



Introduction

The following is in recognition of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day established by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC).

There is a strong history at TeEACH of working with Indigenous children and communities for improved health and wellbeing outcomes. Bradley Burns and Phillip Good, are indigenous Higher Degree Research students studying within TeEACH and their research is informed by listening to and giving prominence to the Indigenous child voice. Phill's research "Children as Health Ambassadors: an approach to improving health, wellbeing and learning outcomes for Indigenous children and communities" will feature in this article.

Informed by his research Phill will discuss the important role that children and young people can play in advocating for healthy lifestyles. Brad, who is an accomplished and recognised Indigenous artist, has kindly supported the article with his traditional art work. Watch out for a coming article from Brad on his research with children in out of home care.



Children as Health Ambassadors: an approach to improving health, wellbeing and learning outcomes for Aboriginal children and communities

Background

It is important to listen to the voices of children and young people in matters that affect their lives. According to Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 2011), this is a child's right. If a change in health outcomes for children is to occur, then children need to be involved as partners in that change (McAneney et al., 2022; Shier, 2001). Engaging with children and young people on their health and service needs is a small but growing area of research in Australia (Grace et al., 2019). In their scoping review of Australian research from 2000 to 2018 using participatory designs with children about health services, Grace et al. (2019) found that only four of the 23 identified papers reported engaging with Indigenous children and young people. This finding highlights a need for more Australian research exploring the perspectives of Indigenous children on their health and support needs.



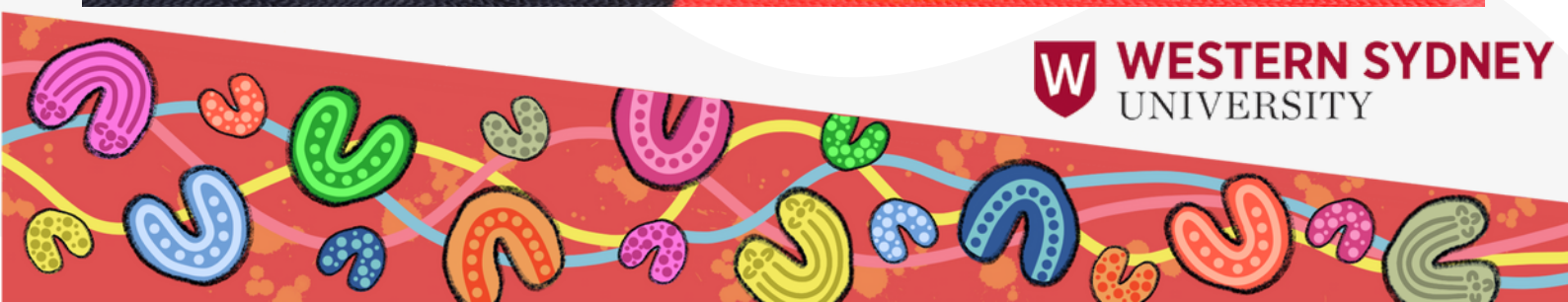


The health innovation

The model used to explore Aboriginal child health education for this research was required to employ a child-centred, community-embedded, co-designed and strengths-based approach to support the health literacy of Aboriginal children. The Malpa Project's Young Doctors for Life (YDFL) program included these criteria with the aim to support the health literacy of Aboriginal children in suburban, regional and remote areas across Australia to address Aboriginal child health inequalities. The concept of young doctors comes from the traditional healers called Ngangkari in Central Australia, who select young people with the right attitude and aptitude to become healers or young doctors. Traditionally, children as young as four can start the journey to becoming healers for their people. For those children, it is a lifetime commitment. Malpa is a Warlpiri word that means 'a friend on the journey' and the Malpa Project's mission is to build on this tradition; collaborating with communities to empower and mentor children who will play a role in their health and in the health of their communities (Malpa, 2021).

This study critically and independently explored the YDFL health innovation that aims to address the current health disparities in many of today's Aboriginal communities. There is a need to:

1. Explore the potential for Aboriginal children to be active agents for change within their communities.
2. Hear the perspectives of Aboriginal children on their health and support needs.
3. Further explore a child-centred, community-embedded, co-designed and strengths-based approach to health literacy in Aboriginal communities.





