

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Making the best of the early years: the Tambellup way

KD Clark, J Oosthuizen, S Beerenfels, A-MC Rowell

Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

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Clark KD, Oosthuizen J, Beerenfels S, Rowell A-MC

Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Tambellup is a small rural town in the Great Southern region of Western Australia (WA), approximately 300 km south-east of state capital Perth. Tambellup has a much higher Aboriginal population than the national average and achieved very positive results for year one children in 2007 regional Australian Early Development Index testing. In 2009 the Great Southern GP Network (which has a facilitating role in providing early intervention strategies to families with young children at risk of disadvantage) requested that public health staff at Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA undertake an exploratory study to discover the factors protective of children's development in Tambellup. This article describes the subsequent research and its findings.

Methods: This 2009 qualitative study interviewed both adult members of the local Aboriginal community (Noongar people; $n = 23$), and non-Aboriginal leaders from a cross-section of organisations, services and the community ($n = 14$) to determine what made growing up in Tambellup a positive experience. Aboriginal participants were introduced to the researchers by a local cultural consultant. Non-Aboriginal participants were initially sourced from a list provided by the GSGPN and extended by asking those listed to identify other appropriate contacts. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with Aboriginal participants and telephone interviews were undertaken with non-Aboriginal participants. All interviews were conducted using a standard schedule of questions as a guide, supplemented by clarifying and broadening questions from research team members. Data were analysed in a multi-stage process of collation, extraction of common themes and verification of themes with study participants and other



stakeholders. Findings were presented to local Aboriginal leaders at a community meeting and a final report was prepared and circulated to community members.

Results: There was substantial evidence of widespread trust and positive relationships in this close-knit community, where adults looked out for and supported both their own and others' children. The primary school played a key role in supporting children's development even before children started school. Good relations generally existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents, contributing to the stability of the population and providing many role models in successful cross-cultural relationships.

Conclusion: Aboriginal people in Tambellup played significant but often under-recognised roles in promoting child and youth wellbeing in the community. The community had the capacity to respond to local needs and challenges. Communication channels were effective and there was a sense of belonging, pride and 'connectedness' in the community that promoted and supported a safe environment for children. High quality services and staff (eg school and community health centre) reinforced children's developmental opportunities. The results suggest that small rural communities offer significant and untapped resources for enhancing the health and wellbeing of children in the critical early years of life.

Key words: child development, community networks, rural population, social support.

Introduction

Tambellup is a small rural town in a grain and sheep farming region approximately 300 km south east of Perth, Western Australia (WA), in the region known as Great Southern. Tambellup has an Aboriginal population of 11.2%, compared with the national average of 2.3%¹.

In early April 2009, the Great Southern GP Network (GSGPN) approached public health staff at Edith Cowan University (ECU), Perth, WA to undertake a study exploring factors protective of children's development in the regional community of Tambellup. The GSGPN's interest stemmed from its role as facilitating partner for the Australian Government's *Communities for Children* Family Support Program² which provides prevention and early intervention strategies to families with young children at risk of disadvantage. The GSGPN had noted Tambellup's very positive results for year one children in the 2007 Lower Great Southern area Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) testing.

The AEDI(3) tests consist of more than 100 questions answered by teachers for each child in their class, covering the developmental areas:

- physical health and wellbeing
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills
- communication skills and general knowledge.

The AEDI is a method that communities can use to pinpoint the strengths of local resources and services, and what can be improved³. A summary indicator comparing Tambellup's 2007 AEDI results with those of the region is provided (Fig1).

In planning the present research into Tambellup community strengths, ECU staff were guided by the *Collaboration Framework*⁴. This framework was developed by a US collaboration of researchers and practitioners and was intended for use as a guide to forming, implementing and evaluating community collaborations. Contextual factors identified in this framework were considered to be areas of interest for gaining a better understanding of the factors that underpinned the capacity of the Tambellup community to care for its children, youth and families. These factors became the subject of discussion with the stakeholders who participated in this study.

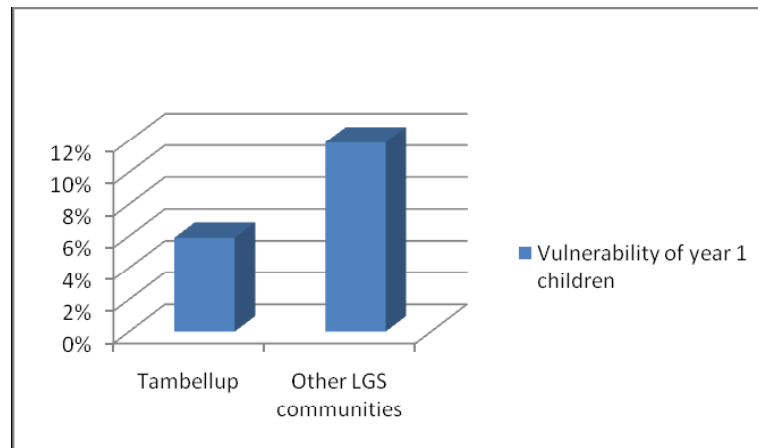


Figure 1: Vulnerability of year 1 children: summary indicator comparing Tambellup's 2007 Australian Early Development Index results with those of the Lower Great Southern Region.

