

Part II

Relations with Communities

3

Exploring Collaborative Research Partnerships in Remote Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

‘*Gularrri* (fresh water) has met the *dhukun* (metaphorically meaning confusion, doubt, misunderstandings or myths) and over the past three years become clear again, drinkable and nourishing.’ This story of freshwater, contamination and nourishment was told during a yarning circle by a community member. It was used to describe their research journey in a collaborative research project that sought to create, enact and evaluate a ‘bridge’ that early childhood education curriculum supported at one end by the strengths and content of local culture, and at the other by a proven pedagogy and learning strategy from the broader culture. This chapter draws on our experiences of implementing 3a (Abecedarian Approach Australia) in Families as First Teachers (FaFT) playgroups in two remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia and explores the contextual realities and relational aspects of researching family practices and young children’s early learning in remote communities. Specifically, we discuss the factors that shaped the implementation of the research and consider the approaches to grow research relationships of trust and collaboration. These partnerships within the research team (university and FaFT) enabled culturally appropriate adaptations and local language interpretations that ensured the strengths of Aboriginal identity, culture and language were upheld in the implementation of the programme. Insights from our efforts to collaboratively develop a culturally responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programme are discussed as design principles that might influence Indigenous early childhood educational research more broadly.

Keywords

Collaborative research partnerships, early childhood education, remote communities, Aboriginal cultural knowledges

Introduction

From 2014 to 2017, the University of Melbourne, the Northern Territory Government’s Department of Education, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and members of Families as First Teacher’s (FaFT) playgroups collaborated in a research project, *Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory*. This research study was built on early Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a) implementation and adaptation work in the Northern Territory (NT). It was born out of an interest on the part of the Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group and the NT Government to formally examine the impact of the educational strategies being implemented in FaFT settings – 3a – on young children’s learning and overall development at three years of age. The project also sought to build evidence of the aspirations of families and community members for young children’s learning at FaFT and to explore whether and how cultural knowledges, languages, concepts and skills could be embedded into the 3a teaching and learning activities that were core to the FaFT educational programme.

Motivating the study was the premise that most optimal outcomes for Aboriginal children will occur when an ECEC ‘learning bridge’ for children from birth to three years of age is created – supported at one end by the strength and content of local culture and at the other end by proven learning techniques from research and practice in early childhood education (ECE). The foundation at one end of the learning bridge comes from Aboriginal people, practices, cultural knowledges, languages, concepts and skills and already established engagement with the FaFT programme within and across community. The foundation at the other end of the learning bridge is the research-validated learning strategies that are known to increase young children’s learning and development (3a) but are open-ended and can be adapted to accommodate the rich cultural knowledges, languages, concepts and skills that Aboriginal families and children engage in at home and in the community and bring to playgroup.

Underlying the study was the Yolŋu concept of saltwater and freshwater knowledge structures:

Now there are knowledge structures about salt water and there are knowledge structures surrounding fresh water. And there is a point where the two streams meet, the fresh water and the salt water, and where the two streams meet is brackish water. But that water is drinkable. And where the two waters meet is the place where two knowledge structures meet.

(M. Yunupingu, as quoted in Shoemaker, 1994, p. 38)

This salt- and freshwater metaphor was explained by a community member during a yarning circle in the study as a way of highlighting how the relationships developed in and through the research had generated the possibility to share new knowledges and develop new ways of understanding and reflecting on young children’s learning. Salt- and freshwater knowledge structures highlight the value of acknowledging different knowledges – the knowledges of Indigenous (freshwater) and Balanda (white people, saltwater) and that when these knowledges meet they can generate new knowledge. In the context of this study, these knowledges were represented by the traditional knowledges and languages of the FaFT Family Liaison Officers (FLO) and families and community members in the two communities in which the research took place. The western knowledge was represented by the 3a teaching and learning strategies, the FaFT Family Educators (FEs) and the university researchers collaborating in the research study. In this chapter, we will explore our journey towards creating a meeting place for these two knowledge structures, and we will highlight the ways in which relationships generated new knowledges in and through the research process.

