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Pockets of promise: exploring innovation and complexity of remote ECEC service delivery in Australia

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Introduction: The existing funding architectures for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in Australia are incompatible with the needs of remote and First Nations communities. The Australian system relies on a market-based model for ECEC – characterized by demand-led funding mechanisms where funding flows to users to choose what service to use. This model is not viable or sustainable in remote and First Nations communities. In this paper, we ask what we can learn from alternative models of ECEC that serve remote, largely Indigenous communities.

Methods: This research is based on interviews with 10 key stakeholders. Potential participants were identified using three selection criteria which established their expertise in relation to: advocacy and experience in delivering ECEC services in remote locations (evident in relevant parliamentary reviews and inquiries), in-depth knowledge about First Nations perspectives about ECEC models, and broader understandings of the ECEC system in Australia. Three themes were explored in the interviews: (1) funding context (including impact of recent changes to Budget Based Funding, and role of philanthropy in the ECEC sector); (2) Quality and regulatory context (including workforce challenges and cultural considerations); and (3) Future research (including research gaps, opportunities, and considerations). The study design and analysis of data was guided by policy studies frameworks that advocate for collaboration and coordination among researchers and stakeholders in order to address complex problems.

Results: Analysis of the interviews illuminated the complex structural and cultural elements shaping the design of, and access to, ECEC in remote communities. Stakeholders argued that the ECEC system should be universal in that it delivers services that meet the needs of young children and their families. This requires the development of a definition of 'universality' that enables communities to define their own ECEC needs and the types of services best suited to meet those needs. Stakeholders' views about the importance of community-led design and delivery highlighted the need to align structural and cultural aspects of quality standards and workforce needs, and also to strengthen consultation with First Nations organisations to better understand community-specific solutions.

Discussion: The paper outlines the complexities and nuances of ECEC service delivery in remote communities. The findings are intended to foster discussion about current initiatives, challenges, and future possibilities for ECEC in remote communities in Australia. These findings concur with other research that argues for community led service delivery and for stronger equity-based partnerships between First Nations and non-First Nations researchers and organizations.

KEYWORDS

First Nations, early childhood education, policy studies and social justice, Australia, remote service delivery

1. Introduction

Advocacy groups argue that early childhood services are essential for strong First Nations¹ child outcomes in the formative 0–8 years. Longitudinal research has clearly demonstrated that sustained engagement in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can narrow the educational achievement gap between children from marginalized communities and their better-off counterparts. However, it is well recognized that the policy architectures and funding models that underpin Australia's ECEC system are incompatible with the service needs of First Nations communities. This problem is not uniquely Australian. Urban (2015) observed that ECEC policy across EU countries fail to serve marginalized populations effectively. He argues that European Close the Gap and ECEC policies are based in the hegemony of western ideals – workforce participation and education that builds human capital – and that policy is out of step with the everyday needs and cultural priorities of many marginalized groups. Like European ECEC policy, Australian policy settings do not yet deliver a system that is accessible and responsive to the needs of many families. These failures are most pronounced in the case of Indigenous families and remote communities. SNAICC, Australia's peak advocacy organization for First Nations children, emphasizes that early childhood services must be '*accessible for and effectively engage with families*' and stress the importance of local consultation about community needs.

The scale of policy failure is evident in statistics that capture the availability of ECEC places across the community and the developmental outcomes of First Nations children, whom are overrepresented in remote communities. In a study that combined licensing data for services in two Australian states, plus census data showing characteristics from local areas in which the service is located, researchers found that children from small and remote communities are more likely to miss out on high quality ECEC (Cloney et al., 2015). This trend continues in spite of targeted government investment. Recent research using data from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) data found that "the current policy settings means that many towns with a population under 1,500 lack childcare services" (Hurley et al., 2022, p. 33). Similar findings from Canada demonstrate this inequity in access is a common trend in countries that operate with a market model (Prentice and White, 2019).

Of all the states and territories in Australia², early years education policy failures are most stark in the Northern Territory (NT) where

there is the largest concentration of First Nations people in *very* remote communities. In the NT, Indigenous people make up 89.6% of people living in very remote areas. Indigenous disadvantage and disparity occur most acutely in remote and very remote areas (Gregory, 2022). In the Northern Territory specifically, First Nations children aged 0–5 years represent 39.8 per cent of the community, yet only 15.9 per cent of children participate in approved childcare services (Productivity Commission, 2022, Table 3A.12). The impact of poor servicing is reflected in children's outcomes data. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that First Nations children from remote and very remote locations are more than twice as likely as those living in major cities to be developmentally vulnerable on one or two (out of five) domains (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

The challenge of developing policy settings responsive to the needs of Indigenous and remote communities is not new. Policy makers and researchers have been grappling with the problems and trialing solutions for decades (Fasoli et al., 2004; Fasoli and Moss, 2007; Brennan, 2013; SNAICC, 2015). Current policy initiatives, including the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Universal Early Childhood Education and Care (Productivity Commission, 2022), the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021) and NIAA's Close the Gap Implementation Plan (National Indigenous Australian Agency, 2021; National Indigenous Australian Agency, 2023), highlight the ongoing urgency of addressing barriers in the current policy system. Some Indigenous communities have stopped waiting for government action and have moved away from government supported services. They have developed ECEC services in line with community priorities and need.

