Quality in children’s services - ‘Yarning’ with parents in the Indigenous Child Care Choices (ICCC) study

Jennifer Bowes
Rosalind Kitson
Natalie Burns
Macquarie University
jennifer.bowes@mq.edu.au

Abstract
The voices of Indigenous families living in the Sydney area are central to this paper, as they take part in yarning sessions about their young aged children. In the yarning sessions they talked about their experiences of early childhood education. The common themes of yarning sessions with 27 city families are presented as first findings of a research project involving close to 100 families across NSW. Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families is a project that has been underway over the last five years, funded by the NSW Department of Community Services. There has been little research on current patterns of child care for young Indigenous children or the attitudes of parents about what is important for them in early childhood programs. Using the culturally appropriate methodology of yarning, this project has yielded rich information about quality early childhood provision from the viewpoint of Aboriginal parents living in the city.

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we yarnd and worked with Aboriginal families to gain greater knowledge and understanding of what is needed for improved present experiences and futures for Aboriginal children and families.

We wish to acknowledge and thank many people and organizations who contributed to the Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families Study. First we are greatly indebted to the communities who listened to us, gave their permission and actively assisted us in carrying out this research. We are very grateful also to the families who participated, spending many hours yarning and telling us about their children and their experiences with children’s services and with bringing up their children. The relationships built between researchers and communities and between field researchers and families over the period of the study were strong and the basis for families sharing with us important insights and experiences about the raising of Aboriginal children in NSW.

Introduction
The provision of “culturally appropriate, accessible and affordable” education and care is a serious issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Brennan, 1998, p.5; Bamblett, 2007). This paper reports the voices of Indigenous parents and grandparents raising children aged under five years as they yarn about their experiences and their children’s experiences of children’s services and about the features of children’s services that are important to them. In this way, the paper provides a window into what matters most in children’s services for these city-based families and the features that they see as representing quality provision for their children and for their families. The intention is to make the voices of Indigenous families visible and valued in planning early childhood services. The paper also gives an example of the use of yarning as a research methodology.

The Child Care Choices of Indigenous Families project was commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services to gain an understanding of why there is such a low representation of Indigenous children attending children’s services across New South Wales. The information presented in this paper is for the urban families in a larger study that involved yarning with over 100 Indigenous families in urban, regional and rural NSW and the input of a large team of researchers.

Background to the project
In 2004, the Department of Community Services commissioned the Child Care Choices research team to undertake a project on Indigenous families that addressed some of the same experiences about services with child care and early childhood education that were being asked in Child Care Choices, a longitudinal study of over 600 young children and their families begun in 2002 in urban and rural areas of NSW. It was recognised that the research methods used in the Child Care Choices study were not suitable for a study of Indigenous families with its reliance on surveys, phone interviews and child assessments.

The challenge for this project was to develop research methods that were appropriate and that would engage families so that their voices could be heard authentically. This challenge has been a central concern of the project. The decision to use yarning as the central methodology will be discussed more fully later in the paper.

1The research team comprised Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University. The authors of this paper, Jennifer Bowes, Rosalind Kitson and Natalie Burns from Macquarie University, worked with a team of field researchers to collect information from families in three suburbs in the Sydney area. Fellow researchers from Charles Sturt University, Tracey Simpson, Jo-Anne Reid, Laurie Crawford Sophia Pearce and Melissa Smith, worked with a large team of community-based field researchers as they conducted the study in over ten regional and remote locations in NSW. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all of the research team members and Indigenous community members to the research and thinking behind the current paper.

We began this study with the knowledge that only 1.5 percent of Indigenous children use child care under the NSW children’s services program, despite representing 4.2 percent of the under-12 population (ABS, 2001). This issue has been of central concern for policy makers in state and Australian government sectors. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs Taskforce (MCEEYTA, 2001) and Nakata (2002) acknowledge that while in recent years work has been done to make programs more inclusive, much remains to be done. Inclusive practice is a matter of social justice and equity (Moss 2007) and MacNaughton (2003, p.290) has warned against a “one size fits all” approach.