Background context to the research

At the inception of this research study, the Abecedarian strategies had been implemented in the FaFT playgroups in the NT for five years. The Abecedarian strategies were chosen as the educational platform for the FaFT programmes as they had a proven evidence base showing positive impacts for young children from early in life (Cooke & Piers-Blundell, 2019). The original Abecedarian studies in the United States demonstrated a range of positive effects on young children’s learning and development – cognitive, language, social and emotional skills – early in life as they engaged in an early childhood programme characterised by frequent, intentional and individual adult-child interactions (Sparling & Meunier, 2019). Later studies highlighted these positive effects were long lasting and persisted throughout school and into adulthood (Campbell et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2014). The educational programme of the Abecedarian Approach consists of four interconnected elements – Language Priority, Conversational Reading, LearningGames® (Northern Territory Government, 2014) and Enriched Caregiving. The active ingredients underlying these elements include rich language interactions, joint attention, back and forth exchanges between the adult and the child, and emotional support.

When the FaFT playgroups introduced the Abecedarian strategies there was recognition of the potential for learning from applications in other contexts while also capitalising on the flexibility of the approach to ensure local fidelity of implementation. A general ‘proof of concept’ was undertaken of the Abecedarian Approach, which later became *3a* (University of Melbourne, n.d.), and in the NT. Following this work was the adaption of the original 200 Learning Games so that they were culturally relevant and included photos of Aboriginal children and family members engaging in the games in community with local artefacts (NT Government, 2014). The adaptation of the Learning Games occurred over a five-year period across 15 communities. The NT Government’s Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group and the original developer of the Abecedarian Approach, Professor Joseph Sparling, were engaged in this process and ensured the local fidelity of this process.

The FaFT playgroups were accordingly staffed by a Family Educator (FE), who was an accredited early childhood teacher, and a Family Liaison Officer (FLO), who was a local Indigenous woman with experience and training in ECE and local cultural knowledges and with strong connections to community, who supported mothers to engage in the strategies with their children in first language, alongside playgroup coordinators – local Indigenous women, often mothers, aunties and grandmothers, who had children attending FaFT. The FE and the FLO worked together to integrate their complementary knowledge and expertise to guide and empower mothers to support their children’s learning and development early in life. The early expression of interest in researching the impact of the strategies on young Aboriginal children’s learning and development and the aspirations of families and community members for young children’s learning at FaFT signalled that the integrity, reliability and validity of the research rested on the ways in which the diverse knowledges and experiences of all the research partners were recognised at all stages of the research process. In the following sections we will highlight how we drew on these knowledges and expertise and the impact that it had on generating new understandings.

The research team was made up of researchers with diverse knowledges and experiences. The team included university staff members with experience and expertise in ECE, early language learning, the Abecedarian strategies and research tools, and FEs and FLOs at two FaFT communities with experience and expertise in implementing *3a*, early learning, local cultural priorities for young children’s learning, local languages and cultural knowledges and strong relationships in Community. The Department of Education, Early Childhood Education and Care colleagues in the NT Government, with oversight of FaFT and expertise in the FaFT programmes, had established relationships with FaFT communities and early experiences in implementing *3a*. Research assistants were employed to support data collection in each community so as not to place unreasonable burden on FaFT researchers. These appointments included women who had been engaged in the FaFT programme for many years both as participants and playgroup leaders who also had a rich wealth of knowledge and experience in implementing *3a*, early learning, local cultural priorities for young children’s learning, local languages and cultural knowledges and relationships in Community. The NT Government, with their expertise of FaFT communities, approached FaFT colleagues to explore their interest in participating in the research. Following this, the design was co-led by university researchers, FaFT researchers and NT Government colleagues. The research team collaborated to choose the books and learning games to be used for mastery records. This involved university, NT Government and FaFT colleagues consulting families regarding the books and learning games that were popular in their FaFT communities. Data collection records were initially drafted by the university team and adapted through consultation with FaFT researchers so that they could be integrated into existing data collection and reporting processes at FaFT. In the following section we explore how the two knowledge structures were drawn on through the enactment of the research.

