CASE STUDY OF THE
BALUNU INDIGENOUS
YOUTH HEALING PROGRAM

Strengths, challenges and implications for policy
and practice
Case Study of The Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program:
Strengths, challenges and implications for policy and practice

September 2013

This case study was conducted as a partnership between the project team at:
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UNSW, Australia

and the developers, deliverers and stakeholders of

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The Balunu Foundation
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In the spirit of respect, we acknowledge this country as belonging to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia.

This country is the only place in the world where Australia’s First Peoples belong and there is no place in Australia where this is not true.

This report documents a case study of a residential healing camp program, the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program, set on the Land of the Larrakia people in the Northern Territory. The Larrakia people are, and will always remain, the Traditional Owners of the Land and Sea at Talc Head. The Larrakia people are famous for the 1972 GWALWA DARAWIKI: THIS IS OUR LAND petition, which had over 1,000 signatures and inked thumbprints and was torn on its way to Buckingham Palace. On behalf of the case study team, we pay our deepest respects to Larrakia Elders past and present.

For over six years, the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program (Balunu Program), with the support of the local community and funding from the Northern Territory and Australian governments and others, has provided the opportunity for young Aboriginal people to reconnect with their spiritual and cultural identities and learn ways to make strong choices and positively impact their own life trajectories and that of their families. This case study provides a window into this program that we hope is valuable to policy-makers and other communities designing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth programs, especially those that contemplate being on and caring for country as a mechanism to promote young peoples’ capacity to enhance and maintain their spiritual and social and emotional wellbeing, life skills and positive life trajectories.

The University team expresses heartfelt thanks to Balunu Program coordinators, their youth participants and key stakeholders. Each gave their time generously to ensure we gained a clear understanding of the strengths and challenges faced in creating and maintaining an empowering, healing experience for Aboriginal youth, and so that others may share in their knowledge and experience. We thank the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) for their time and effort in examining the project’s ethics implications. At all times the research team has sought to produce a mutually useful product that truly reflects the knowledge and experience of the developers, deliverers and youth participants of the Balunu Program.

This study was made possible by funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The team expresses special thanks to Dr Darren Benham of FaHCSIA for support and guidance.

We also thank the School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW, for providing in kind support for Associate Professor Melissa Haswell to travel to Darwin and participate in this valuable work; and Muru Marri for additional in kind support, under the direction of Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver. The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.
### Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
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<td>AMSANT</td>
<td>Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<td>CRCAH</td>
<td>Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health</td>
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<td>FaHCSIA</td>
<td>Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs</td>
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<td>HREC</td>
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<td>Muru Marri</td>
<td>Muru Marri, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW</td>
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<td>NHMRC</td>
<td>National Health and Medical Research Council</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBI</td>
<td>Public benevolent institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEIQoL</td>
<td>Schedule for the Evaluation of Individual Quality of Life</td>
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<td>SEWB</td>
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Prologue: Starting point for this case study

This case study was nested within a larger project commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) that aims to facilitate better policy and practice in the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (Haswell et al. 2013). The need for improvement in this area is clearly evident in the much higher prevalence of negative outcomes across most measures of health, education, employment and involvement in the justice system that are reported for Indigenous youth (Doolan, Najman, Mills, Cherney & Strathearn 2013). In 2008, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that a third of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (33%) (16–24 years old) experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress; this was more than twice the rate of the equivalent group of non-Indigenous young people (14%) (ABS 2009, p. 86). Their rates of hospitalization for mental and behavioural disorders were three times that of non-Indigenous young people (AIHW 2011).

These data indicate problematic exposure of Indigenous youth to the causes and consequences of low social and emotional wellbeing, as well as a lack of opportunity to recognise and build on personal strengths and capacity to achieve their full potential. As part of this project, a systematic literature, policy and program review revealed both a need and a significant opportunity to enhance understanding of the strengths and challenges experienced by programs working on the ground and to the value of sharing knowledge and ideas on what kind of supporting mechanisms would maximise program growth and sustainability (Blignault et al. 2010).