In this paper, we ask what is not working; and, what we can learn from alternative models of ECEC that serve remote, largely Indigenous, communities. We know that services developed outside of the 'formal' service system often move beyond the circular problem definitions that drive policy (Urban, 2015). Much of the research that informs ECEC policy development construct the achievement gap 'problem' in terms of children missing out on the early education *that is currently on offer*. In this logic, the solution of 'increased participation' is narrowly conceptualized in terms of existing models of ECEC. This eclipses the question of whether some families do not participate in ECEC because the education on offer does not meet their needs or is delivered in a way that is hard to use. Urban turned to countries outside the EU to explore what a competent ECEC system might entail when it is developed to meet social priorities other than those enshrined in OECD and European policy.

In a similar vein, we have asked Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, with knowledge about ECEC in remote communities, what is needed for an inclusive ECEC system. We offer this paper as two non-Indigenous ECEC policy researchers at a time when the Australian government has again turned its attention to universal ECEC provision (Productivity Commission, 2023). We are not experts in service delivery in remote communities or the needs of young children in these communities. However, we strongly believe

1 The terms First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are used interchangeably to reflect the context and source or reference.

2 Like Canada, Australia has three levels of government – Federal, State and Territories, Local governments. Education funding is primarily delivered *via* State and Territory governments.

the needs of remote communities should not be sidelined as governments work to lift their game on universal ECEC provision and deliver a national early years strategy. We ask about the needs of services in remote communities in terms of how funding is delivered and quality is supported. Furthermore, we explore what can be learnt from communities providing services for their young children that are 'out-of-scope' of the mainstream system. What do these community-controlled out-of-scope services tell us about being user friendly for families? What and how are children learning? What are the concepts of quality that drive service delivery? What knowledge, practices and arrangements in these services could strengthen the capacity of mainstream systems to be inclusive? What are the research priorities for ECEC advocates and organizations in remote communities?

Before turning to our method and findings, we offer a sketch of the Australian system and key policy developments aimed at addressing issues of ECEC access and quality in Indigenous communities, with particular attention on the NT. This overview provides insights into why communities would source their own funding for services for children's wellbeing and development. From here we describe our study, its methods, and participants. We explore how these stakeholders saw the impacts of existing policy on communities, what universal provision and quality standards means from an Indigenous worldview and what is needed moving forward.

2. Background

2.1. The Australian ECEC system

Australian governments continue to spend less on ECEC (relative to Gross National Product) than most OECD countries and far less than Nordic countries. Accordingly, Australian households pay more towards ECEC services than other countries (Grudnoff, 2023). The Australian system is based in a mixed market provision delivered through government, for-profit, not for profit and community-based providers (Adamson and Brennan, 2022). Furthermore, there are significant differences in each of these broad provider groups. Some for-profit organizations are large multi-national listed companies making profits for shareholders, while others are small family-run businesses. Australia has three tiers of government – federal, state and local. The Commonwealth government funds ECEC services through demand-led funding mechanisms that emphasize user 'choice' and directs funding to users to spend in the 'approved' service they choose. They also fund some targeted programs to support inclusion and the National Quality Standard which sets consistent minimum standards across the states and supports quality improvement over time (Brennan and Adamson, 2014). The state governments vary in terms of what they deliver – direct funding to services and/or funding support, and in some jurisdictions local governments also are involved in funding and delivering ECEC services. The logic behind the mixed market model is that service providers compete for consumers because they rely on full utilization to be financially sustainable. This competition is meant to drive up the overall quality in the system (Newbury and Brennan, 2013).

The mixed market model does little to support service viability, sustainability and quality in many remote communities (Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training, 2020; Centre for Policy Development, 2021; Hurley et al., 2022). Market models

incentivize providers to establish services in larger and more advantaged locations where demand is higher (Hurley et al., 2022, p. 33). There is little to incentivize providers to deliver services in 'thin' markets where there is limited demand (Penn, 2009). Even with state governments and philanthropic organizations stepping into 'thin' markets, there is no guarantee or entitlement that all children can access ECEC (Centre for Policy Development, 2021). The Northern Territory is a geographically large jurisdiction in the north of Australia. It has a population of over 200,000 people, with over 25 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, compared with approximately 3.2 per cent in the rest of Australia. The Northern Territory also has a higher proportion of children 0 to 4 years (7 per cent), compared with the rest of Australia (5.8 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The NT is characterized geographically by its remote communities, home to mostly First Nations people.

2.2. Policy context of remote ECEC delivery

It is well recognized across government portfolios that the financial viability of services in remote locations cannot be assured through market approaches. Historically, Indigenous-focused ECEC services have been established under a variety of supply-side funding programs to address the issue of financial viability. In 2003, these were consolidated into the Budget Based Funding program (Department of Social Services, 2021). The BBF program was designed to "provide access to childcare in communities where mainstream or conventional childcare services are [sic] not available or viable, and where there is a need for culturally competent services, in particular Indigenous focused childcare" (ANAO, 2010, p. 39). Importantly, it provided flexibility for communities to identify their own needs and to fund specific wrap-around supports that met those community needs – such as providing transport or services for older children (Fasoli and Moss, 2007). A further 38 Aboriginal Children and Family Centres (ACFS) were established under the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development in 2009 (Brennan, 2013). The BBF and ACFS models supported service integration so families could access an array of health and education services from a single-entry point. Integrated child, family and community services are widely recognized as best practice in Indigenous and other disadvantaged communities (SNAICC, 2012a,b; Brathwaite and Horn, 2019; Moore, 2021).

In 2013, a review of these Indigenous-focused ECEC services found that holistic community-led services built on community strengths to address a wide range of physical, social, emotional and learning work. The review noted that these services had much greater scope to address complex community needs than mainstream ECEC services. They provided a trusted community-owned entry point to tackle the trauma, poverty, dislocation and disempowerment faced by many First Nations families. Communities and families could determine the learning priorities for their children and galvanize the rich learning opportunities in remote communities. Children were able to build their capabilities in line with the cultural practices and kinship arrangements of their own community including 'community languages, bush tucker and navigating the bush, and care for country' (Brennan, 2013, p. 5).