Methodologies to support two knowledge structures

A number of strategies were put in place to share knowledge of the Abecedarian teaching strategies, local cultural knowledges, skills, teaching and learning practices and first languages across the three-year duration of the study. These included training, coaching, yarning circles and feedback. Training was provided to support the FaFT teams to build strong knowledge of the 3a teaching strategies and to support them to coach the strategies to families during daily FaFT sessions. All members of the FaFT teams completed three days of certified 3a Practitioner Training and one day of certified 3a Coach Training with the research team. This training provided the opportunity to explore the research and theory underlying the educational elements that make up 3a and the teaching strategies embedded in the Learning Games that could support mothers and family members to build confidence in engaging in these strategies with their children. Knowing the intent of the 3a teaching strategies and how they supported child learning proved to be important knowledge for exploring the potential alignment of 3a with local Indigenous teaching and learning practices – whether and how cultural knowledges, concepts, skills and languages could be embedded further in Conversational Reading and Learning Games. The coaching training supported FaFT researchers to explore the strategies they could use during FaFT sessions with mothers and family members, such as modelling and feedback, to support the mastery of the 3a strategies in first language and to explore how cultural knowledges could be embedded further.

Equally important was embarking on discussions and developing a range of strategies to support the FaFT and university research team to track and monitor mothers' and families' perspectives of these issues throughout the duration of the research. The research team spoke regularly via teleconferences, and university colleagues visited the FaFT programmes throughout the three years to build relationships and discuss the opportunities and challenges that arose during the research, and to discuss the emerging themes. For example, records of programme dosage (levels of children's engagement in 3a strategies) were adapted with clearer definitions of what we would record as a Conversational Reading and Learning Games sessions and cycles. FaFT researchers explored with university researchers the different ways this could be interpreted. This led to a clearer and consistent recording of sessions and cycles throughout the research study (for a definition of sessions and cycles refer to Page et al., [2019](#)). In addition, at weekly staff meetings, FaFT team members recorded mothers' comments about specific books and Learning Games to capture over time how they were experienced. These experiences fed into yarning circles that were held on Community. The research team discussed the themes that were emerging within the FaFT programmes and the key questions that would be discussed in the yarning circles. The FaFT researchers organised and led the yarning circles on Community in consultation with university colleagues who participated in the yarning circles in both communities.

Two yarning circles were undertaken in the first and third year of the study. Yarning circles, 'an Indigenous cultural form of conversation' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, [2010](#), p. 37), were a culturally meaningful practice at the two research communities. Yarning circles were an important way to explore the joint intention of the research – to explore local Aboriginal families' and community members' aspirations for young children's learning at FaFT, and whether and how cultural knowledges, languages, concepts and skills could be embedded into the 3a teaching and learning activities at FaFT. The FLOs, respected elders and/or community leaders in the two communities with expertise in local cultural knowledges and languages and strong relationships within the community that organised the yarning circles and, guided by the researcher team, led the discussion in first language and translated the discussion during the yarning. This cultural knowledge of kinship ties ensured that community members were able to participate in a yarning circle with the appropriate family and community members. The yarning circles were recorded following an explanation of the project and the acquiring of participants' consent. The first yarning circle focused on the local perspectives on the teaching and learning practices that supported children to learn and to prepare them for preschool and school. The second yarning circle drew on the fortnightly reflective feedback forms which documented mothers' and families' interests and discussions with

FEs and FLOs on the impact of the FaFT learning experiences on their children's learning and the extent to which Conversational Reading and Learning Games aligned with local Indigenous teaching and learning practices. As a result, the second yarning circle had a specific emphasis on the issues that were emerging in the FaFT educational programmes; for example, sign language, technology, traditional dancing and ceremony. Following the yarning circles, transcripts of the recordings were shared and discussed at research team meetings and within the FaFT communities to ensure that everyone involved felt that they were a true and accurate record of discussions. This was critical to the interpretation of the data, helping to ensure that it was checked by and aligned with the perspectives, experiences and expertise of the FaFT team, families and community elders participating in the yarning. Following this process, the research team explored how these learnings could be built on in the FaFT playgroup programme by embedding them in Conversational Reading sessions with particular books and in specific Learning Games.