The broad aim of this research is to provide evidence and analysis that will inform public policy and planning, and assist program managers, health professionals, and community workers and members in devising strategies that will improve the social and emotional wellbeing of youth.

Six case studies were completed to gather this information across a range of program contexts, and provide practical, useful and highly supported recommendations about what works, how and why relevant to policy, resource allocation and practice. This report describes findings from the Balunu Program, one of the six case studies that, collectively, contribute to better understanding of how the universal strengths and positive potential of young Aboriginal people, whatever their circumstances, can be successfully and sustainably fostered.

The team involved in this project wishes to clarify the starting point for this work and the lens used in carrying it out. Their aim was to ensure that the project was embedded within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of the concepts of “health” and “social and emotional wellbeing”, and also of “youth” and their position within the immediate, and broader, family and community unit (NACCHO 2006, pp. 5-6). Hence, from the outset, the team adopted a working definition of health as:

“Not just the physical wellbeing of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. This is a whole-of-life view and it also includes a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989, p. x).

Several fundamental health concepts emerge from this definition:

- the centrality of the word “wellbeing” to health and its multiple dimensions; i.e., physical, social, emotional and cultural aspects (spirituality and connection to country are also frequently identified)
- family and community wellbeing is inseparable from that of each individual
- one’s individual wellbeing and achievement of potential are essential components of the wellbeing of the whole community; i.e., the process is interactive and iterative.

The project team, which comprised both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, was unanimous in their recognition of the paramount importance of the often enormously challenging circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, and the relative lack of attention accorded to their strengths and needs. For example, while there is no argument that healthy pregnancy and early childhood development are essential to long-term outcomes, there appears to be no such consensus regarding the importance of supporting children and adolescents as they undergo the demanding phase of physical, social, emotional and identity development into young adults that occurs prior to parenthood. The team further recognised this group is susceptible to experimentation with drugs and alcohol, development of common mental disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety) as well as psychotic illness, and other poor consequences including injuries, suicide, lack of progress in education, criminal activity and incarceration, the development of risk factors for chronic disease (e.g., overweight, poor nutrition and low levels of physical activity), and to becoming parents at an early age themselves.

We believe this project has the potential to ameliorate the negative consequences of not paying close attention to the social and emotional wellbeing needs of this group, which are patently huge. Even more important, however, is the project’s opportunity to provide evidence-informed guidance in setting policy direction in this area, e.g., for the integration of social and emotional wellbeing into the Council for Australian Government’s strategies for ‘Closing the Gap’, to ensure that programs and services are designed and implemented in the most effective ways to assist Indigenous young people to successfully transition to healthy adulthood and parenthood.

From the outset, the team has been fully aware that we have been working with a potentially vulnerable group and with often-struggling programs and services. As a result we resolved to work assiduously to avoid the following, common, pitfalls that often beset projects such as this and, indeed, with which existing programs and services constantly grapple, e.g.:

- acknowledging the need for action, but then failing to embed the research within a strong action orientation;
- focusing too specifically on young people to the exclusion of family and community units, thereby exacerbating rather than reducing disconnection;
- underestimating the disempowering circumstances facing many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at multiple levels that, if left uncorrected, will continue to act as major barriers to successful action and sustainability;
- not fully taking into account the many different contexts and settings in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are growing up and the need to be attentive to their life circumstances;
- overemphasising what is wrong, rather than seeking out what is working for young people; i.e., starting from a deficit model (perhaps because it is easier to measure consequences of wellbeing loss) rather than a strengths-based approach that honours young people’s capacity to build their future.

Evidence that a strengths-based orientation is likely to be a better guide for policies and services comes from Aboriginal ways of knowing and understanding; the mainstream mental
health and addiction literature; and from the current recovery-focused movement, which has sparked major policy and service reform nationally and globally. Indigenous policy and program documents on social and emotional wellbeing frequently adopt a strengths-based and holistic discourse, rather than concentrating on the costs of its loss or absence, but research supporting such an orientation is limited. The team has witnessed the disempowering influence of negative representations of Indigenous youth and the need for a positive approach to wellbeing action.