Community control is a critical element of 'what works' in ECEC in Indigenous communities (Fasoli and Moss, 2007; SNAICC, 2012a,b). It is important to note that the funding mechanisms of the

BBF and ACFS services emphasized community control and local flexibility and so were more responsive to community needs than the subsequent policy. However, there were significant sustainability issues not addressed by these programs. Most BBF services had poor quality infrastructure and found it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff (Brennan, 2013). Further, BBF services were excluded from the provisions of the ECEC system that monitor and support quality improvement (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012).

Funding for the BBF program and the ACFS was only assured until 2014. In 2018, the Commonwealth increased expenditure and restructured the subsidies and targeted programs under what became known as the Child Care package. Under this umbrella, many Indigenous focused services were formally transitioned to the demand-side market model (with targeted grants including one funding stream restricted to these services – Community Child Care Fund-Restricted). Early reviews of the impact of a demand-side funding model had already indicated that for services to break even fees would have to be up to or over \$100 per day. Further, the strict eligibility and administrative requirements made it impossible for many families to claim subsidies. Importantly, eligibility requirements mandate the number of ‘allowable’ absence days. This requirement, based on workforce norms, does not reflect where and how children’s learning takes place and the cultural obligations that generate belonging in Indigenous communities (Brennan, 2013). The evaluation of the Child Care package found the change in policy had significant *negative* impacts on over 65% of former BBF services. The evaluation noted that policies were driving former BBF services to change what they deliver and many now ‘no longer respond to the community’s circumstances and needs’ (Bray et al., 2021, pp. 317–318). Moreover, the evaluation found that targeted grants (CCCF-R, Inclusion funding etc.) were not designed in a way that is easy for services or communities to use, the restricted grants were small and did not enable adequate infrastructure development, the package as a whole did not support service integration (Bray et al., 2021).

Under the BBF program, services fell outside of the remit of Australia’s National Quality Standard (NQS) that mandates the level of quality in services eligible for federal demand-side subsidies. Most studies that review service quality in Australia utilize data from the NQS so little is known about quality in Aboriginal controlled ECEC services. Indigenous advocacy groups argue the need for high quality in Indigenous-focused services but caution that the notions of quality that manifest in regulations and quality standards do not align well enough with the cultural priorities and knowledges in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or with the resources at their disposal (SNAICC, 2019a). There is a handful of studies that have investigated the adaptability, implementation, appropriateness, and acceptability of evidence-based programs in ECEC (Elek et al., 2022). SNAICC produced service profiles of good practice of Budget Based Funded services across Australia (SNAICC, 2015). These service profiles, and other studies (Fasoli et al., 2004; Hutchins et al., 2009; Bowes and Grace, 2014; Leske et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2017) demonstrate that quality manifests differently when culturally informed practice is central to service provision.

While there are many aspects to quality, Dr. Sue Lopez Atkinson observes that ‘one of the real differences between western pedagogy and Indigenous pedagogy is the position of Elders as knowledge-holders: “I think the position of elders as teachers is not as prominent

in some western communities. So knowing you need to consult with someone before doing particular things might be quite alien to some practitioners. You cannot do what you think is appropriate, there are times you need to contact someone and say ‘is this appropriate? Is this respectful? So ... practitioners need to exercise patience, because our Elders have got huge responsibilities within their own communities, locally and internationally” (Atkinson, n.d.). This observation offers a process for defining quality in First Nations contexts.

2.3. Policy goals, calls for action and action

Improving early childhood outcomes for First Nations children is an enduring but unmet aspiration of Australian policy. The Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021) includes a goal to increase the proportion of First Nations children enrolled in ECEC in the year before fulltime schooling to 95% by 2025. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Strategy asserts the need to “improve early childhood education and care programs and funding models to increase access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021, p. 17).

In remote NT communities, these goals are compromised by ongoing funding uncertainty (SNAICC, 2018; Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training, 2020). Since 2018, 46 NT services have lost BBF funding, and 41 of the 225 early childhood education and care services are out-of-scope of government funding and regulations. Policy makers and key stakeholders have identified the urgency of developing a new funding model designed to sustain existing services, and expand promising practice models to more remote locations (Centre for Policy Development, 2021). The paucity of research into quality and ‘what works’ in remote communities has been repeatedly identified as a problem. There is a need for monitoring the effects of policy and for building an evidence base on service arrangements and practices that fall outside the remit of current policy structures.

The Select Committee on Work and Care recommended the Australian Government commit to long-term increases in funding to First Nations community-controlled Early Childhood Education and Care, with a particular focus on regional, remote and some urban areas” (Select Committee on Work and Care, 2022, p. xiii). In 2020, SNAICC proposed three evidence-based measures to ensure First Nations children can access quality ECEC. This included a minimum of 30 h per week of 95% subsidized care per week, a sector development initiative to establish regional intermediary services to build capacity, an alternative community focused funding program for Indigenous focused services.

These calls for action resulted in increases in investment in the October 2022–23 Budget. The government committed to subsidizing up to 36 h per fortnight of ECEC for First Nations children. However, this commitment falls short of assuring all First Nations children can access quality ECEC as it is focused on childcare places *in mainstream services* and amounts to 18 h per week. The budget also included \$10.2 million over 3 years from 2022–23 to establish the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership with Coalition of Peaks and First Nations representatives to develop policies on First Nations early childhood education and care (Department of Education, 2023). This second investment can

potentially support an alternative funding program and intermediary capacity building services.

