Aboriginality with quality of care and trust at all.

“All I care about is quality for my child . . . It’s not about the skin colour it’s about the individual person . . . I try to take everyone for who and what they are.” (Anna)

Another interesting finding to emerge from the interviews was parent gauging of worker trustworthiness based on the feelings of their child. Kim, for example, worried that “something might be going on” because her child was so unhappy

and “cried and cried and cried” every day. On this basis, Kim removed her son Harry from the mainstream centre and has decided not to engage with early childhood settings at all. When Rachel was asked how she felt about the family day carer of her children she said that she trusted the carer because “the girls are really happy there”. It is important not to underestimate the role of the child and their behaviour in the decision making of their parents.

Culture and Community

Closely linked to issues of trust were those associated with culture and the local Indigenous community. Research shows that cultural knowledge can contribute to building resilience in young children (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009). Whilst acknowledging the validity of this claim, the results of this research emphasise the importance of acknowledging that Indigenous families perceive cultural knowledge in many different ways.

Early childhood settings as spaces of cultural learning

There were some families who demonstrated in their narrative a strong commitment to instilling their Aboriginal culture in their children. For example, Tracey said that her most important message to her children is; “Be strong in yourself in your culture.” When Tracey was asked what she does at home to assist her son Adoni with his learning Tracey spoke of working with him in the garden, a response which surprised the non-Indigenous member of the research team who had become so accustomed to parents speaking about reading books and practicing the alphabet to enhance their child’s learning. Tracey’s focus was clearly very different as she encouraged her child to learn through the working of their land.

Karen also expressed the importance of teaching her children to internalise their culture. She said that she takes her children at least once or twice a year back to where her “mob is from.” She says; “You always need to go back home and put your feet on the ground”. Karen’s father puts mud from the river on his grandchildren’s faces and tells them stories. The children love these trips and have been able to use them to help explain their culture to the other children in their classrooms. On one such trip they took the school’s stuffed wombat with them. They took pictures of themselves holding the wombat standing in the dried up river with mud on their faces. They journaled their experiences and were able to present all of this to the class.

The families who gave focus to their cultural background sought early childhood programs that also valued and incorporated Aboriginal language, stories, and artefacts. Karen was able to find this kind of learning for her children within a mainstream centre. She felt committed to engaging with this centre as she

believed that she had an important role to play in building cultural understanding amongst all of the children.

“Isn’t it all about reconciliation? We’re all going to have to come together at some time, so start early . . . I remember when I went to primary school and that’s where the racism starts because young kids don’t know enough about it, Aboriginal culture. It needs to start early, it needs to start in early day care services. That’s where the education has got to start.” (Karen)

Early childhood settings as arms of the “welfare board”

For families like those described above it is the culture and the local Indigenous community that leads parents to want to send their children along to preschool, particularly Indigenous preschools. For others, a close link to the local Indigenous community may serve as a barrier to participation in early childhood settings. For example, Linda spoke of the difficulties in encouraging families from the “mish” [mission] to come along to preschool. One of the families from the “mish” had used the service, but then had her children removed by DoCS. The families suspected that it was the preschool that reported the mother to DoCS. They linked this setting with the “welfare board” and did not want to leave themselves vulnerable by sending their own children along.

There were other families who deliberately sought to separate themselves from their culture and from the local Indigenous community. This included rejecting any form of engagement with Aboriginal preschools. For example, similar to those families described above, Marlee made a link between formal services and DoCS. The difference is that this link caused Marlee to avoid contact with both Aboriginal services and the broader Indigenous community. Soon after having one of her babies Marlee went to an Aboriginal Health Service attached to the local public hospital seeking help because she was concerned about her own emotional well-being. Professionals from this service reported Marlee to DoCS and Marlee had to fight to retain custody of her children.

“So I don’t get help from Aboriginal anyone . . .they just pinpoint ya!”
(Marlee)

Challenging the relevance of culture

An important aspect that is often overlooked in the literature is the fact that Indigenous people have a choice about their association with Indigenous communities. Indigenous Australians are not homogenous and it is inappropriate for research literature to carry that assumption. For example, Walker and Shepherd (2008) argue that Aboriginal families and the local Indigenous community are intricately linked. Whilst this is true for many Indigenous families, it is important to understand that this is not necessarily the case for all

Indigenous families. For example, Charlotte explained “I don’t really call on them [the Indigenous community]. Some of the things you just handle yourself you know.”