The discussions were based on the following themes:

- Did different groups communicate with one another when it came to issues affecting local children and their development?
- Were adults prepared to take responsibility for the care and wellbeing of local children, even if not members of their own family?
- Was there a perception that trust, understanding and safety for local children existed?
- Did residents tend to feel they belonged, and was there a community spirit and sense of responsibility for the town's future?
- Did residents tend to share a collective sense about what was expected, valued and wanted for the town?
- Were residents ready to work together to deal with issues or to achieve community goals?

Method

Community consultation and ethics approval

Prior to the conduct of the research an Indigenous cultural consultant who lives in the Tambellup community was

approached by the researchers to express their interest and canvass general ideas about the conduct of the proposed research. The consultant discussed this with the Indigenous community leadership group and reported back their willingness to participate because they believed the research to be constructive.

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research

The study took place in June–July 2009 and utilised a self-organising evaluation design, which examines the interactions and adaptation of individuals and groups within a system, such as a community⁵. The study was initiated using a list of local stakeholders compiled by staff of the GSGPN, which included the cultural consultant from the Tambellup Aboriginal community who assisted the research team to invite leaders from Tambellup's Aboriginal community to participate.

The initial GSGPN list also identified non-Aboriginal stakeholders from a range of organisations, services and the community, which was extended by asking those on this list whether there were others in the community who the researchers should interview.



Interviews with adult Aboriginal people ($n = 23$) were all conducted face-to-face, usually in small groups. Interviews were semi-structured, casual in format and were carried out in a local community facility that is a base for a range of services delivered to Aboriginal families. This approach was taken to ensure interviewees were as comfortable as possible with the research process. Consent was sought to tape-record interviews and extensive notes were also taken. Participants were paid for their time and most interviews lasted between 30-60 min.

Interviews with non-Aboriginal service providers and community leaders ($n = 14$) were also semi-structured and were all conducted by telephone. Prior to being interviewed, the participants were sent an email outlining the background to and focus of the research. Consent was sought to tape-record interviews and extensive notes were also taken. Interviewees from this group were not paid for their time.

Data gathered from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants were subsequently analysed in a multi-stage process. This began with members of the research team reviewing collected data and extracting common themes. The themes were agreed by members of the group and documented in a draft report. Copies of the draft report were circulated among study participants and other stakeholders with a request for comments and feedback on the adequacy and accuracy of the findings. Findings were also presented to a mixed gender group of nine Tambellup Aboriginal leaders at a community meeting. Following this process, a final report was prepared and circulated to community members.

Results

The analysis from both sets of interviews affirmed common themes. In each, strong communication, connectedness, community leadership, participation in services and programs and positive cross-cultural relationships were considered to be forces supporting positive outcomes for local children. Themes that emerged from interviews were linked to some of the contextual factors (*connectedness; history of working together/customs; political climate; resources; and catalysts*) identified in the *Collaboration Framework*⁴.

Connectedness and strong communication

Tambellup was described as a 'tight-knit' community. Interviewees believed that the people were strongly connected through family relationships, organisations and businesses, and that the town's small population resulted in closer relationships, fostering a safe and supportive community for children. It was also highlighted that the Aboriginal people of Tambellup were all part of one extended family. The *Collaboration Framework* description of the contextual factor *connectedness* fits here almost exactly: '... linkages between individuals, groups and organizations'⁴. *Connectedness* also incorporates formal and informal communication networks, of which there are many in the Tambellup community.

For the children of Tambellup, the benefits of connectedness appeared extensive, resulting in there being a natural scaffolding to support, protect and guide them within the community, enabling them to encounter high levels of social cohesion and social capital, enriched by the relationships and social contacts that they and their immediate families experienced in the town. These aspects have been recognised as an important way in which communities can have an impact on child wellbeing².

Communication between various individuals, groups, services and networks within Tambellup was deemed to be effective, with the local newspaper being a pivotal tool for the distribution of town news. The primary school was also mentioned as an integral dispenser of information; using the newspaper and other means to keep the community informed about school matters. The small size of the town was seen as advantageous with respect to the flow of information, including informal communication channels among families.