Several First Nations communities and organizations have developed early childhood education and care services outside of the formal service system of funding and regulation. These services (often called out-of-scope) rely on philanthropic funding and short-term grants from government agencies (see [Barhava-Monteith, 2020](#); [Children's Ground, 2020](#)). They operate on varying models of service provision around the NT, and elsewhere, and are delivering innovative, culturally safe early childhood services. Examples include Indi Kindi, Children's Ground and mobile services such as the Katherine Isolated Children's Services ([Katherine Isolated Children's Service, 2020](#)). Other Government programs, such as Families as First Teachers ([Page et al., 2019](#); [Gapany et al., 2022](#)) and KindiLink ([Barblett et al., 2020](#)) are demonstrating positive impact for the communities they serve.

While these services can offer enormous insight into the question of what works in remote communities the models are not currently well documented (with the exception of examples noted here). Children's Ground – a community-led and evidence-based model of service delivery that is committed to combining First Nations and Western learning and development – is also calling for better monitoring of what works. They note 'there is still no clear understanding or documentation available about homelands/outstation service delivery across the NT' ([Children's Ground, 2020](#), p. 10). This absence of documentation about many remote services creates barriers to identifying gaps and opportunities for reform. This paper contributes to this gap with findings of a small pilot study that sought the perspectives of stakeholders who have diverse, insider perspectives on remote service delivery.

3. Method

The findings from the study are based on interviews with 10 stakeholders with knowledge and expertise of the ECEC landscape and community needs.

3.1. Theoretical framework

The study aimed to better understand the complexities and identify promising practices related to funding, regulation, and research to improve ECEC service delivery in remote communities. It is grounded in critical policy analysis and the recognition that the design and delivery of ECEC in remote communities, and for First Nations families, can be considered a 'wicked policy problem' that requires systems thinking, collaboration and coordination ([Head and Alford, 2015](#)). As such, the study is inspired by a solution driven research approach that prioritizes research that is relevant to partners, stakeholders and end users ([Western, 2019](#)). In this way, the study was designed to identify solutions to ECEC delivery in remote communities and identify opportunities to collaborate in future research. Given the study was undertaken as a pilot project to inform a longer-term research project in collaboration with First Nations organizations, the study was also informed by community-based participatory research with First Nations organizations, particularly an openness to learn from each other, have trust and prioritize community leadership ([Snijder et al., 2020](#)).

3.2. Sample and recruitment

Stakeholders were identified primarily through relevant parliamentary reviews and inquiries with a strong focus on the Productivity Commission inquiry into expenditure in the Northern Territory ([Productivity Commission, 2020](#)), and the 2020 Parliamentary inquiry into education in remote and complex environments (Parliament of Australia, 2020). These inquiries specifically sought submissions from organizations and service providers with an interest and expertise in improving access to ECEC services for children living in remote communities, and thus offered rich data and context for understanding key stakeholders with expertise.

The first author, Elizabeth Adamson invited the participants using publicly available contact information and, in some instances the researcher had contact information for professional contacts. Stakeholders were also identified and invited via the author's professional networks, some of whom also had contributed to one of the above inquiries. Stakeholders were asked if there were any other stakeholders who may be interested in participating, with three of the 10 participants ultimately being recruited through this snowballing method.

The participants were selected based on their known expertise in advocating for and delivering ECEC services in remote locations, their broader understandings of the ECEC system in Australia, and local perspectives about ECEC models for First Nations children. Of the 13 organizations and stakeholders identified through submissions to the above inquiries and known professional connections, three First Nations organizations did not respond to invitations or declined to participate in the study. It's understood the reasons were due to not having organizational capacity, as well as internal ethics processes that made participation difficult for a project of this small scale. Half of the interview participants ($n = 5$) had a particular focus on the Northern Territory. Of the 10 participants, three were First Nations stakeholders, or were employed by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander-led organization or service. Of the remaining seven participants, three had NT-specific experience and/or perspectives, and four had broader ECEC policy and sector expertise with a particular focus on servicing or advocating for remote and disadvantaged communities. Two interviews were undertaken face-to-face, and eight were undertaken via Teams/Zoom video conferencing.

3.3. Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were guided by three themes: (1) funding context (including impact of recent changes to Budget Based Funding, and role of philanthropy in the ECEC sector); (2) Quality and regulatory context (including workforce challenges and cultural considerations); and (3) Future research (including research gaps, opportunities, and considerations).

The first author tested the interview topic guide and research questions with two stakeholders. The interview guide was adapted throughout the interviews to align with the participants' own expertise and background, and to ensure their own priorities, views and concerns were not restricted by narrow questions, or the author's pre-empted research interests. With participants' consent the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, where the researcher undertook an initial analysis to identify the key themes that emerged. These themes broadly aligned with the research

questions' focus on funding, regulation, quality and research gaps, yet other themes and sub-themes emerged. Using an iterative approach to analysing the data, both authors reviewed and adapted the themes to better capture the nuances of the participants' views, particularly in relation to literature, policy papers and developments that reflected the background of the study (outlined above). This second round of analysis informed the identification of the three key themes, presented below, in relation to: funding complexities and the concept of universality, Community-led delivery and cultural knowledge, and workforce challenges and prioritization of local staff.