In addition, the research team utilised the two knowledges to ensure that the assessments used in the study were aligned to capture the breadth of young Aboriginal children's skills and abilities in a culturally responsive way. In order to achieve this aim, the research team drew on FLOs' expertise and knowledges and the university researchers' knowledge of a research instrument to adapt the Brigance Screen (Glascoe, **2010**) to ensure that it was culturally appropriate and that all the items were culturally relevant (see Page et al., **2019** for a fuller explanation of this process). This was an iterative process that included, for example, a trial with several children, feedback from mothers and senior community members, adaptations of items and removing items that had no equivalence in the local language and could trigger trauma. These assessments were administered in children's first language (with a translator such as a family member when needed). Through this process the dual knowledges of local culture and knowledge of the instrument created not just a culturally adapted instrument but more nuanced knowledge for the research team members of a strengths-based approach to assessing young Aboriginal children's knowledges and skills.

The dissemination of the results of the study to the families and local community was also a key consideration of the research design. In addition to collaborative methodologies, during the research and at the completion of the research, ceremonies were held to celebrate the early outcomes of the results within each community. These ceremonies were co-designed and included many members of each community speaking with the researchers about the impact of the research. Following analysis, the research team and government colleagues shared the key learnings in the communities. Each FaFT community reflected on the key learnings, and discussed how these learnings could be communicated to families in each community. Backpacks with resources to support home learning and key findings from the research in first language were made and distributed to FaFT families and the local community.

Situating the research within collaborative relationships of trust and cooperation

Indigenous peoples' knowledges, experiences and interests were at the core of this research. As Indigenous researchers and researchers in the Indigenous space, we collectively appreciated the necessity of understanding relationality as 'an essential and core condition by which Aboriginal people have lived, do and will continue to live' (Martin, **2010**, p. 23) and this premise guided all stages of the research process. For example, the methodologies described above provided a strong platform for data collection and analysis. However, the descriptions of the methods in themselves fail to fully account for the complexities of the context, as aspects related to place and time, and the relational aspects critical to researching Indigenous family practices and young children's early learning in remote communities. During the research and through our reflections on the process, we can now identify the factors that shaped and reshaped the implementation of the research. This

includes consideration of the issues arising and the approaches adopted and adapted to support and strengthen relationships of trust and collaboration as we engaged with Indigenous co-researchers as partners in the study.

Building respectful and reciprocal partnerships

This research has confirmed the importance of the relational aspects of research. Collaborative relationships are built on and rely on trusting, respectful and ethical relationships that recognise the differing and complementary knowledges required to build new understandings, in the case of this research, of teaching and learning at FaFT (National Health and Medical Research Council, [2018](#)). The 3a project from the outset was a process of adaptation (Cooke & Piers-Blundell, [2019](#)). The introduction of western-based teaching strategies represented a different approach to teaching and learning within communities, and it is important to acknowledge these differences in a research project such as ours (Page et al., [2019](#)). It is the exploring of these differences – in and through the research process – that generates the possibilities to create and share new knowledges and develop new ways of understanding and reflecting on young children’s learning. Brackish water is only achievable through an acknowledgement of the complexities when relationships are forged between all members of the research community, especially the FaFT team, university team and the mothers, fathers and family members participating in FaFT.