We note that in achieving a sound evidence base, conducting pre- and post-evaluations in the Indigenous context is complicated by the scarcity of culturally sensitive tools, the frequent lack of expertise in selecting and delivering such tools that are available in a rigorous manner, and the lack of substantial relationships between evaluation staff and informants. The resulting absence of reliable evaluations often leads to the loss of otherwise valuable programs. The project team has notable strength in psychometric and evaluation skills and has sought to provide useful recommendations on how this issue can be practically and feasibly addressed in policy and practice. In producing a document that meets the needs of policy and decision-makers, we have also sought to provide additional contextual information about healing and caring for country to contextualize the approaches inherent to this case study.

Mindful of our own privilege to have interacted and communicated with people working tirelessly on the ground, it is a collective hope of the research team that this report contributes to a strong and shared commitment to successful, empowering and sustainable action towards the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

The story of Balunu is an important contribution to this aim.
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Executive summary

Selection of Balunu as a case study program

The Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program (Balunu Program) is a short-term residential healing camp program that takes place in a natural bush setting close to Darwin in the Northern Territory. The program targets at risk youth who are involved in criminal activities and in substance misuse (Menzies 2008). Run by the Darwin-based charity, Balunu Foundation Limited, the cultural camp program commenced in 2006, and received philanthropic funding to continue in 2007 from the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH). Since that time, Balunu has developed a program of healing camps for urban and remote dwelling young people from the Top End, with several camps taking place each year in the dry season. The program has received funding from both the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government through FaHCSIA and, after a period of uncertainty, has recently been funded for two years by the Department of Health and Ageing.

Up until Christmas 2012, the organization had eight staff (Koori Mail, 16 January 2013) including one trainee youth worker who was a former participant (Australia’s Lost Generation 2013).

The philosophy that underlies the work of the Balunu Foundation is the creation of strong families that create balanced and strong environments in which children can be nurtured; children being sacred to Aboriginal culture. The word, ‘Balunu’ is from the Luritja language and means ‘creation’.

Founded on the basis of healing through traditional Aboriginal cultural principles including the wisdom and guidance of traditional Elders, the Balunu Program works on the principles of “going back in order to move forward” (Balunu, 2010a), building the individual’s self-belief and confidence through strengthening identity and building pride.

In 2010, the Balunu Program was selected as one of six case studies in a review of policies and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that promote social and emotional wellbeing (Haswell et al. 2013). The field from which the cases were selected was constrained to documented programs promoting SEWB amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (Blignault et al. 2010). The selection of the six cases was underpinned by considerations of diversity in the circumstances experienced by young people and the variety of program modalities. Balunu was included “because of its strong focus on healing through culture, spiritual awareness and caring for country” (Haswell et al. 2013, p. 139); its central feature being short-term residential healing camps held in a place of substantial historical significance and pristine natural surroundings at Talc Head, on the traditional Land and Sea of the Larrakia people.

Methods used in the Balunu Program case study

The examination of the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program used a case study design and employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Data collection methods included documentary review, in-depth interviews and participant observation by one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous member of the research team who attended part of one of the healing camps. Documents inspected included Balunu Program information and reports, as well as transcripts of recordings made during site visits. All the data were

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1 The language of one co-founder’s grandfather.
examined, in turn, by one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous researcher according to five predetermined themes in order to give structure to key issues and insights. These general themes were: program history and development; operation (including participant experiences and impacts); strengths; challenges for effectiveness, growth and sustainability; and future vision and potential.

Figure 1: Talc Head relative to Darwin, Larrakia Country, NT
Source: Balunu.org.au and Google Maps™

Key findings from the Balunu Program case study

Program process
The aims of the Balunu Program healing camps are:

- To increase self-esteem, confidence, choice, empowerment and self-respect of young people;
- To re-engage youth with education and youth services targeting improved life pathways and the cessation of anti-social and criminal activities;
- To build community-considerate young people who have greater life and employment opportunities; and
- To build the emotional resilience, cultural spirituality and wellbeing of Indigenous young people.

