Building a bridge to support the early learning of Aboriginal children in remote Northern Territory communities

Background
High-quality early learning programs that support the early learning and school readiness of young Aboriginal children are important to families, communities and governments across Australia. In particular, early childhood teaching practices that incorporate and prioritise the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical knowledges and perspectives of families, children and community members (Martin, 2017) are critical to creating equitable learning and development outcomes for young Aboriginal children as they transition to preschool and school. The introduction of Families as First Teachers (FaFT) playgroups by the Northern Territory (NT) Government in 2009 created a platform for exploring how an evidence-based early learning program could be meaningfully implemented in partnership with local communities and families to improve the developmental outcomes of young Aboriginal children in remote communities. The FaFT approach is an Australian adaptation (Page et al., 2019) of the Abecedarian Project in the United States – an evidence-based early learning approach which has been shown to improve the short and long-term academic, language, social-emotional and health outcomes of vulnerable young children (Sparling & Meunier, 2019).

Research Context
The NT government and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education partnered in an ARC Linkage Project (LP13010000) which built on the early FaFT adaptation work. This study sought to establish an Early Childhood Education (ECE) learning bridge, supported at one end by the strength of local cultural knowledge and practices, and at the other by proven learning techniques from research and practice in ECE. It was conducted with Aboriginal children, families and staff at two Families as First Teachers (FaFT) playgroups in two remote Northern Territory communities. FaFT is a voluntary early learning and family support program for Aboriginal families in remote communities, managed by the Department of Education, NT Government (Cooke & Piers-Blundell, 2019). FaFT playgroups are co-delivered by a Family Liaison Officer (a local Aboriginal person with early childhood experience), and a Family Educator (an early childhood teacher) to ensure the fidelity of program delivery and to support children’s cultural knowledge, local language fluency and identities as learners. FaFT staff provided parents with coaching in the use of 3a strategies in first language/s. Contributions from a core Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group (IECPRG) and from each community helped to ensure that local culture, identity, and language remained at the centre of the program.

Research Aims
This study explored whether a culturally adapted 3a approach could support young Aboriginal children’s language, learning and cultural knowledges and skills prior to preschool. Implementation data on two components of the 3a approach (Conversational Reading and Learning Games) were reported. Levels of program dosage (child and family engagement with 3a strategies), parents’ mastery of 3a strategies, and parents’ aspirations for their children’s learning were monitored and analysed. Developmental outcomes for 149 children aged 24-56 months were assessed using an adapted Brigance Early Childhood Screen II.

Key Findings
Cultural responsivity matters
Embedding culture and local language in the program was an essential component of its success. The culturally adapted 3a approach was delivered effectively in playgroups and was a meaningful strategy to engage families and support children’s early learning outcomes.

Family engagement matters
Family participation at FaFT and parents’ engagement with 3a strategies were positively associated with children’s language and learning outcomes at the end of the study. Coaching at FaFT was an effective way to build parents’ confidence in the use of 3a strategies.

Program dosage matters
Children’s language and early learning outcomes were positively associated with program dosage. Greater exposure to and engagement in 3a strategies predicted stronger language and developmental outcomes for children at the end of the study.

Fidelity of implementation matters
Maintaining the learning intent of evidence-based strategies that underpinned cultural adaptations was important. The provision of coaching and monitoring parent mastery of 3a strategies supported the fidelity of the implementation strategies.
About REEaCh
The Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Hub was established in 2019 with funding from the Leaper Foundation. The REEaCh Hub works to translate research findings into real-life solutions so that all young Australian children can realise their potential. education.unimelb.edu.au/REEaCh

Implications for policy and practice

Cultural and community responsivity
Successful implementation of 3α strategies in remote communities is more likely when the program is connected to the community and tailored to meet the specific needs of each community. Embedding local culture and languages in authentic ways while maintaining the learning content underpinning evidence-based strategies is essential. In addition, building the capacity of local staff and families is critical to the success and sustainability of the FaFT program.

Family engagement
Family engagement is imperative to improve children’s outcomes. It is important to make the learning visible each day and to show family members how they are supporting children’s learning when they are engaging in 3α strategies together. Sending home popular and culturally adapted Learning Games and books can support family members to engage in 3α strategies with children at home.

Program dosage
Attendance alone is not a reliable indicator of engagement in the program. To have the greatest impact on children’s outcomes, it is important to structure the FaFT session to increase child and family engagement over time. Keeping daily records supports FaFT staff and family members to make sure every child attending FaFT is engaging in 3α strategies each day.

Fidelity of implementation
3α strategies have the greatest impact when they are implemented as intended while aligning with cultural priorities. Monitoring and tracking how families and children are engaging with 3α strategies is critically important.

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Suggested Citation

References


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