3.4. Ethical considerations

The team was committed to undertaking this research in a culturally informed and ethical way. It received Ethics approval from the UNSW Ethics Committee (HC220477) and the Top End Ethics Committee (HREC-2022-4394). The project was designed to ensure the perspectives of First Nations individuals and organizations were sought and their unique expertise recognized. Given the importance of research about First Nations people to be led by First Nations people (NHMRC, 2018), the authors were cognizant to not assume research questions were relevant or priorities of participants. The interview questions and protocols encouraged participants to talk broadly and define their own priorities for ECEC policy and delivery.

4. Results

4.1. Untangling effective funding and service design for remote communities

Stakeholders talked at length about the complexity of the different funding streams, and various changes in recent years. There was overall consensus that the current, and recent, programs are not successfully tackling the challenge of equitable access to ECEC for families in remote communities. While the quote below refers to the Northern Territory context, this sentiment also captures the view of stakeholders from other regions.

So I think that there's been ebbs and flows and changes in the challenges of remote delivery that governments have dealt with - the NT government have dealt with in various ways but never achieved equitable service delivery (Stakeholder 4).

Stakeholders noted that targeted funding streams like the BBF program were developed because government *recognized* that a market model does not work in remote communities. In spite of this recognition, new governments sometimes tried to reimpose market models:

there was quite a swing away from that [BBF approach] and towards bringing many services within what we might think of as a more market based or market-oriented idea of funding. [...] but I'm hoping that with the current government, there may be some recognition that that's not an appropriate approach to funding certainly for remote communities and possibly for other communities as well (Stakeholder 1).

A couple of stakeholders referred to how the layers, or intersection, of funding and programs create complex circumstances for services and families, whereby funding seems to cancel each other out, hindering service sustainability. In the following quote the stakeholder observes the service could seek state/territory funding for a preschool program, they could seek funding for operational costs via a federal funding stream for Indigenous services and/or could seek subsidies for families via the mainstream federally funded CCS program. They explained that:

the preschool would be fully funded if that's approved, for a short period of time. But from my understanding the CCCF-R guidelines don't allow for two funding models. So we have to look at how that can work. And there's a CCS layer as well. So we're trying to look at how three funding models can value add, rather than cancelling each other out (Stakeholder 6).

The issue here for the service providers is that all the funding streams are a poor fit for the community's needs – which extend beyond pre-school hours and the traditional remit of childcare and pre-school. There are multiple funding streams available but all are narrow and inflexible in scope which creates a tension for First Nations services as most communities have broader objectives to support whole communities. Referring to the most recent changes under the 2018 Child Care Package, one stakeholder stated:

Aboriginal services are not just trying to provide childcare for kids, they are trying to empower a community, trying to provide cultural safety for children, and CCS [Child Care Subsidy] doesn't recognize that. So I think those services are really really struggling, so no I haven't seen anyone thrive under the new model (Stakeholder 8).

Stakeholders identified the benefits of place-based funding, opposed to multiple federal and state/Territory program funding. One research participant emphasized the importance of place-based funding where communities could define their own needs and noted the precedent established by the Communities for Children model (Katz et al., 2010) which delivers a package of services and programs across portfolios (education, health, and child protection) determined at a local area level in 52 disadvantaged communities. She commented:

There is no reason that the government couldn't fund nation by nation for First Nations people, like they've got the model there but they need to value and respect the differences between nations which is critical in policy, and you can't have Aboriginal people from different nations representing other nations at a senior government policy level which is what we do at the moment as a country (Stakeholder 4).

Overall, stakeholders talked about the complexities, limitations and lack of calibration of current funding streams and initiatives – both for families and service providers. Stakeholders recognized there is a need for 'parallel' streams where targeted funding accompanies universal funding (Stakeholder 5). Many wanted to be included in the universal system so children in remote communities could receive the same quality early childhood education as other children but emphasized the need for targeted flexible funding for the additional family and

community services necessary for this aspiration to be achieved. As one stakeholder explained an inclusive universal system would overturn the

endles[sic] picking out groups as the neediest or most disadvantaged, it's just simply not the way to go [...] because it leaves so many groups vulnerable to not being seen, not being viewed. But [also] because it carries within it a whole weight of, I guess, discrimination and treating people as other (Stakeholder 1).

Similarly, another stakeholder stated:

[With] a new federal government in and a bit of a commitment to reform, to actually undertake a more substantial process around funding model reform. [...] I think we've put pretty clear positions that tinkering with the kind of individual subsidy-based model isn't going to solve the problems for service delivery, especially in remote communities and especially for, for highly vulnerable populations (Stakeholder 5).

Three stakeholders explicitly talked about the need to unravel what exactly 'universality' means and looks like in policy. For example, as two stakeholders explained:

it would be wonderful to have fleshed out an ideal of universality for remote communities [...] And I think that if the commitment [to universal access] is genuine, then what governments and all the other organizations are going to have to do is really is really deep consultation with communities and their leaders as to what that that should mean in their contexts (Stakeholder 1).

I think definitely universal access, what does that mean, what does it look like in different environments. And understanding that universal access will look different for different children, so having universal access to what a child needs. So I think there's a lot that needs to be unpicked there (Stakeholder 8).

Thus, stakeholders tended to agree that 'universal' delivery will manifest differently across communities because a responsive, inclusive universal system requires a commitment to community-led design and delivery. They noted the poverty of policy language in the mainstream system and suggested change to key terms like 'childcare' and even 'work.'

As will be discussed further in the next sections, language needs to reflect people's worldviews and everyday realities in order to realize the concept of universality in these communities. For example, one stakeholder commented,

The childcare model itself, the language around it, in remote communities, has to change. It cannot be a 'well you drop your child here and go to work', because that's not happening in [most] remote communities [...] the parent needs to be involved in the model, they need to be growing with the child. Because nothing is going to change if it's a bunch of [western] educators and a coordinator bringing up children. Community change is what's needed...so parents and elders have to be involved in that (Stakeholder 7).