In terms of level of intervention, the Balunu Program delivers promotion, early intervention and treatment to individuals and communities (Haswell et al. 2013); although within resource constraints, it also seeks to reach out to families.

During the dry season (April/May to October), the Balunu Foundation operates a series of nine-day residential healing programs each accommodating ten participants. Eight of the nine days are spent in camp, while the ninth day is a reward day back in town.

Balunu’s main target group is Indigenous at-risk youth, typically boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 17 years who are demonstrating anti-social behaviour and getting into legal trouble. In exceptional circumstances 11–13 year-olds may attend. Non-Indigenous youth are also accepted. Youth are referred by the courts, police, other agencies and organisations
and the community. Issues facing youth attending include violence, recovery from drug and alcohol abuse and attempts at suicide.

Over the nine days program leaders and staff endeavour to promote the development of positive relationships; and, in keeping with the program’s principle of “going back in order to move forward” (Balunu 2010a), encourage the youth to ‘slow down’ and reflect on their lives. Embodying a trauma informed approach (Perry 1996; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation (Healing Foundation) 2013), they provide structure, routine, consistency and predictability and identify and focus on each youth’s strengths and positive behaviour; encourage participation in activities that reconnect the youth with their culture; promote healthy lifestyles; facilitate skill/knowledge development; and teach new ways to express needs and cope with emotions and life experiences.

The isolated bush setting and the friendly and safe camp environment allow for self-reflection and future planning. Camps are carefully planned, including liaising with referring agencies and post camp supports. A ten-step methodology developed by Balunu and simplified over time assists each camp participant to develop a personal plan to guide strong choices and more control over their futures. Numerous cultural activities provide opportunities for the exchange of information and stories and the building of pride in personal achievement and a sense of purpose and being productive.

External service providers are invited to the camp setting to share information and once there interact with participants on their own terms, enhancing participation and discussion of important issues such as drugs and alcohol, sexual health, etc. Whilst the program aims to continue to provide follow up and maintenance activities after the camp, this is not always achieved due to resource constraints.

Relationships are considered central to the program’s effectiveness:

* the relationships that we form with the children; the relationships that we build around the children; the relationships that we rebuild within the family; the relationships that we rebuild around the individuals and the support networks.

Connecting participants to the sea and to the land are the foundation from which other relationships flow. The youth also seek out mentoring relationships with camp staff, which may be numerous.

**Program strengths**

The program is delivered by a strong team of Aboriginal people who amongst them have a range of experiences, skills and knowledge, and a deep commitment to making the program work. The young participants relate well to the Aboriginal staff who have had similar life experiences in the past (e.g., domestic and family violence, struggling to overcome drug and alcohol problems) and who are willing to share their own journey; in doing so the staff become important role models. This also includes mentoring relationships that are built up over the eight days through one-on-one and teamwork activities such as sitting quietly together, talking, hunting, gathering bush tucker, etc. Local Elders and cultural consultants connect the young people to their identities and cultures. The camp setting at Talc Head offers both isolation and proximity; so allowing for processes to unfold without normal distractions.
Another key feature, and strength, is the program’s emphasis on giving the participants choices. Staff members, who are often developing their own listening skills, strive to provide multiple opportunities and multiple options so that the boys decide what they want to do.

**Challenges and threats to the Balunu Program**

Uncertainty about ongoing funding has been a major challenge for the sustainability of the Balunu Program and has also had implications for staff training and retention. The Elder has been working with the program for six years, as has one of the mentors, but other staff come and go even though they are passionate about the work.

Passing traditional knowledge down to youth who have grown up in the Darwin urban environment is a particular challenge. A very small, core group, who have built the program up over the past eight years, still shoulder much of the work *(I do about seven or eight jobs to sustain what we do).* This can be very tiring. What keeps them going is the positive feedback from the youth and their families and the people around them who share the Program’s overall vision.