Reciprocity and respect were the central tenets that guided the decision to position all who engaged in the study as ‘researchers.’ We used this term deliberately and inclusively to refer to everyone involved in the research. Beyond tokenism, relationships of trust and equality were also critical when the research was being conducted by researchers located across the country and separated geographically. While regular visits were scheduled over the three-year period, the vast travel distances placed limitations on on-site contact for the university researchers off-site. The researchers were dependent on each other and reliant on regular meetings where issues were raised and addressed that continued to shape the research. Throughout the project the researchers participated in regular email and telephone communications, monthly operations meetings and quarterly governance meetings to discuss and progress the research outputs and activities. Over the research period, routine communication and contact was also essential to the building and rebuilding of relationships as research colleagues moved from the communities and new staff were employed. On-site visits, although limited, were key to building respectful relationships. Throughout the project at least four visits per year were undertaken by university researchers to visit FaFT research colleagues, family members and children at both communities. These visits gave researchers the opportunity to discuss, negotiate and collaborate on the core 3a concepts and 3a inclusion within the FaFT playgroups. University researchers were able to participate in the FaFT sessions and to spend time with FaFT research colleagues alongside family members and children. During these visits all came together to observe and share assessments and to reflect on the challenges as well as the successes so that adaptations could take place over time.

The building of relationships with families was critical to the success of the study, and we all recognised the importance of researchers and parents walking side by side to build on the knowledge and strength of local families. Language and literacy barriers and parents’ reticence to express opinions were challenges that slowly overcame with patience and a focus on developing relationships with families. Confidence and trust overcame the potential for doubt and confusion (dhukun), as parents saw that their children were culturally safe and the research sought to be inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives and understandings. The genuine interest in building new understandings encouraged and empowered parents to voice their views, and this included both resistance to some practices and suggestions to modify some approaches as ‘ways of doing’ (Martin & Mirraoopa, [2003](#)).

In addition, a number of discussions were held between the research team reflecting on the feedback received from mothers and family members regarding their experiences of engaging in the 3a teaching strategies – especially Conversational Reading and Learning Games. These conversations evolved into yarning circles that further promoted two-way learning and research partnerships between researchers and participants (Geia et al., **2013**). In each of the yarning circles participants were free to share stories and perspectives in a way that respected oral traditions and privileged local cultural protocols. This mutual relationship has continued as the research results have been reported to community members and at conferences. The positioning of FaFT staff as researchers supported the communities' ownership of the programme and the long-term benefits of the practices investigated to strengthen early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal children in ECEC.

Reflective and reflexive practice

Respectful collaboration, in turn, gives rise to reflective and reflexive practices in research. Reflective practice has the potential to question the power relationships within early childhood research or a service and ask questions about who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged in and through the research (Dodgson, **2019**). Reflective practice also has the power to reshape research methodologies as the researchers critically examine the nature of the research collaboration at every stage of the research process (West et al., **2012**).

Dadirri, as deep listening, means 'listening to and observing the self as well as, and in relationships with others' (Atkinson, **2002**, p. 19). It is a quality of inner, deep listening and quiet still awareness (Ungunmerr, **2017**). It grows from respect for each other and is viewed as a way of building community, and exploring and learning from Aboriginal traditional knowledge, culture and knowing. In the context of this study, Dadirri was a skill and process that could be implemented in and through the research process to support an ethos of reflection. Dadirri also allows for the constraints and complexities of research to be explored openly. When the research team feel that they can discuss complexities safely and that they will be listened to deeply, then new ideas and possibilities can be generated, 'maximizing the opportunity for participants to impact the process and outcome of research' (Berger, **2015**, p. 230). It is in these discussions where the two 'waters' (or knowledges) meet and where different perspectives can be explored to generate new understandings. In addition, acknowledging the constraints and complexities of research can also lead to adaptations within the research process so that the research is aligning with the realities of the local programmes and communities in which they are being implemented. When these outcomes are achieved, the integrity and validity of the research is strengthened. Furthermore, the fidelity of the research is strengthened through this process as the research remains both faithful to the intent of the cultural aspirations of families as well as to the intent of the interactional components of the 3a strategies.