It is also important to note that out of scope services may rely on a mix of philanthropic money, small government grants, and royalties and other community income streams. Further many remote communities are comprised of more than one community group, which can create challenges for investing income that comes to some but not all families, and for inclusive community representation in leadership and workforce development. This intra-community diversity can create an additional layer of funding and governance complexity which is not fully explored in this paper.

Stakeholders had diverse perspectives about the role and potential of philanthropy and how it shapes the sector. Some were uncertain about the role of philanthropy within the current market model of ECEC and what this means for universal entitlements. However, they recognized the value of the initiatives funded by these organizations in relation to broader sector development. They noted this funding allowed innovation, new practices to be trialed, programs to be built from the ground up and could resource advocacy (Stakeholders 2, 8). They recognized that philanthropically funded initiatives create a challenge because systems are not in place to monitor and measure outcomes from the various programs and initiatives funded by philanthropic organizations. (Stakeholder 6). A stakeholder from a community-led organization funded through a philanthropic foundation agreed with this general view, stating:

we're still doing a million little data reports for a lot of different funders. But, you know, it is that collective investment that enables us to deliver and report to government with the flexibility from the philanthropy (Stakeholder 4).

Stakeholders also identified the positive role philanthropic organizations could play in building a strong evidence base, which will be discussed further in the Discussion.

4.2. Prioritizing community-led delivery and alignment with local knowledge

Aboriginal-led service delivery is increasingly recognised as a central pillar for effective service delivery in Aboriginal communities (SNAICC, 2015; Department of Social Services, 2021; Early Childhood Australia, 2022), 'guided by Indigenous ways of knowing' that prioritizes culture, and the role of family and kin in pedagogy (Harrison et al., 2017, p. 191). Stakeholders offered examples of how policy systems, service design and delivery should be community led and these typically aligned with the published examples of promising practices (SNAICC, 2015). They emphasized the need for better recognition of, and creative ways to foster, cultural knowledge and skills of the local workforce, which is discussed further in the next section.

There was consensus about the important role of community members in designing and delivering services. One stakeholder believed that one way to address this challenge would be to have stronger leadership from local women elders, who were often not represented in community leadership structures and organizations.

If there was a strong women's group then the coordinator would be taking direction from them, and there would be more opportunity for sustainability (Stakeholder 7).

Stakeholders often talked about community-led delivery in relation to broader concepts of quality and culture, including how and why regulations should be adapted to community circumstances and needs. They believed in the value of ensuring community leaders have their say about “what children need,” stating:

I think we need to open up space to allow communities to have some real say about modifications and adaptations [...] I think it has to be, it has to be a much more considered and thoughtful and joint collaboration, I think, between regulatory agencies, leaders and families to figure that out. But we all know that the workforce challenges across Australia are so acute. There's no way we are going to be meeting all of those requirements anytime soon in very remote areas (Stakeholder 1).

This prioritization of community-led policy extended to community-led delivery at the service level. One stakeholder felt strongly the local female elders, in particular, should be more involved, providing direction to service coordinators. With ongoing turnover of non-Indigenous staff in remote communities, the stakeholder believed this model would improve the sustainability of services (Stakeholder 7).

And [community name] is really interesting because the families don't like sending their children to childcare, they see that as shame. Because why should someone else have to look after their children? But they'd come to Families and First Teachers program because they're part of one family. So what we find is the ladies who work in childcare, it's actually the family that enroll in the creche. You won't find people coming to enroll who aren't related to the ladies (Stakeholder 7).

One stakeholder argued that a First Nations education system could be “generic enough to be planned, developed and reflected nation by nation” and could sit alongside a mainstream education system (Stakeholder 4). Many early childhood services in the NT have funding for designated First Nations positions. However, community members are often paid as support workers rather than educators. This remunerates local Indigenous knowledge holders less than those who hold western teacher credentials. One stakeholder argued First Nations staff need to be equally remunerated and valued to address the hierarchy of knowledge between Indigenous and western knowledge and workforce sustainability. They explained that, in the early years, the

emphasis on cultural knowledge is as important and remunerated as much as western knowledge and if not more so sometimes, particularly for the little ones the cultural knowledge and learning in language is the most important - and then when they start to get that 3, 4, 5 age you really start to bring in more extensive western learning (Stakeholder 4).

Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of an ECEC that delivers two ways of knowing – traditionally oriented local knowledge including knowledge accrued by Aboriginal people post-colonization and western/global knowledge. Pedagogical leadership by community elders means that children (and potentially local

workers) can receive the right knowledge at the right time. One stakeholder stated:

So we are not expecting non-Aboriginal teachers to read books about Aboriginal culture and teach the kids' language and culture, we would never expect that. But we need to have, you know, Aboriginal kids need to have access to their language and culture and all of that in their education settings and recognize that (Stakeholder 4).

However, stakeholders emphasized that while they intended to work with traditionally oriented and western knowledges, there is a power imbalance between the two that requires vigilance (and the critical knowledges accrued by Indigenous people post colonization). One stakeholder from this First Nations organization explained their approach to early childhood delivery includes a combination of western trained and cultural expertise. This blend of knowledge structures everyday practice:

[it's] at least two days a week it's learning on country which is fully in first language on country led by the cultural educators, and our western educators are there but they're in the background. And then we have the remaining days are generally at a center [...] And that is where you - it's still in language but it's also in English, but it's also where you're learning your English, your literacy, numeracy, all of those kinds of things that Aboriginal kids need to become global citizens [...] (Stakeholder 4).