Data collected from 141 participants in Balunu camps over three years, which was reported to the research team, indicated that most young people experienced multiple problems that affected them on every level—spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. Overall, 93% came from broken families; 90% had issues with alcohol and 68% with drugs; 74% reported thinking about or attempting suicide; and 24% had experienced homelessness. Appropriately addressing needs of participants, who may be detoxifying from substances whilst participating in the program, requires both cultural and clinical expertise. Ideally, arrangements would be made for them to detoxify before the healing camp.

In terms of throughcare, it can be difficult prioritising referrals when there is existing high demand from the Aboriginal community and non-government organisations as well as government services, as well as so many high-risk persons, whose lives may be transient and chaotic. With a history of limited funding and resources, the Balunu Program has been restricted in its capacity to meet the high demand in terms of program access and the provision of supportive follow up to participants after the camps.

Less obvious but nonetheless challenging is the fact that dealing with government requires translation of terms and continuing explanation of Aboriginal philosophy that may not be readily grasped or appreciated by people more familiar with Western models of psychology and counseling:

> Because ... for us it’s spiritual wellbeing. Different language, same intent ... It’s about working together and providing a safe and culturally appropriate environment for Indigenous youth.

**Balunu Program potential**

Healing must ultimately allow all individuals, families and communities to reach their highest potential (Development Team 2009). Balunu has identified that there is a desperate need for intensive support for the families of the children with whom they are working; however winning over government to provide the resources to cement this whole of family healing into the program has created frustration in the organization.

The Balunu Foundation has plans for a permanent healing place at Talc Head, offering youth long-term healing as well as the eight-day residential program, and an urban healing centre in Darwin, involving families and linking to other agencies, employment opportunities and
the like. Between the two centres, the Foundation hopes to better address the needs of very high-risk youth who require intensive input and will be supported to access the support they need. The urban healing centre will be a place for families, providing opportunities for early intervention and working with younger children as well.

The vision for a family healing area arose in response to community demand:

*Because we’re getting a lot of mothers and fathers saying, ‘Brother, this is good, but what about my pain?’ So what we want to do is to grow it, to be able to bring families to a safe space where we can do whole-family healing. If we can alleviate the pain within the family then we can reduce a lot of the challenges that the kids face. And then you don’t need the family children services involved. You get fewer kids on the street committing crime and getting caught up in the justice system. So our other thing is to work back up in the family … create an Indigenous spiritual healing centre … our urban healing centre.*

**Lessons learned and implications for policy and practice**

The following attributes of the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program help to account for its success and inform other cultural healing programs:

- Ownership, development and delivery by Aboriginal people, with strong, stable leadership and a core team of workers with appropriate knowledge, skills and experience who share a common vision;
- Incorporation of simple and culturally appropriate tools in program implementation and evaluation;
- A full program of activities that allows participants to exercise choice;
- Careful preparation and follow-up and maintenance activities whenever possible, including linkages to other services and programs.

In order to reap the full potential benefits of such youth healing camps, this case study supports the following recommendations:

- Recognise that, whilst the general model may be transferable, its successful implementation depends upon bringing together the right combination of people with local cultural knowledge and skills in an appropriate setting;
- Support Indigenous holistic models of healing that may not fit neatly into a single agency or department’s funding guidelines;
- Support initiatives that strengthen families, assisting them to create a strong, nurturing environment for children;
- Explore further the value of cultural healing and renewal for building the wellbeing and capacity of Indigenous youth, families and communities in remote, regional and urban Australia.
The Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program

Introduction

Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are creating their own healing through community-designed and -driven programs. The Indigenous Youth Healing Program delivered on Larrakia Country by the Balunu Foundation, Darwin, NT, is one such program.

Balunu’s funded program of healing camps for Indigenous youth began in 2006 following a positive evaluation of camps held previously with a grant from the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Fund. The program has received funding from both the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government through FaHCSIA and, after a period of uncertainty, has recently been funded for two years by the Department of Health and Ageing.

The aims of the healing camp program are:

- To increase self-esteem, confidence, choice, empowerment and self-respect of young people;
- To re-engage youth with education and youth services targeting improved life pathways and the cessation of anti-social and criminal activities;
- To build community-considerate young people who have greater life and employment opportunities; and
- To build the emotional resilience, cultural spirituality and wellbeing of Indigenous young people (Balunu Foundation 2010a).