Anna stood out because she questioned the relevance of culture and community in her own decision making. Anna said that she does not teach her children of Aboriginal culture or kinship, and does not see the importance of attending services that cater specifically to Indigenous people. She says that she hopes her children will be loved for who they are and not defined by their background.

Extended Family

It is important to note that all but two families who participated in this study spontaneously emphasised the role of their extended family in offering advice and information. These parents will go to their extended family for information in relation to their parenting and decision making before they will seek guidance from any professionals. It is fair to say that decisions about engagement with early childhood services are heavily influenced by the larger extended family. Both of the families (3 and 5) who did not speak of family support were asked where they got support from, both responded that they had no support. Jeannie responded to this question with a one word answer; “Nowhere!”

The Early Childhood Setting

There were aspects of the early childhood setting beyond culture that served as barriers and facilitators for families.

Learning

Whilst some families expressed very little interest in the formal learning of their children, others saw the development of pre-academic skills as a priority. Merinda perhaps captured this sentiment best.

“But now I make sure I read her a book every night before we go to bed because I really want her to be not like me. I’m not a big reader. I don’t like to read a lot, but she’s really interested in books so I read to her every night so she’ll still be interested in books when she goes to school.”
(Merinda)

Friendships

Most of the families saw the early childhood setting as an important place for their child to be able to develop friendships. Kim’s discussion of friendships was quite different. She described her son, Harry, as being very shy when he went to preschool, and much more comfortable in engaging with other children in

informal settings. Unlike the other parents Kim felt that preschool was bad for her son's socialisation.

Individual attention and a special connection

There was widespread concern about the ability of early childhood staff to give the children the individual attention they need.

"There were too many kids and not enough teachers. He would stand there looking at them for help but they were too busy with others." (Kim)

"Sometimes he was in a soaked nappy when I picked him up, and another time they left his jumper on him all day on a hot day and he got the worst heat rash." (Tracey)

"I fear that these people can get taught to look after her but will they really care to look after her? To them it's probably a very blasé thing but it's not to me . . . how can they have, like, twenty children in their class and two teachers and keep tabs on all those children and their special needs?" (Anna)

These fears were relieved for parents whose children had developed a particularly strong connection with one teacher. This is once again, strongly linked to the notion of trust, in that it is about trusting that there is someone in the setting who has a personal relationship with their child and cares about them. Tracey, for example, described the relationship between her son and a male worker at the preschool. Adoni "looks for this worker when he arrives, and does not want to leave if he is doing something with this worker in the afternoon."

Practical Issues

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Biddle, 2007) this research found that transport, cost and other practical issues potentially influenced attendance at an early childhood centre.

Transport

A bus is clearly an important centre resource. In this study, only the two families (1 and 2) who attended Aboriginal centres spoke of access to a bus, and only family no. 2 used the bus regularly. The importance of the bus to the attendance of the children was demonstrated most clearly by Tracey when she spoke of the bus temporarily being out of service whilst they trained a new driver, and the class sized halving in direct relation to the bus not running.

Marlee also talked about how essential the bus is in getting her children to and from preschool. A closer look at Marlee's narrative does prompt questions about whether or not there are disadvantages to using this service. Marlee demonstrated a distinct lack of knowledge about the routines of the early childhood centre, what the children do during the day, and how the children experience their own participation. She acknowledged that there are times when the preschool has invited all the parents in to activities at the centre, however Marlee says that she never goes along. It is difficult to know whether this lack of knowledge and parental engagement is something that would be the case for Marlee under any circumstances, or whether it is a reflection of rarely being present in the centre herself. We understand from the literature that the benefits of engagement with an early childhood centre extend far beyond the benefits in attendance for the child, to benefits for the family as a whole in terms of providing information, support and modelling of effective parenting behaviour. The question that arises from this particular case study is whether or not using a bus essentially alienates a parent from the setting. Perhaps it is a choice between at least having the child engage and no family engagement at all, in which case a bus service is very important. It also prompts questions around what services might and/or could do to reduce the possibility of parent disengagement despite child attendance.