At national level, in recognition of the significance of early childhood education for all children, COAG (2006) stated that an outcome of the Human Capital reform agenda will be that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children is closed. While the productivity assumptions in relation to early childhood services for Indigenous children underlying the COAG agenda are questionable, the issue remains that Indigenous children do not have the same access to early childhood education as do non-Indigenous children in Australia. Prochner’s (2004) study of early childhood programs for Indigenous children in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand indicated that while increasing attention has been given to the importance of early childhood education, less has been given to Indigenous programs.

The priority for equity and equality of access to pre-school services for Indigenous children is clear in The National Goals for Indigenous Education (DEEWR, 2008). Many government reports recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are the most educationally disadvantaged group in the country (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; Cassady, Fleet, Hughes & Kitson-Charleston, 2005; Press & Hayes, 2000; Purdie, Tripcony & Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000) and Gordon (2006) asserts that education at the early childhood stage is of particular concern because both parent and child are less visible, especially in remote communities where the child may not have access to early childhood facilities (p.77).

Previous studies on reasons for Indigenous families not enrolling their young children in children’s services have identified a range of factors. A DETE survey in South Australia cited in MCEETYA (2001) found that the majority of the families who accessed services indicated it was for educational advantage (75%), mixing with children outside of the family (33%), and providing children with the opportunity to interact with other children (10%). The
study highlighted the importance of personal relationships and cultural factors in decision-making and the provision of quality care. The most highly discussed reason for not participating was lack of recognition of Aboriginal culture and negative attitudes towards Indigenous families. Other reasons included restrictions on children’s freedom and the availability of extended family care arrangements.

A number of barriers to participation in formal care have been identified. These include practical issues such as accessibility and lack of awareness of the availability of services as well as distrust of early childhood services and fear of racism (DEST, 2005; De Gioia, Hayden & Hadley, 2003). In a study of one rural child care service, De Gioia et al. (2003) found that a significant constraint to participating in early childhood services was a lack of knowledge within the Aboriginal community about the services available and what they had to offer.

Accessibility has been found to be a major barrier to participation for Indigenous families. This can involve availability of services in the area, cost of the service, and a lack of transport or the cost of transport to take children to and from services (Biddle, 2007; Cassady et al., 2005; De Gioia et al., 2003; Hutchins et al., 2007; Kronemann, 2007; AECG/DET, 2004; Press & Hayes, 2000). A Victorian study identified aspects that fail to support the strengths of the Indigenous community

- Services that are not respectful of Aboriginal people
- A poor understanding of the cultural history of Aboriginal people
- The inability of services to work with Aboriginal people in a way that strengthens their ability to participate in mainstream health and educational programs

(Early Childhood Australia, 2008, p. 10)

The history of black and white relations in this country, particularly the Stolen Generations, is a major barrier to Indigenous participation in early childhood services (De Gioia, et al. 2003). As suggested by De Gioia et al., many Aboriginal people believe that early childhood settings are purveyors of the dominant macro-culture (p. 11) and distrust them for that reason. Aboriginal families in their study reported that they wanted exposure to Aboriginal culture for their young children (p. 5). Because of mistrust based on history, early childhood services are not regarded as safe or appropriate by many Indigenous families and are seen as white fella places (Bourke et al., 2000; Butterworth & Candy, 1998). Many Indigenous parents have had very negative experiences with formal schooling and wish to spare their child similar experiences, even though they value education (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; Cassady et al., 2005; AECG/DET, 2004).