Child participants

The study involved two groups of Aboriginal children. Group 1, the retrospective cohort, consisted of fourteen children aged 9–12, who had completed the YDFL program within the last 2 years. Group 2 consisted of eight children aged 7–11, who were interviewed before commencing the YDFL program and then after participating. The children attended primary schools in a regional area of New South Wales, where the YDFL program was presented [1].

Data analysis

The emergent qualitative themes from the data from all 22 children were explored using a qualitative Thematic Analysis approach. Initial coding was undertaken using NVivo 12. This initial codified representation of the data progressed to a deeper exploration aimed at understanding the rich experiences and stories of the children (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The exploration of the qualitative data aimed to understand the experiences of children's participation in the YDFL program. It focused on the combined qualitative data of the pre- and post-program participants (referred to as PP in the following source attributions) and the retrospective participants (referred to as R in the following source attributions).

Extracts from children's responses

In the Thematic Analysis of the qualitative data from interviews with the children, four overarching themes were identified—1) Becoming strong, 2) Becoming agents of change, 3) Family at the centre, and 4) The Malpa experience. The following extracts are from three of the subthemes which relate to the important role that children and young people can play in advocating for healthy lifestyles.

[1] Pseudonyms used for children's names



Image: courtesy of MALPA





Subtheme: Care for self and Other Aboriginal Children.

Throughout the interviews, the children demonstrated their knowledge of self-care by speaking about staying strong and presenting their views on how to help themselves and other Aboriginal children grow up healthy and strong. The term staying strong was used in this research on the advice of our Aboriginal collaborators, who advised that Aboriginal children understood cultural strength, cultural identity and wellbeing as staying strong.

“Uhm, like connecting to your culture like always—like when you’re not—when you’re weak with your culture, you’re not learning about your culture. And when you’re strong, you’re always learning about it, and you have elders talking to you. It’s sort of like knowledge when you’re strong”.

(Irene, aged 12 years, R)

Irene, spoke of the importance of connecting to culture and learning from her Elders. Lucy also expressed the importance of seeking the support from her friends.

“Making us tough, uh, feeling—feeling good. Do something do something I like...talk to the best people ever... mainly your friends. Watch out for people... Uh, be kind to the person who be mean to you back”.

(Lucy, aged 11 years, PP)

Additionally, Rob and Tess saw the importance of helping people in need of care.

“uhm, give—probably give them, uhm, clothes. Uhm, shoes, shorts, socks, shoes. Yeah, and, uhm, food. Check their ears, mouth, nose, eyes to see if, uhm, anything’s wrong with them, and maybe their blood. Yeah, and give them, uhm, like, uhm, give them Nurofen if they’re, like, get sick”.

(Rob, aged 10 years, R)





- "I think we should show them that what's better for them, not show them that what's dark or like what's bad. I think we need to show them to pull their heads in and tell them that, 'You shouldn't be doing this, don't act like that. It's not—this isn't right' show them a better way, show them like the fun way that they would enjoy and have—change their perspective in people—in their people—and show them that we care about them that—they're not alone. We've all been through stages like that and that we all support them—with their needs".

(Tess, aged 12 years, R)

The children's responses reflected staying strong from a perspective of wellbeing and their sense of their own self-care extended to the care for other children.

Subtheme: Learning to Advocate for Self and Others

The participating children talked about several ways that they had learned to advocate for themselves and others.

- "Believing in what's right and what you think is right and what your family thinks—and standing up for what you believe in and why you believe in it and just always being around family and friends. [and you are encouraged by your family?] I think we all encourage each other to be better people".

(Tess, aged 12 years, R)

- "Like not listening to anyone if they have something mean to say and, uhm, like being who you are, not being anyone else's...well, I learnt from [the YDFL program] that if my friends don't wanna respect who I am, that I shouldn't let them disrespect me and that, uhm, I can learn to be, uhm, healthy and stuff like that".

(Steph, aged 11 years, R)

Tess spoke of the value of standing up for what you believe and what is right and finding strength from family support and values. Steph talked about holding onto a sense of herself despite comments by others that are 'mean' and 'disrespectful'.