In 2010, Balunu’s Indigenous Youth Healing Program was chosen to be one of six case studies in the FaHCSIA commissioned report, *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing Programs of Indigenous Youth* (Haswell et al. 2013). Balunu was chosen for this project because of its strong focus on healing through culture, spiritual awareness and Caring for Country (See Appendix). A central feature of Balunu’s program are short-term residential healing camps held in a place of substantial historical significance and pristine natural surroundings at Talc Head, across the harbour from Darwin, on the traditional Land and Sea of the Larrakia people.

This case study will examine the history and context of Balunu; what are its strengths and challenges and vision for the future; implications for policy and practice, and its part in the Indigenous youth social and emotional wellbeing program review (Blignault et al. 2010; Haswell et al. 2013).

Balunu's founding principles and context

The Balunu Program is founded on the basis of healing through reconnection to traditional Aboriginal culture, including the wisdom and guidance of traditional Elders. It works on the principles of “going back in order to move forward” (Balunu 2010a), building the individual’s self-belief and confidence through strengthening identity and building pride. The Healing Foundation (2013, p. 9) identifies that:

Programs that achieve holistic health and healing for young people are those that strengthen protective factors. Protective factors increase resilience in the
face of distress and enable recovery from trauma. Key protective factors for youth include: a strong sense of identity and cultural pride; confidence in life skills and a strong desire to succeed; being part of an active community with opportunities to participate in the cultural life; and community self-governance and influence over health and education services.

A recent review of the NT Youth Justice System (NT Government 2011) found that 76% of the 3,386 young people apprehended between 2006/07 and 2010/11 were Indigenous. The review noted that national and international research shows better outcomes for Indigenous people where communities and leaders have taken steps to preserve their culture and control their own destinies. Community submissions to the review supported that view. Significantly, the review recognised the association between violence, trauma, and dislocation from family and culture with involvement with the youth justice system, and noted the value of culturally appropriate healing programs for lessening this impact.

Balunu, who are also strong advocates in the healing space, have previously described Aboriginal people today as being “at the end of the pain chain”, finding themselves living out layers of trauma without knowing why (Australia's Lost Generation 2012).

The youth we see before us today I call the lost generation. They are hurting, traumatised, confused and angry and have been failed and neglected by family breakdown and a system which fails to see or address the trauma they have endured from an early age (Cole cited in Northern Territory Government 2011, p. 26).

Balunu’s vision is to break the cycle of Indigenous disadvantage by targeting youth and reconnecting them to their true identity, dealing with the underlying issues they face and equipping them with the necessary tools to make strong choices. Balunu seeks to instil a cultural identity among Indigenous youth at risk through a culturally appropriate healing program that builds self-belief and self-esteem while assisting them to overcome the wide range of challenges they face as young Indigenous people in today’s society (Balunu 2010a; CRCAH 2007).
Methodology

Rationale and approach to the case study
Consistent with the other five case studies that were undertaken by the research team (Haswell et al. 2013), the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program case study design employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Data collection methods included documentary and website review, in-depth interviews and participant observation by one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous member of the research team who attended part of one of the healing camps. The data were examined in turn by one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous researcher who drew out and then refined key themes and insights in five predetermined areas: program history and development; current process; strengths and impacts; challenges for effectiveness, growth and sustainability; and future vision and potential. These were considered in light of findings from the original documentary and website review, a scan of relevant website material and findings from the cross case analysis by Haswell et al. (2013) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Study design for The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Indigenous Youth: Reviewing and extending the evidence and examining its implications for policy and practice (Haswell et al. 2013)
**Ethics approvals**
Ethics approvals for this case study were granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 11116) and the Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT). A formal letter of agreement for the Indigenous Youth Healing Program as one of the case studies was provided by the Balunu Foundation.