Limited family involvement in service planning and delivery has been cited as another key barrier to Indigenous families accessing early childhood services (DEST, 2001; De Gioia et al., 2003). Research indicates that Indigenous families are more comfortable using services that include the language and cultural practices of their communities and that have Indigenous staff members with specific local knowledge (DEST, 2001; Hutchins et al., 2007; AECG/DET, 2004). Reid and Santoro (2006) highlight the diversity and complexity of Indigenous cultures as they remind us of the many different Aboriginal nations existing in the country we know as Australia (p.148). Non-Indigenous staff members are seen as not understanding the culture and language that Indigenous parents want their children to learn.

Research questions

The research team took a social ecological and an appreciative enquiry approach to the study and framed the question about use of children's services in a broader question about different forms of education in the family and community as well as more formal educational settings in the years prior to school entry.

The key research questions were:

- What is the experience of Indigenous families in NSW raising children under school age?
- What knowledge and skills do Indigenous children develop in the years prior to school and hence bring to the transition to school?
• What are the reasons for the low proportion of Indigenous children in NSW children’s services and how can children’s and family services be more effective for Indigenous families?

This paper focuses on the third research question with some information about the first in relation to views about the importance of the early years of a child’s life and the learning that takes place during that time.

**Methodology**

**Yarning**

Yarning has been recommended in the literature as an appropriate and respectful way of engaging with Indigenous participants in a research or consultation process (Brown, Brands & White, 2002, Power, 2004, Atkinson n.d., Bessarab, 2008). It is seen as a culturally appropriate form of accessing and privileging Indigenous Knowledge. According to Bessarab, yarning has a number of strengths in Indigenous research. She notes that yarning facilitates in-depth discussions in a relaxed and open manner; provides a rich source of thick description; is a culturally safe process for Indigenous participants; allows the use of narrative in relaying information [and is] transferable across disciplines (Bessarab 2008).

Yarning involves talking around a topic without use of direct questions. Each yarning session was preceded by a statement that we were interested in yarning about the family’s preschool aged child, what they were like, what sorts of things they learned at home and in the community and their experiences with childcare, preschool or playgroups. Field researchers had a list of topics that we hoped would be covered during the yarning sessions and while sometimes the yarning would be steered in the direction of these topics, as far as possible direct questions were kept to a minimum.

**Recruitment of families**

Prior to yarning with the families, community consultations took place in each community over a 6-18 month period. The consultations involved meeting with key members and organisations in the Indigenous community and in early childhood and family services in the area. These included elders groups, Indigenous women’s groups, preschools, playgroups and child care centres. Discussions were held about the proposed study and the most appropriate ways of recruiting families to participate and how findings would be shared with the communities. The consultations were also seeking approval for the research to take place within that community. Recruitment of families differed in each site according to the recommendations given during community consultations. In most cases snowball sampling was used once initial families had been recruited via children’s services or community groups.

**Participants**

Twenty-seven families from three areas of Sydney participated in the study. These included nine families from an inner city suburb, ten families from an inner western suburb and eight families from a suburb in the outer west of Sydney. All had at least one child who had not yet started school. Details about the families and children are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Number of Families and Children in the Urban Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>No. Families</th>
<th>Mean no. Children in Family</th>
<th>Age Range of Children</th>
<th>Average Age of Focus Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner city</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2 mths-22 yrs</td>
<td>3.0 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner west</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>19 months-15 yrs</td>
<td>2.8 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer west</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>18mths-12 yrs</td>
<td>3.2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>2mths-22 yrs</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.0 yrs</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The families in the study represented a wide variety of family structures and types. In each of the three city areas there were single and multiple child families, families that had had experience in formal child care and those that had not, single-parent families (headed by mothers, fathers and grandmothers), families in which the parents were employed and unemployed and families with one or two parents who were Aboriginal.

Childcare services were used by a total of 23 of the families. This ranged from attending playgroup through to attending a long day care service for 50 hours per week. Eleven of the families were accessing preschool or long day care and the number of days children attended varied from one to five days. Ten families had children participating in playgroups and two families were accessing family day care.