At the start of the YDFL program's day, the trainers and children gather on the yarning circle mat with a focus on sharing and promoting care and respect for each other. The confidence building of being in the group provided a foundation for children to support each other and to become advocates, not only for themselves but also for their peers.

"I remember—when we sat in a circle, and we'd tell each other about our day and on the weekends. And we'd like to make new friends and just talk about what's going on around school and like just sharing a lot with each other and that was really nice".

(Cliff, aged 12 years, R)

It, sort of, made me a bit more confident to—it, sort of, made like everyone in our group to be, kind of, a bit more confident—and to, I guess, speak out, cause most of us or some of us, they feel like they can't speak out because of, like, our colour and stuff. And even though that there's no racism at our school—that we know of, we still feel like that we can't—do stuff, so that sort of helped us. Yeah, it made us more confident.

(Irene, aged 12 years, R)

These children's experiences powerfully spoke to how the YDFL program met its aims to build children's confidence to advocate for themselves and their peers by encouraging friendships and respect for each other and making education enjoyable. As Denis (aged 11 years, R) reported, 'They like turned education to like a fun way'. Children's responses indicated the power of yarning and enjoyable learning as instrumental in achieving the YDFL program's aim of child advocacy.



Images: courtesy of MALPA





Subtheme: Understanding Nutrition and Hygiene practices

The children described coming to understand that they have a role to play in their own health and the health of the community. Throughout the interviews, the children demonstrated their understanding of self-care by way of good nutrition and good hygiene practices:



"Well, they were teaching us how to be healthy in there and the school, like I didn't have that much healthy stuff, so, uhm, I ask mum if she could get us some healthy stuff, and she gets us some healthy stuff for school... Yeah, because tonight, I will have dancing at seven o'clock, and mum will usually stop at IGA, which is just across the road and, uhm, they have the salads there, so she'll usually let me to get one."

(Mila, aged 10 years, R)



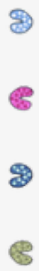
"... uhm, I think I've been—so is it, uhm, what I've changed my eating habits today? Yeah. I've probably eaten like salads and less like fats and grease, and all of that, yeah".

(Cliff, aged 12 years, R)



"They've told us like the, I guess, good and bad food and that sort of changed how I see food. And they tell us like what you can and can't eat and they—they also introduce us to new foods and salts and like jams and stuff like—uhm, like cultural sort of foods that sort of has changed my diet too. And like—yeah. I guess they're teaching us—what we used to do eat like back in the day and that".

(Irene, aged 12 years, R)



"So I would always wash my [hands] before and after I eat dinner and after I go to the bathroom or outside, or I've touched the animal. Uhm, I've cleaned my room every Sunday, and I wiped down walls and clean my sheets and stuff, to make sure my room is all clean. And I always, uhm, get—I—if I've had water sitting in my drink bottle all day, I will refill it at night and put it in the fridge. And I would clean my di-dishes and fork, knives, and things like that after I've eaten, yeah".

(Steph, aged 11 years, R)





Summary

Listening to children's voices is important for understanding their own experiences of matters they see as important in their lives (Priest, 2017; World Vision, 2022). The wider research results from this study also include the perspectives of the children's parents and their schoolteachers regarding the program's effect on the children. All aspects of the important role that children and young people can play in advocating for healthy lifestyles could not be covered in this article. However, these brief extracts from the children interviewed for this research have indicated that the educational model in this study has influenced Aboriginal children for the important role they can play in advocating for healthy lifestyles and to become health ambassadors for their peers, parents, and wider community.

Implication of the findings are:

- Indigenous health literacy programs should be child centred, community-embedded, co-designed and strengths-based, and they should
- Explore the potential for Aboriginal children to be active agents for change within their communities,
- Hear the perspectives of Aboriginal children on their health and support needs,
- Include Indigenous culture, and the awareness that Indigenous children learn differently, which is integral for health literacy education, and finally
- Learning should be fun. Then we'd do like some games and stuff—but they were also still educational which was really good. (Denis, aged 11 years, R).





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