In the long run, this service aspires to having all “First Nations people delivering those services, so even your western education should be in time delivered by an Aboriginal person” (Stakeholder 4). The aspirations and ideals advocated by many stakeholders were often followed with caveats about the structural barriers to achieving Aboriginal-led service delivery, discussed further below.

4.3. Promoting quality through investment in, and valuation of, local workforce

Most out-of-scope services (funded through the CCCF-R program or by independent funding streams) are not currently required to meet the National Quality Standards because of challenges in upskilling the workforce so they have recognized credentials. Stakeholders regularly asserted that cultural knowledges should be prioritized over Western pedagogies and qualifications. One stakeholder said credentials

need to recognize how important cultural relationships and knowledge are in engaging families and supporting families in the local community and that those things are not recognized in qualifications or in in quality standards (Stakeholder 5).

Some suggested that policy could better recognize the skills and knowledge of local staff, rather than hold a myopic focus on their attainment of formal qualifications:

So it's not about the qualification, it's about the gap that needs to be closed for educators who are great educators and operators, and

great connections to families and community but it's that formal qualification or literacy levels that need to be considered first [...] I think there's more benefit in figuring out how educators can show competencies in the context of how they're working, the practice is where it counts (Stakeholder 6).

However, there was recognition that it was important for local educators to be able to access training that involved western knowledges.

Ideally, we would like to see people supported so that there can be people with the qualifications able to take up these roles (Stakeholder 5).

There was broad consensus that there are significant barriers facing local community members wanting to gain this training and credentials. The logistics of undertaking Certificate IIIs were not well supported by policy. One stakeholder indicated “the RTOs that administer the Certificate IIIs aren't ready to do the remote work” (Stakeholder 7). Furthermore, they noted, “I just do not think any thought has been put into how that [requirement for credentials] is going to impact the community” (Stakeholder 7).

Recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff members in remote communities was identified as a significant part of the policy problem, but also the policy solution. One stakeholder identified partnerships between communities and training institutes as “potentially valuable areas to build on” (Stakeholder 5). Others noted that productive partnerships between RTOs and certain communities existed previously, but that “funding does not allow for it anymore. So that makes it quite difficult for staff to access training that is truly accessible. Because online is not an option when it's in English and that's your fourth language” (Stakeholder 6). They identified other successful local initiatives, including services partnering with local schools offering VET courses to Year 10 and 11 students. Another service organized their daily program to allow educators paid time to complete their studies:

In [community] we've got one Western coordinator, one Western educator and 3 [local] educators. But the reason we could do that is that [community] only operates until midday, and we paid them to stay on to complete their certificates (Stakeholder 7).

Cultural activities and family obligation were commonly identified as a key challenge to recruiting and retaining First Nations staff. One stakeholder explained that out-of-scope services have the capacity to be respectful of the customary activities and obligations of Aboriginal people and respond to the needs of both families and local staff:

We recognize they won't be around so then they go off and do that [sorry business]. But that can't happen in mainstream systems because there is no flexibility [...] And so for people with that level of work experience we have extremely supportive systems and variable contracts and you work when you can, where you can and all that kind of stuff, and we respect the kinship systems (Stakeholder 4).

It was recognized by more than one stakeholder that this requires a lot of resources to cover periods when staff are away, however this

model was viewed as a good investment because these staff are reinvigorated with traditional knowledge and remain loyal and committed to the organization (Stakeholders 4, 7).

Stakeholders identified the challenges of attracting local women to work in the childcare and the need to prioritize cultural knowledges in the everyday running of services:

There needs to be a way to really motivate the women to do their study. If we're not running the childcare in a way that the community believes we should raise children then nobody is going to be interested in studying a Western model. I just don't think enough work has gone into it [developing a culturally safe model]. I don't think they've asked the right questions (Stakeholder 7).

In addition to these service and program level initiatives, another example that is designed to build capacity and retention among staff is SNAICC's THRYVE program, which is intended to “support the capacity of First Nations early childhood services to deliver quality early education and development supports” (p. 4). One stakeholder commented on how, through the initiative, “small teams in particular states and territories to be able to work with the Aboriginal early years services to support them around workforce development and policy and program development and providing [sic] that kind of intermediary or backbone support that we have been calling it (Stakeholder 5). This pilot program is operating in urban, regional and remote locations across New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia to support and represent First Nations community-controlled early years services, and responds to the need to build capacity and among Aboriginal-controlled services and support local solutions.

5. Discussion

The three themes discussed above point to considerable consensus among a diverse group of stakeholders about the current limitations of the market model. The findings demonstrated that the market-model for ECEC and multiple, and changing, funding streams create financial uncertainty and instability in many remote communities. Stakeholders offered different views about the effectiveness of targeted funding streams. Although there was a consensus that services should be accessible to all, stakeholders explicated that universality looks different across communities and noted the need for a clear definition of universality and more thought about how a universal set of principles can align with the values in remote communities and their need for service differentiation. These findings align with other research with remote First Nations communities in relation to the need to recognize alternative approaches to early learning and care for children (Fasoli and Moss, 2007; Harrison et al., 2017).

Stakeholders articulated the need to shift to supply-side funding, but in a way that recognizes and prioritizes diverse community needs. Supply-side funding is more effective in achieving uniform quality, and a “higher degree of equity and access and participation than consumer subsidy models” (OECD, 2006 in Brennan, 2013, p. 21). Targeted approaches risk the development of a multi-track service system, which embeds different quality services for children depending on their income-level and targeted inclusion/exclusion in the national system. This type of fragmented system has the potential

to embed structural disadvantage in the early years with long-term social and economic consequences (Gambaro et al., 2014). Only a universal system has the best chance of providing sustained high-quality services for all children across the income-spectrum (Penn, 2009; Watson, 2012). Overall, the findings show that deeper consultation about community priorities is required if the ECEC system is to meet children's needs universally.