In the yarning sessions most parents did not differentiate between preschool and long day care and the terms ‘preschool’ or ‘day care’ were used generically. Family Day Care and Playgroups were the two models that were identified as being different from preschool or long day care. In their discussions, families spoke about factors which would make child care more attractive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and factors that constrained or limited their participation. Unless otherwise specified by families, this chapter will use the generic term early childhood setting as used in the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, p. 8).

Procedure

Parents (generally mothers or grandmothers but also one father) took part in two yarning sessions of up to two hours in length with an Indigenous field researcher who had either established previous or developed new links with the community. Families’ wishes were respected in regard to who was present at the yarning sessions. Sometimes it was a mother and child only and at other times both parents were there along with other children or members of the extended family. At the end of the first yarning session on the early childhood years and experiences with children’s services, families were given a disposable camera to take photographs of their family and activities involving the preschool aged child at the centre of the yarning sessions. The photos formed a basis for discussion in the second session that was generally held within six months of the first.

Yarning sessions were transcribed and analysed. The findings showed clear patterns of attitudes and experiences among the urban families in relation to early childhood services.

Findings

Findings are presented in relation to the key themes that emerged in yarning sessions with the urban sample. Themes were: Learning and education in the early years; teaching children about culture; access, availability and participation in early childhood education and care; suggestions for ways forward; importance of family and community connections in services; and staff-family communication. Comments from the families are included throughout the findings in order to highlight their voices.

Learning and education in the early years

The yarning sessions indicated that families understood the importance of the early years in their child’s learning and development. Twenty of the families who participated in the study specifically commented on the significance of the early years in a general sense. Some of the reasons given included social interaction, development, including language development, as preparation for school and understanding routines. Developing independence and a sense of identity were also discussed. Another reason parents referred to was the provision of support for working parents. Four of the families made the following comments:

- “The early years are very important.”
- “That’s when most learning occurs.”
- “They are “the most important years. It moulds them.”
- “‘Cause that’s when they’re mainly learning everything.”
A majority of families, sixteen, specifically indicated that they viewed education as extremely important and gave reasons to support their views. They clearly indicated that they valued learning and education to give their children a better chance in life:

- “Childcare is important. You can’t provide everything for learning in the home.”
- “If you don’t get ‘em now when they’re young, for me it’s just like settin’ him for his educational life … so it won’t be such a struggle.”
- “Education is the way to put your stamp on society. If you are not educated, if you don’t have the knowledge it holds you back sometimes.”

**Teaching children about culture**

Learning about culture was a recurring theme in the yarning sessions. Ten families identified the need for their children to learn more about their culture. It was discussed in the context of home culture and of learning to be with others outside of the family and interacting with other cultures. One mother commented about cultural learning as a cross-cultural “both-ways” concept:

- “It’s good she can learn about everyone else’s culture and they can learn about hers.”
- “More Indigenous people would use services if culture was taught. It is about your heritage and your language.”
- “That’s when they learn everything, they learn the basics and it’s the best time to teach respect, knowledge, anything . . .”

**Access, availability and participation in early childhood education and care**

Families were aware and clearly identified issues that prevented or constrained their use of early learning settings. There was agreement concerning the issues that prevented families from participating. These included insufficient Indigenous involvement in the settings, cultural issues, and access. Access included cost, lack of vacancies and availability of transport. Nine families said it was too expensive, despite receiving subsidies. Five of the families indicated a lack of available places, four families referred to unavailability of transport and four families specifically referred to cultural issues and that early childhood settings did not teach Indigenous cultures. Parents supported their reasons with informative statements such as this comment from one parent about transport:

“Even if there was a really beautiful centre set up somewhere in Sydney, unless we’re able to get our kids there, the big chance is it’s gunna be empty.”

Families often felt misunderstood and not respected by staff in early childhood settings:

- “Just their attitudes, like I didn’t feel like I was welcome… I just got the feeling that I wasn’t wanted there or (they) didn’t need us.”
- “I feel like I’m a young mum and they’re constantly watching me. I don’t know if it’s just because I’m black or they do it to everybody.”