Most of the parents did not have access to a bus and did not express a desire for access. Merinda said that she would not use the bus even if there was one available "because I know in my car she's a lot safer."

Food

Tracey and Linda both felt frustrated by the restrictions placed on food within an early childhood setting. Tracey explained that the children are not allowed juice, muesli bars, processed meat or dried fruit at her child's centre. She finds it difficult to think of what to send in her son's lunch box, and worries that this might be a very big issue for families with minimal financial resources.

"You can't always cook up a side of side of silverside so it makes it really hard!" (Tracey).

Hours

The limited hours of the child care settings was another wide-spread concern for families. Some families were juggling between multiple settings and carers to be able to cover the time they needed. Tracey said that she needs to leave work early to pick her son up. Jeannie has to arrive late at work because of the opening time of the centre. For a period of time Rachel had to shuffle her children between two different Family Day Care settings to obtain the hours of care she

needed for her children. To quote Rachel: “Child care doesn’t cater for shift workers!”

Cost

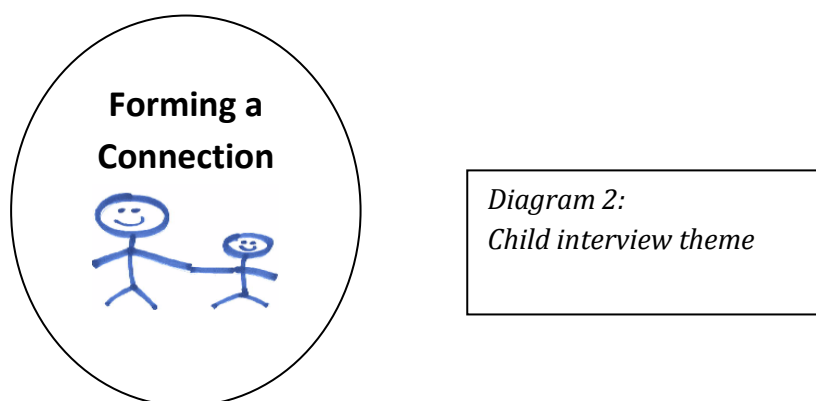
For Kim, an important factor in the decision not to send Harry to preschool related to the cost.

“I thought, I can’t be paying that! . . . It’s a struggle day by day.” (Kim)

Other mothers also complained about the cost of early childhood services (e.g. Rachel and Karen). Merinda took a different view and argued that the main problem was not cost but parental understanding of the importance of early childhood services to their child’s development. She pointed out that there are a range of services and a range of price options. Merinda felt that if it was important enough to a family they would be able to find a centre that worked with their budget. This argument only holds in local areas where there are a number of different options, and for families who do not need to access multiple care settings in order to maintain their hours of work.

Thematic Analysis: The Child Interviews

Whilst the children touched briefly and inconsistently on a range of issues, such as whether or not they have friends, there was only one clear theme that emerged from the child interviews, and that is the importance for the child of having a strong and positive connection with at least one of the adult carers (see diagram 2).



Forming a connection

When asked about going along to preschool both Conrad and Karla (family 2) and Hannah (family 5) spontaneously mention before anything else their favourite teachers. Hannah in particular talks about how much she loves one of her teachers, and identifies this teacher as her best and only friend at preschool.

The most marked expression of this theme came in the interview with Girra (family 3). Girra had significant expressive language delay. As soon as the researcher asked him about his family day care setting Girra grinned and excitedly repeated in a sing-song voice the word “dubbadubba”. This is the word he used to refer to one of the two carers in his day care setting. “Dubbadubba” was happily and affectionately said over and over in response to most questions until the researcher reminded Girra that he had another carer as well. At the mention of the other carers name the entire disposition of the child changed dramatically. He stopped saying “dubbadubba” and instantly became quiet, serious and subdued, shaking his head and taking on a facial expression of concern. When the researcher returned to the topic of his favourite carer once again Girra’s eyes lit up and he returned to giggling and lovingly saying “dubbadubba”.