Further, reflexive practice in this study involved an examination and questioning of attitudes, values and assumptions involving aspects of the research. Adopting a reflexive stance required researchers to 'carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal' (Berger, **2015**, p. 220). This allowed members of the research team to explore issues that might have been taken for granted at both the everyday and conceptual level of the research. This occurred during visits and meetings where the researchers engaged in respectful exploration of how 3a aligned with local Indigenous teaching and learning practices and considered how traditional knowledge, concepts and languages could be embedded further in Conversational Reading and Learning Games within FaFT programmes. The development of the data collection tools also demonstrated reflexivity as the researchers considered 'ourselves in relation to our contexts, and our contexts in relation to ourselves' (Longhofer & Floersch, **2012**, p. 513). The visits and final research ceremonies provided further opportunities to reflect on the impact of the research journey for all the research community

members – researchers, families, children and community members – and the learnings that have evolved over time regarding teaching and learning priorities for young Aboriginal children.

Understanding the opportunities and constraints of place

Place plays a critical role in Indigenous research. As researchers we appreciated the connection and relationship between people, their country and the Entities within this: ‘all things are recognised and respected for their place in the overall system’ (Martin & Mirraboopa, **2003**, p. 207). With these understandings central to our research endeavours, community priorities were privileged and provided broader, richer representations of the lives of the families and children who participated in the study (Somerville & Turner, **2020**).

The FaFT services in this research were closely connected to their school and local community and had a strong profile within each community as a safe place for families and their children to learn together with the support of FaFT staff (Cooke & Piers-Blundell, **2019**). As important services within the community, the FaFT programmes were influenced by the cultural priorities that play a central role in community and the natural and environmental events that had an impact on community. In these ways, place shaped, influenced and impacted the research. But as we explore these factors, it is important to note that not all these factors should be considered constraints. There are also enabling factors that ebb and flow throughout research practices and are deeply connected to FaFT’s priority of building cultural knowledges and skills of young children. In this way place-based considerations are complementary to the learning priorities of FaFT and the aspirations that community hold for young Aboriginal children’s learning.

As stated above, the communities’ aspirations, local priorities, traditional languages and the geolocations of the research sites had an impact on the implementation of the research. The research design was necessarily responsive and receptive to these opportunities (and impositions), and over time these factors prompted further critical reflection. Each change required the research team to re-evaluate priorities and return to the central aims of the study and the intention to build and maintain relationships of trust and collaboration with the co-researchers as partners and community members as participants in the study. At the outset of the study, one of the communities was greatly impacted by a cyclone – houses and buildings were destroyed, and displaced families housed in a temporary tent city on the community oval. While the community recovered, implementation of the research project was placed on hold for the first term and into the second term. As a result, it was a key priority to carefully monitor as a research team when and how the research should be planned in conjunction with community priorities.

Weekly site reports provided important information on how place-based factors impacted the FaFT programme and research implementation, including staff absence, cultural priorities, external events, the weather, community life and school-related events (Table 3.1). Examples of these place-based factors that were encountered during research implementation are discussed below.

Aboriginal employees (FLOs and playgroup coordinators) are critical to the programme’s success. Staff absences were the largest factor that impacted research implementation, mainly due to cultural leave, medical leave or staff training. Understanding the complexity of these reasons, why a reason may not be given and supporting staff during these times are important in building and maintaining respectful and culturally responsive relationships. To help overcome the impacts of staff absenteeism, additional Indigenous staff were employed as dedicated research coordinators. This also required a reprioritisation of research funding and a review of budget.