**Document analysis**
A number of documents listed in the References and Data Sources were included as data for this project. These included key information documents, summaries, youth reflections, background notes, webpages and video weblogs. Requests for early evaluative material were unsuccessful. In addition to the comprehensive policy and program review by Blignault et al. (2010), relevant peer reviewed and grey literature scanned in 2013 has also been also cited.

**Interviews**
Two researchers, one Indigenous male and one non-Indigenous female, visited the NT on two occasions and conducted two formal in depth interviews with a key program leader. One interview was conducted in the Darwin office of Balunu and the second at Talc Head during a healing camp. During the five-day healing camp, the case study team was able to have many informal conversations to strengthen their understanding of the program. A young male volunteer assisting in the camp was also interviewed. The team also recorded observations when attending one of the healing camps.

The ‘interview guide approach’ allowed the case study team to bridge the needs of informal open conversation facilitating Aboriginal non-linear ways of learning and knowing, whilst the structured aspects of the interviews provided comparability for the multisite study (Yunkaporta 2009; Patton 2002 cited in Osborne 2011). Interviews were recorded on digital recorders with brief hand-written notes made when pertinent issues arose.

**Data analysis and feedback**
Interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy by the author, and returned to interviewees for confirmation that the information captured in the transcripts was correct.

Interviewees were provided an opportunity to remove or adjust material or wholly withdraw from its inclusion in the study reports. A number of email and face-to-face contacts were also made with the program leader to check for accuracy of interpretation and to receive advice on changes and feedback.

To shed light on essential program elements, the data were coded and analysed for detailed insights into the following:

**History**
How did the program first come into being? What initial challenges were faced? Had the program experienced major stages, changes and shifts? What strategies had been used to respond with these changes?

**Process and actions at the program level**
How does program function? Where does it sit? What have been the successes and challenges in maximizing the capacity of the program to be effective, survive, sustain and
grow? What relationships does the program have with the community, other services, funders and government?

Process and Impacts at the youth – program interface
How do young people become aware, involved, engaged? What happens in the program and what tools and processes are used? What change does the program bring about among participants? What are the successes and challenges in achieving maximizing positive impact?

Long term sustainability
What are the programs most important achievements? What have been the main enablers, inside and outside the program? What ideas do program leader and staff have for growth and improvement? What challenges have been or are being faced? What solutions have been found? What is its full potential? What support is needed to achieve this?
Findings

The spirit call

The story about the spirit call ... its confirmation through our way that this is right type of thing. There’s that much stuff that’s happened behind the scenes. We talked about walking this journey, creating this program.

About 16 years ago, my wife said ‘What do you want to do?’ I said ‘I want to help kids and our people’ and she said she’ll walk with me. So I guess we started and she said ‘no worries, let’s do it’. We thought about helping one kid and fostering, and then we thought about helping a few. We thought about buying a small block and setting up some cabins and helping ten or 20. As we kept sort of planning in that how we were going to do it and what needed to happen, I guess we were walking our own healing journey at the time.

So through our healing we ... self-developed things that worked for us that we thought would work for our other mob. Between the healing journey and the vision of helping the kids, we kind of brought it all together. I then ... decided that maybe we’d set up an organisation that would focus purely on that on a bigger scale. The more I looked in setting up organisations, the more I realised the constraints around other organisational structures. The more I researched into what would be the best vehicle for us to use ... you know because every philanthropic corporate body wants PBI or deductible gift recipient. So then I worked towards setting up a charitable foundation and public benevolent institution.

Program history and initial challenges

Young Aboriginal people living in the NT experience particular challenges, many of them balancing their participation in mainstream Australia with diverse lifestyles that may have a regional orbit with particular “linguistic, social and economic interconnections” (Eickelkamp, 2011, p. 4). They are also impacted by trauma from colonialism (Hampton & Toombs 2013, p. 31); i.e., trauma that is not merely historical but cumulative and ongoing (Reid, Taylor-Moore & Varona 2013, p. 24) founded on “overwhelming physical and/or psychological violence; segregation and/or displacement; economic deprivation; and, cultural dispossession” (Sotero cited in Reid, Taylor-Moore & Varona 2013, p. 14). The authors note that implicit in this experience for Indigenous people is loss of connection to land.