One parent raised the issue of lack of understanding of Aboriginal family culture and commitments and of feeling alienated by regulatory requirements. She described how she was questioned over her child’s absences:

“The lady said to me, ‘Oh [she] has had one, two, three – she’s had 24 days off this financial year. She has only got six left’. I said, ‘Look, just stop there. I’ll probably use them six up by the end of the year’ … but just that whole counting how many days she’s had off. It’s just like things go on in the family where if she doesn’t have to be in school, she doesn’t have to be there”.

**Suggestions for ways forward**

Families had strong views concerning what they valued and they had many suggestions for ways in which early childhood settings could be improved and made more attractive for Indigenous parents “get some Indigenous workers with backgrounds that understand the way Koori kids are”. This statement was supported by another parent who
said there is a need “for understanding workers who acknowledge that Aboriginal people may not send their child to care from time to time for family or cultural reasons”. More places for children and more affordable care were identified as essential to improving the situation. Other strategies included more Indigenous involvement and one parent identified the need for increased understanding “just to understand Aboriginal people and the way we are”.

The inclusion of cultural programs, the provision of transport, increased approachability of the setting and the staff, providing meals for children and encouraging family involvement were all discussed as positive ways forward by the families. One parent identified the need for more teachers and smaller group sizes and said, “it should be a ratio of 1:3 not 1:5. More staff are needed to give attention to children”. In a conversation about what the ideal child care would look like, another parent made the following comment about what she valued:

“It’d have to look like it was somewhere you’d like your kid to be . . . I reckon you’ve gotta walk in there and think yep, I’m comfortable leaving my child here.”

Importance of family and community connections in services

Eleven of the families made specific reference to significance of Indigenous staff and Indigenous participation in early childhood settings. Five families stated that more Aboriginal-operated early childhood settings should be established, giving reasons such as, “I’d rather put my kids into a Koori centre cause I know they would get looked after”. One father commented that he would like more Indigenous specific services and staff because “they look after the kids well – like family friends”.

A sense of feeling welcome and trust were major considerations for the families. The participants saw this as best achieved by having Indigenous staff to make families feel welcome in the centre “It was absolutely fabulous at the preschool. The uniform was red, yellow and black”. Another parent said, “Get some Indigenous workers with backgrounds that understand the way Koori kids are”. Discussions concerning Indigenous staff and feeling connected to the centre were central to many of the yarning sessions. This was commented on in regard to Indigenous connection to family and community. A father whose three children attended an early childhood setting acknowledged the significance of a strong family connection to the setting. It had been central to his family over the years, he had attended it as a young child and both he and the children’s mother now worked there.

• “If it were an Indigenous run centre I’d feel like it was a family thing ya know. Like they care about me and my family, not just my kids.”
• “It is better if there are other Aboriginal people. The centre where she started, they don’t know about Aboriginal connection to family. Now my aunty has started working two days at a centre she may be more comfortable there.”
• “We need more Aboriginal faces there … when you first walk in. They’ve gotta be comfortable. It doesn’t matter what school it is, preschool, day care, or whatever, you’ve got to be comfortable to be able to walk in, say whatever’s on your mind ya know, ask questions”.

Staff-family communication

As well as more engagement in settings families suggested it would be helpful to provide more information about their children’s progress. It is evident from the data that families want the management and staff of early childhood settings to consult with them in decision making processes. For example, one mother said:

“They tend to make the decisions and not know what the kids need. They don’t ask. It seems to me they don’t ask the carers what the children need. So they make a management decision which affects the kids because they haven’t gone to the families and carers.”