Both communities reported ‘Sorry Business’ having a large impact on staff and FaFT family attendance. Some families did not attend the programme for more than a term, affecting educational

dosage and longitudinal assessments. In Aboriginal culture, Sorry Business refers to the mourning of a loss of a family member by following traditional ceremonies and practices (Carlson & Frazer, **2015**). It involves responsibilities and obligations to attend funerals and participate in other cultural events, activities or ceremonies with the community. There is no set time period for Sorry Business. It is important as a research team to understand the personal and cultural significance of Sorry Business for children, families and community and how this in turn follows through to building and maintaining relationships of trust and collaboration in research.

External factors such as the Royal Darwin Show affected family attendance at FaFT every year of the three-year study. While the Royal Darwin Show runs for less than one week, the impact on attendance was seen throughout the remainder of the term due to delays in families returning to community (due to family and cultural priorities, travel availability and financial reasons).

The weather and seasons also affected attendance, with the wet season seeing families stay at home during days with heavy rain and families moving to their homelands or visiting family members in other communities during the dry season. The movement of children and their families in and out of community (e.g., for cultural, seasonal or health reasons) either temporarily or permanently also affected attendance and opportunities for longitudinal follow-up in the study.

Table 3.1 shows the factors that had an impact on programme implementation, grouped in six broad categories and ranked in order from most discussed in weekly progress reports. Examples or further explanation of these factors are also ranked in order from most reported.

Table 3.1 Factors impacting programme and research implementation

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Staff absence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff away (no reason indicated) • Sick or medical leave • Funeral/cultural leave • Study/training • Staff covering other roles in school
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sorry business (hearing ceremony, funeral and related ceremonies) • Death of community member • Cultural business (not specified)
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal Darwin Show – delay of returning to community
Weather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dry season – families travel out of community • Cyclone (term 1 2015) • Wet season – heavy rain
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children temporarily out of community (homeland, other communities, Royal Darwin Show) • Community unease (death, trauma, violence, substance abuse) • Children no longer living in community • Health of FaFT children or family members
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School event/assembly/cultural ceremony • FaFT event (graduation, celebration, training)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of term – numbers decrease in last week of term • Staff training
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Implications for practice

The discussion above details our efforts to collaboratively develop a culturally responsive ECEC programme in remote Indigenous communities for children aged 0–3 years. This research has provided insights into how research partnerships can strengthen the integrity and fidelity of the research, as well as learning outcomes for young children. Insights from this study that might influence early childhood researchers working in similar contexts are discussed below.

Children and families

The study demonstrates the power of a strong shared commitment to improving children’s learning and development with positive outcomes for young children and families achieved through the implementation of a purposeful programme that supports frequent, consistent and intentional adult-child interactions. The metaphor of knowledge structures meeting, with freshwater and saltwater joining together to generate new knowledge, symbolises the new ways of understanding and reflecting on young children’s learning that resulted from this study. Over the four-year period of working together a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of what culturally responsive ECEC programmes and practices involved in each community evolved and underscored the relevance of integrating local culture and content alongside research-based practice. Families adapted 3a strategies; for example, in one community a Learning Game required a mother to position herself in a particular way with her baby. This positioning was not culturally appropriate for mothers in that community and was hence changed to a culturally appropriate position, while still keeping the intent of the learning goal in place. Other adaptations included making use of natural resources such as cockles and shells to integrate children’s learning into everyday language and literacy practices, with dual language use common as parents read to their children, often interacting using double monolingualism (Danjo, [2018](#)) in their interactions during Conversational Reading. Importantly, this study provides new evidence showing that the embedding of local languages and culturally relevant Aboriginal content into the 3a can produce positive effects for Aboriginal children’s language and academic outcomes (Page et al., [2019](#)).

Another strong example of the adaptation work undertaken during the study by the research team included the development of the Early Literacy Engagement Assessment (ELEA; James et al., [2015](#)) to support FaFT colleagues to track and monitor children’s engagement over time in Conversational Reading. The ELEA was intended to be a culturally sensitive instrument that could be administered in English and local languages to assess young children’s early language and literacy skills as they engage with a text to create meaning (Scull et al., [2021](#)). The collaborative design was developed by the research team to ensure it embraced cultural knowledge and sensitivities, and included the joint vision and decision-making for the style of the narrative the characters selected the title of the text and the administration of the task. In this way the ELEA reflects community aspirations for their children and supports families and educators to foster children’s engagement in book reading in meaningful and supportive ways.