Community leadership

All interviewees reported high levels of respect for the efforts of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community leaders and recognition of the value of their work in Tambellup. Members of the community were easily



motivated and leadership capacity appeared to be widespread (contextual factors *history of working together/customs* and *resources*)⁴. A recent example cited was the development of a school holiday activity program, initiated by adults from the Aboriginal community, and made available to all children. This program began in response to concerns that some children were bored and 'getting into mischief' (*catalysts*)⁴.

The establishment of the holiday program was an example of the capacity of Tambellup residents to identify reasons for collaboration, and for community leaders to use their organisational and interpersonal skills to develop a response, securing sponsorship for food and equipment and supported by the Shire who approved the use of the local football ground for the initiative. The alignment of citizens and governing bodies (the Shire) in achieving an outcome is encompassed in the contextual factor *political climate*⁴. Efficient planning and a dedicated volunteer force have meant that the program has become a sustainable fixture for the children of Tambellup. Importantly, interviewees stressed that the holiday program was just one example of a broader capacity within the community to take action and to be supported in doing so.

The significant role of Aboriginal women Elders in Tambellup was also noted. They were identified as key community role models who played a pivotal part in the town's leadership and development (*resources*)⁴.

Participation in services and programs

Many examples of community members working together to support local families and 'whole of community' projects were highlighted. This willingness to work together was identified as being a consistent feature (*history of working together/customs; resources*)⁴. Examples included the redevelopment of the town park, efforts to keep the Tambellup newspaper venture afloat and support for the local Emergency Response Services.

The capacity for proactive effort by Tambellup residents directly and indirectly fostered better local child development outcomes. Examples included parents working

together to apply for a government grant for the primary school and the assistance rendered by parents and past pupils in planning and building a shaded play area.

Being proactive and acting in the community interest extended to support for families experiencing crisis, for example when a parent had been unwell and community members stepped in to 'look after the children'. Positive contributions made by the school and teachers were frequently cited, including programs to support parents during the critical early years of child development. The school also ran playgroup programs, teaching parents child development, health and safety skills. That a significant number of teachers had been long-term residents of Tambellup leading to a low staff turn-over rate at the school was also seen as an advantage.

The school was almost universally described as a uniting force across the community, and the leadership skills and personal qualities of the principal were seen as critical. Teaching and support staff were also widely commended for their commitment to achieving positive outcomes for all children. Aboriginal interviewees indicated that a matter of particular importance to them was the effort teachers put into facilitating the transition to school of Aboriginal children, ensuring all children were valued as part of the school community, and in early and positive intervention to address any problems children encountered.

It was generally agreed that Tambellup residents, service providers and the Shire were motivated to ensure children were well catered for in terms of services and programs (*political climate*)⁴. Other activities mentioned included a variety of sporting opportunities. The health centre was singled out for a good deal of praise: community members had a clear understanding about what was provided by community health services. While praise for the health service was directed to the current staff, with whom Aboriginal community members had established trusting and positive relationships, many people also mentioned the work of a previous long-serving community nurse as being an important enduring positive influence.



Positive cross-cultural relationships and pride in place

While some interviewees mentioned that they felt some racism was evident in their community, they also felt there was much to be positive about in terms of cross-cultural ties. Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people enjoyed positive relationships and this was regarded as an important part of the quality of the community and one of its strengths. In part, the quality of cross-cultural ties was attributed to the stability of the community's population, its history, and positive leadership and role modelling in cross-cultural relationships. Another aspect appeared to be that the Aboriginal members of the Tambellup community had pride in their own history and culture and strove to pass this on to their children (*history of working together/customs*)⁴.

Community pride was evident among the people of Tambellup, recognising the benefits of living in a welcoming and supportive community that valued the achievements of its members. 'Pride in place' encompasses the contextual factors *history of working together/customs and connectedness*⁴. The people had a sense of optimism about the future and there was also a good deal of pride evident regarding the capacity of their community to support children.

Human capital and common goals

Along with having a reservoir of capacity for local leadership, interviewees also noted the willingness of Tambellup residents to participate in community events and programs. This willingness was seen to support the development of local children by ensuring families remained connected, maintained their awareness of broader policies and programs, and gained relevant health and wellbeing information. Thus, the capacity to support programs meant that Aboriginal people in Tambellup were able to effectively use resources that supported families and children both within and outside their community.

Service providers believed the community shared the goal of offering as many opportunities to local children as possible, facilitated by high quality education, the maintenance of a safe environment within the township, and strong parenting role models. Recreational groups and organisations were identified as playing key roles, serving as vehicles for enhancing communication and the wellbeing of children, in particular sporting clubs and events, which acted as opportunities for town-based and farming families, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, to join together. The contextual factors *history of working together/customs and connectedness*⁴ underpin these expressed ideas.