Another mother suggested that early learning settings should give parents information about the child’s individual growth and have more focus on education including the provision of “someone to work with children on their speech.” The following suggestion from a parent highlights the need for communication with families:
“Individual growth and maybe a book that sorta illustrates that through the years you know. Like you could take it home once a month, the book, but it shows everything that they’ve sorta gone through… and you could have parent input and things like that.”

Several suggestions were made of practical strategies to aid communication between staff and parents. One parent commented that there is “not enough communication about how individual children are developing.” Another parent suggested that offering parents some morning tea would encourage more communication and two parents indicated that providing lunch would be a supportive way to encourage participation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Before linking the findings to the literature, we wish to foreground the voices of the participants in the study by summarising the suggestions they made for improvements in children’s services.

Major points that families made were that early childhood services need to be made welcoming for Indigenous families and that the presence of Indigenous staff in services is a primary way to help make Indigenous families feel comfortable and welcome. Another suggested way to make services more welcoming is to invite parents into the centre rather than expect them to leave the children and go immediately themselves.

Cultural awareness and cultural competence training for non-Indigenous staff was seen as essential so that non-Indigenous staff members can understand the issues of Indigenous families and communicate effectively and appropriately with them.

Families also told us how important it was to include culture and language in the activities of the centre. This aspect was seen by Indigenous families as a key feature of quality in services that was seen only rarely. In order to inform parents about their children’s activities and development and establish a better relationship with them, families suggested that mechanisms for frequent service-family communication about children need to be instituted.

Families were also concerned about access to services in terms of cost, transport and places available. This last point is absolutely essential. Without access to services, families cannot benefit from any of the suggested improvements to services. Given access to services, families will attend if they are welcomed, invited in and talked with by staff, preferably Indigenous staff and understood by non-Indigenous staff.

This paper has provided an overview of the themes arising from the yarning sessions in a way that has allowed the voices of urban Indigenous families to be heard. Families clearly articulated the importance of education for their children’s future and of education in the early years in particular. Throughout the yarning sessions, the families told us of the importance of service staff understanding them and their culture and the need for culturally safe early childhood programs that honour diversity and respect Indigenous culture and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The families’ desire for early childhood settings that provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, staffed with Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous staff with cultural understanding and competence was strongly stated. Families also shared suggestions for ways that early learning programs could be structured to be more culturally responsive to the needs of Indigenous families and wanted more access to services as parents and more communication with staff about their children.

Identity and culture were central to the experiences and suggestions related to us by the families. These concepts have been discussed extensively in the literature on what it means to be Aboriginal (Martin, 2005, 2007a) and how the education system needs to incorporate identity and culture throughout the education system (Harrison, 2008; Martin, 2007b; Phillips, 2006). What the families in this research have added to this discussion are practical suggestions about how this might be achieved through introduction of diverse activities into the early childhood setting and though ways of developing and strengthening relationships between staff and children and staff and families.

Many of the stories families told us about staff attitudes and their own fears of being judged by staff and other parents in early childhood centres reflect the racism present in Australian society (Cowlishaw, 2004). Early childhood education is a prime site for beginning
to combat racist attitudes in new generations of Australians (Davis, Gunn, Purdue & Smith, 2007; Glover, 2001). This project gives some direction to how young Indigenous children can have a more inclusive start to their educational life.

The findings from the study contain valuable information for early childhood services and for policy makers in the same way that voices from the community were used to generate new approaches to early childhood in New Zealand’s Te Whariki early childhood curriculum (Bishop & Glynn, 2003). We are convinced that the richness and authenticity of the families’ contributions in this project were linked to the accessible and non-threatening use of yarning as a methodology. Yarning as well as the research processes used gave participants in this project control over how the yarning sessions proceeded, over who was present, over what was recorded from their yarning and over the photos taken for discussion in the second session. This meant that the usual power relations that operate in most research between researcher and participant were diminished to allow the kind of sharing of personal information that comes with greater trust. We found yarning to be a valuable and productive methodology for this study of childcare experiences and attitudes of Indigenous families.

References