Conclusion

This research represents a relatively small number of participants. Future research will expand on this research by seeking to consult with a larger number of parents and children, including the gathering of father perspectives.

Despite its limitations, this research offers a contribution to the growing body of knowledge relating to the views of Indigenous Australian families about early childhood services. Barriers that are often highlighted within the literature, such as the cost of childcare, lack of Indigenous early childhood workers and the inclusion of culture within the childcare setting, were also important themes within this research, although it should be noted that these issues were not identified as important by all of the participating mothers.

The notion of trust emerged as the dominant theme within the thematic analysis. None of the participants were asked any direct questions specifically relating to trust, yet they all spontaneously identified trust as a pivotal issue that could act as either a barrier or facilitator in their childcare choices. Trust could be established in a number of different ways. For some trust was established because the workers were Indigenous, or because a relative worked in the centre. For others trust was built upon worker qualifications or decided on the basis of the child’s reactions to the centre. In both the parent and child

interviews, the importance of having at least one person with whom the child had a strong connection was viewed as imperative to a satisfying experience with early childhood services and a guiding factor in the child care choices made by the families. Future publications will discuss in detail the implications of this finding for practice.

Perhaps the most important message of this research is that all Indigenous families are not the same. What they value in a service and how they make their decisions will vary from one family to the next. This message was perhaps captured most effectively in a comment from an Indigenous early childhood worker with whom we were discussing this research. She said: "Everyone thinks it's rocket science, but it isn't. I look at people sometimes and think, I don't think I'm an alien. I don't think I come from another planet". It is very important that both researchers and practitioners take care to never assume homogeneity amongst Indigenous families.

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Table 1. Summary of family demographic data

Family No.	Mother (pseudonym)	Mother's Age	Mother Education	Mother Employment	Child (pseudonym)	Child Interview	Early Childhood Services	Family type	Area
1	Tracey	37	Yr 12	Part-time	Adoni (4 year old boy)	×	Preschool (2 days per week)	Extended family	Rural
2	Marlee	23	Yr 10	Home duties	Conrad (3 year old boy)	✓	Preschool (both children, 2 days per week)	Single-parent	Rural
					Kala (4 year old girl)	✓			
3	Jeannie	34	Yr 12	Full-time	Girra (3 year old boy)	✓	Long Day Care (4 days per week)	Two-parent	Suburban
4	Yvonne (Foster Mum)	46	TAFE	Home duties	Jack (3 year old boy)	×	Long Day Care (both children, 4 days per week)	Two-parent	Suburban
					Ethan (4 year old boy)	×			
5	Linda	44	Yr 10	Home duties	Hannah (5 year old girl)	✓	Preschool (2 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural
6	Rachel	28	TAFE	Full-time	Skye (3 year old girl)	✓	Family Day Care (4 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural
7	Karen	29	TAFE	Part-time	Arika (4 year old girl)	×	Long Day Care (2 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural
8	Anna	26	Yr 12	Full-time	Joy (3 year old girl)	×	Family Day Care (3.5 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural
9	Merinda	19	Yr 10	Part-time	Mariah (3 year old girl)	✓	Preschool (1 day per week) Long Day Care (1 day per week)	Extended family	Rural
10	Charlotte	36	University	Home duties	Lily (3 year old girl)	×	None	Two-parent	Rural
11	Jacinta	38	Year 10	Home duties	Arabella (4 year old girl)	×	Preschool (both children, 2.5 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural

					Lucas (4 year old boy)	×			
12	Kim	33	Yr 9	Home duties	Harry (4 year old boy)	✓	None	Single-parent	Rural
13	Alana	39	TAFE	Home duties	Nina (3 year old girl)	✓	None	Two-parent	Rural
14	Pauline	39	Yr 10	Home duties	Michael (3 year old boy)	✓	None	Single-parent	Remote
15	Kylie	37	Yr 12	Self-employed	Merran (5 year old girl)	✓	Long Day Care (2 days per week)	Two-parent	Rural