Emerging trends

Some interviewees suggested that Tambellup was in a stage of transition, which could possibly affect the 'connectedness' of the community's residents and its capacity to support children's development. For example, it was indicated that an increasing number of people were moving to the town to take advantage of low cost housing and that long-term town residents were becoming more mobile. *Political climate and connectedness*⁴ would be key contextual factors should the perceived emerging trends become reality.

Other factors

Two additional inter-related aspects were highlighted during the subsequent presentation of results to Tambellup Aboriginal leaders. These were the significant and long-standing influence that the Christian faith has had on many members of the local Aboriginal community, and the association of this with abstinence from alcohol.

This study highlighted a range of factors that may have contributed to the positive overall AEDI³ results found among the year one children of Tambellup. In an attempt to elaborate on what the results suggest, Green and Kreuter's Precede-Proceed model⁶ was used to develop a schematic overview outlining how the GSGPN and the Tambellup Aboriginal community might interpret the findings (Fig2).

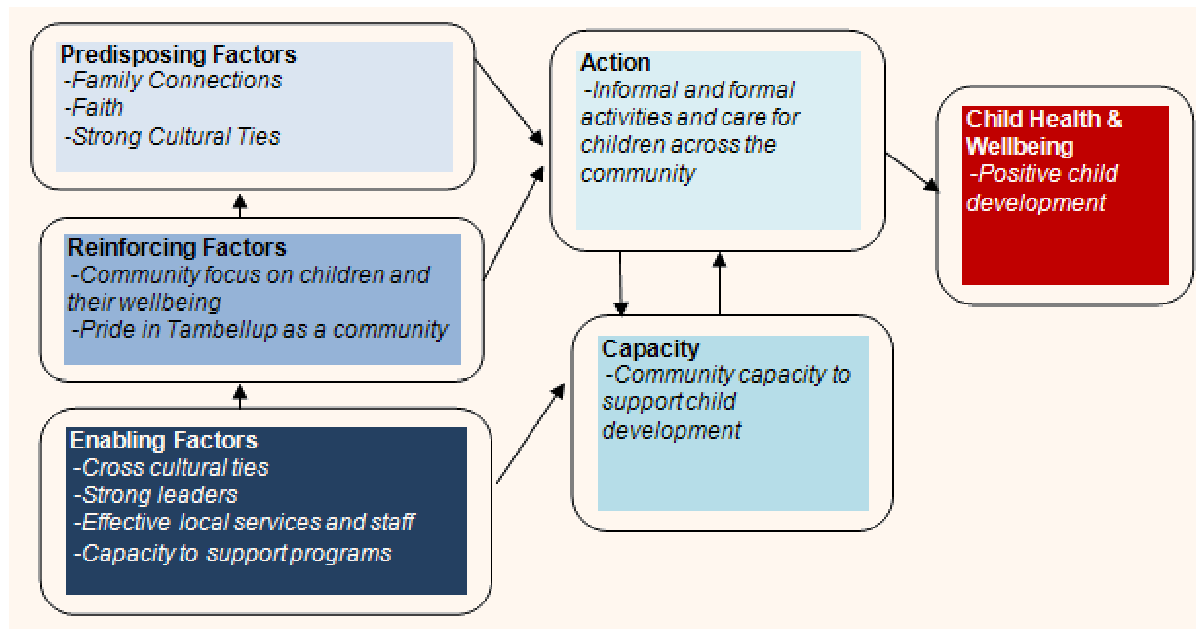


Figure 2: Schematic overview showing how the study findings for positive child development outcomes in Tambellup might be interpreted, using Green and Kreuter’s Precede-Proceed model.

Conclusion

A range of enabling, reinforcing, and predisposing factors within the community appear to have directly and indirectly contributed to improving the chances of positive development for Tambellup children. These factors are both diverse in nature and dispersed throughout the community, leading to a high-level capacity to meet the developmental needs of local children and to respond to challenges.

The willingness of local community members to ‘step up’ to take on a challenge or respond to a local need is widespread. Additionally, the quality of local services and staff (ie education and health) is high, which reinforces children’s developmental opportunities. Consequently, Tambellup seems to be an exemplar of how communities can work together to make the most of the developmental opportunities presented during the early years of life.

While this study was small and the results obtained need to be interpreted cautiously, it did suggest that there may be a rich vein of evidence in many small rural communities suggesting how some of Australia’s most significant health and social policy challenges might be addressed. Further, the researchers’ experience in the Tambellup community suggests the residents of such towns are keen to participate in sharing their ideas and are open to learning from others with respect to maintaining and promoting the health and wellbeing of residents. A process that captured this enthusiasm has the potential to generate many positive outcomes for both rural and metropolitan communities across Australia.

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