The implementation of 3a strategies with children and parents was important to children’s learning and led to further understandings of the value of home and preschool connections in remote communities. One of the major challenges to this research, as signalled in the discussion of factors impacting programme and research implementation, was children’s attendance at FaFT. The results highlight the benefits of attending FaFT programmes and prompted the subsequent consideration of

strategies that supported families to attend, while being mindful of the competing priorities for families living in remote communities.

FaFT community members highlighted the rich intersections between cultural knowledges, community priorities and early education. They highlighted the value of exploring families' aspirations and priorities for children's learning at home and on country, and how 3a strategies supported the teaching of these cultural knowledges and skills in these contexts as well as the FaFT context.

Research teams

The outcomes of this study demonstrate the impact of collaborative research partnerships with the integration of two knowledges building new understandings for all members of the research team. Through participation in the study the researchers increased their understanding of the 3a strategies, particularly in relation to how these might be adapted for local contexts, how resources might be customised to meet diverse communities and families' needs and how to support families to engage with the strategies in their home languages. Participation in the study and the sharing of researchers' experiences and knowledges deepened researchers' appreciation of respectful ways of working. Deep listening skills were practised, and the researchers became increasingly aware of the value of situating oneself in relation to each other and its importance as an element of reflective practice. Professional judgements were constantly reviewed through 'conversations with each other and with colleagues, to ascertain that we hear and convey is what was told rather than what we think and believe' (Berger, [2015](#), p. 228). The study also provided authentic learning opportunities for the research team and enhanced the researchers' agency and strategic decision-making and, on the ground, daily decision-making practices to ensure that the children had numerous opportunities to engage in an intentional, language-rich environment.

All members of the research team have also benefitted from ongoing professional engagement and collaboration. The dissemination of the results, with researchers working together to share the findings, continues to enhance relationships and strengthen the communities' commitment to the implementation of the ECEC programme developed through this study. Our continuing engagement has deepened two-way learning opportunities as the researchers work to advance learning opportunities for young Indigenous children.

Research methodologies

Throughout the research process we became increasingly aware of the need to ensure the methodologies were respectful of local cultural practices. Specifically, this included ensuring the integration of home languages and the careful selection of data collection techniques that drew on local knowledges. Dadirri, alongside yarning circles, were methods critical to building a shared understanding of the key issues driving the research process. For those coming from outside the research site, our experiences reinforced the need for reflexivity as a means of making the research process visible, through a process of deep self-examination 'expanding one's consciousness to make what has been tacit explicit' (Dodgson, [2019](#), p. 221), as a means to enhance the rigour of the study and its ethics. We also learned to appreciate the worth of analytic frameworks that were aligned with community values and perspectives, and Aboriginal ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing when interpreting and sharing our data (Martin & Mirraboopa, [2003](#)).

Throughout the study, the need for flexibility and resilience also became apparent. Changes on-site were mirrored with a number of unexpected challenges off-site. Taking account of the changing

circumstances, remaining open to opportunities and ensuring the research methods were adapted when and as required were essential to the success of the study.

Conclusion

The research reported in this chapter tells the story of freshwater, contamination and nourishment and is used to describe the research journey in a collaborative research project that sought to create, enact and evaluate a culturally appropriate early childhood learning programme. It details the approaches used to grow relationships of trust and collaboration. It highlights the potential of collaborative research partnerships in remote Indigenous communities to generate and nourish new knowledges of research processes and collaborations. In building on this study, other researchers will no doubt find ways to reflect on the methodology outlined in this study and the issues that it raises for their research. Our intention is to open the topic for further discussion as the contextual realities and relational aspects of researching Indigenous children's early learning continue to be explored.

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