Themes about community-led delivery intersect with discussions about the qualities that should underpin practice. There was strong consensus that high quality practice relies on community elders guiding all aspects of practice (from determining the nature of services that need to be available, to communication with families, setting up learning environments, pedagogical interactions with children). This will ensure practice is embedded in cultural knowledges specific to and sustaining for the community. In this way, the findings about community-led delivery, quality and local workforce challenges and solutions are intertwined. These findings very much align with previous research about community-led delivery and pedagogical practice that have been undertaken in the Northern Territory (Fasoli and Moss, 2007; Armstrong et al., 2022). Stakeholders identified the importance of Aboriginal-owned organizations to have representation from across their communities, touching on gender, age and different family groups as cohorts that were sometimes underrepresented. In particular, stakeholders emphasized the need for local elder women to be more involved with the design and delivery of ECEC services so as to better reflect the cultural knowledges and practices of their communities. This aligns with good practice case studies of First Nations early childhood services (SNAICC, 2019a). It is important their own skills and knowledge about child rearing and education underpin the everyday practices of services, and their role is recognized and supported within the broader regulatory and qualification frameworks.

As with the sector more broadly, there are critical structural barriers to building up the local workforce. This included the structure and format of Certificate III, including language and online access; and requirements to undertake placements in different communities. These barriers are recognized in the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (Australian Education and Care Quality Authority, 2021). Importantly, there are also cultural barriers whereby stakeholders identified local women (primarily) are not encouraged to enter the sector because the purpose and practices of mainstream ECEC often do not resonate with their own cultural beliefs about childrearing and education. Stakeholders offered solutions to this, including dual systems that prioritize both Western and First Nations pedagogy and knowledge, akin to identified approaches operated by non-government organizations in the Northern Territory and across other communities in Australia (Barhava-Monteith, 2020; Children's Ground, 2020). These findings touch on some of the key themes from another study undertaken by the authors, particularly around the need to privilege local knowledge and skills outside existing quality frameworks (Skattebol et al., 2023) through better recognition and valuation of cultural practices and worldviews. Importantly there are existing ECEC frameworks and approaches that regard local knowledges as central for children's wellbeing and belonging as well as a rich foundation for learning western/global knowledge and skills. Australia has a strong heritage in two ways (both ways) education (Ober and Bat, 2007) and marginalized people in other countries have

utilized the funds of knowledge concept (González et al., 2006) to galvanize children's existing everyday knowledge the with western/global knowledge which brings power in the wider society.

One of the aims of the study was to generate a better understanding about the research gaps and priorities in relation to ECEC policy in remote communities. Stakeholders agreed that research and evaluation is critical to inform evidence-based approaches and advocate for policy reform. However, some stakeholders were also critical about how the gaps should be addressed:

"In early childhood there's no lack of knowing what the problems are, there's a lack of evidence about the causal links" (Stakeholder 8).

The stakeholders in the study were from diverse organizations and backgrounds, including First Nations and non-First Nations participants, offering national and jurisdictional-level perspectives. The common gaps that were prioritized by stakeholders centered on workforce issues (Stakeholders 1, 2), community-controlled approaches (Stakeholder 5) and the need for Aboriginal-led research (Stakeholder 4). It is integral that communities are involved not only in research about the everyday practice and pedagogy to support children's development (Lowell et al., 2018; Armstrong et al., 2022), but also in research about how these practices can inform the design of policy and research to monitor how these programs are working (Children's Ground, 2020).

Children's Ground model for long-term evaluation offers an approach to embedding First Nations worldviews and approaches into rigorous data collection and monitoring, and which views outcomes holistically. It tackles issues integral to undertaking high quality research with and about First Nations communities, including research integrity, data sovereignty and the involvement of First Nations researchers in data collection and evaluation (Children's Ground, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The paper outlines many of the complexities and nuances of ECEC service delivery in remote communities. It also identifies challenges and tensions at the nexus of research and policy change. It is designed to prompt discussion about current initiatives, challenges, and future possibilities for ECEC in remote communities and, ultimately, it is intended to foster dialogue among policy makers, service providers and researchers in the ECEC policy field.

It is important for us, as non-Indigenous researchers, to acknowledge the limitations of our findings, while also recognizing and valuing how new data and perspectives can contribute to change. We advocate for further research in this area to be led by First Nations researchers and communities. However, given the study's focus on policy stakeholders, all who held a position of privilege within their organizations (both First Nations and non-First Nations), the findings from this pilot study offer new insights into current policy developments and build on recent sector momentum to expand and improve outcomes for children living in remote communities, particularly First Nations children. There is potential to continue to invest in collaborative projects that involve governments, Indigenous-owned organizations and ECEC

providers to improve outcomes of First Nations children and families. The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership is an example of a new initiative that aims to address the identified need for sector partnerships. It is important these types of initiatives are monitored and evaluated so that successful elements of these programs can be retained and expanded to new locations, and even difference service sectors.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The study was reviewed and approved by UNSW Sydney HREC and the NT Health and Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee (NT HREC). The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in the study.

Author contributions

EA developed the research questions, undertook the qualitative research for the study, analyzed the data, and drafted the findings. JS

supported the analysis and interpretation of findings, and contributed equally to writing of the article. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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