Connection to traditional land or ‘Country’ in Aboriginal worldviews implies connection to “a place that gives and receives life” (North Central Catchment Management Authority cited in Kingsley, Townsend, Phillips & Aldous 2009, p. 291). The interrelatedness of country, community and family has long been recognised as crucial to Aboriginal wellbeing and has emotional and spiritual dimensions (Swan & Raphael 1995; Tse et al. 2005; Kingsley et al. 2009). For Aboriginal Traditional Owners, such a spiritual connection implies,

reconnecting to an individual’s ancestry, meaning they were pulled to land and this gave them a sense of belonging. This relates back to humans’ innate connection back to nature that gives a sense of identity and pride which empowers and promotes individuals’ health (Kingsley et al. 2009, p. 295).
The vision of the Balunu Foundation is:

To break the negative cycle that fosters Indigenous Disadvantage by: Relieving distress, suffering and mental illness in Indigenous people through holistic mental and spiritual healing; Creating positive cycles of cultural empowerment for our youth, promoting healing, harmony and spiritual well being; Uniting and empowering Indigenous people by creating a positive future for Indigenous youth and culture; and Providing a balance to empower and strengthen the spiritual well being of Indigenous youth, giving them choices and the opportunity to create a positive future through nurturing, guiding, mutual respect and love (Balunu Foundation 2010b).

The program is run by the Balunu Foundation, a charitable organisation comprising four directors, an Indigenous advisory board and a traditional Elder (Kholosi et al. 2007). The story of the program’s origins and journey is quite personal, emerging step by step with apparently very little resource support from a husband and wife’s desire to do something for young people paralleling their personal healing journey (see The spirit call, previous page), to a project proposal produced as a university assignment that led to an initial $10,000 pilot program grant evaluated with the assistance of the CRCAH (2007), to seedfunding from the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation. Balunu has continued to receive funding from both the Northern Territory Department of Health and Families and the Australian Government through FaHCSIA and OATSIH as well as small grants from, e.g., the Healing Foundation. Ongoing funding is not guaranteed.

The aims of Balunu’s healing camp program are:

- To increase self-esteem, confidence, choice, empowerment and self-respect of young people;
- To re-engage youth with education and youth services targeting improved life pathways and the cessation of anti-social and criminal activities;
- To build community-considerate young people who have greater life and employment opportunities; and
- To build the emotional resilience, cultural spirituality and wellbeing of Indigenous young people (Balunu Foundation 2010a).

**Process and actions at the program level**

Balunu’s operation is:

*Aboriginal owned ... Aboriginal developed and ... Aboriginal delivered. And it’s location specific ... What brings power to it is local people, power and knowledge ... I’ve developed this program so that it can reach everywhere, but it’s not a one shoe fits all solution, it’s a process.*

It offers a safe and supportive social environment to both staff and visitors and a chance for young people to observe Aboriginal leadership and to learn more about and celebrate Aboriginal culture. During the camp attended by the case study team, this opportunity was shared through the generous involvement of a Traditional Elder, the program leadership, the young camp volunteers and the youth participants, including one with particularly in depth awareness of his Yolgnu culture.

During the dry season (April/May to October), Balunu operates a series of nine-day healing programs each accommodating ten participants. Eight of the nine days are spent in camp, while the ninth day is a *reward day back in town*. 
Balunu’s main target group are Indigenous at-risk youth, typically boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 17 years who are demonstrating anti-social behaviour and getting into legal trouble. In exceptional circumstances 11–13 year-olds may attend. Non-Indigenous youth are also accepted. Youth are referred by the courts, police, other agencies and organisations, and the community.

At the community level, Balunu has close relationships with Elders, who are the programs cultural consultants in terms of healing, identity and rebuilding the self-worth of individuals, and their identities as an Aboriginal person.

Our children are our future, we cannot change our past but we can change our future if we rebuild the Warrior within our youth to rebuild our families, communities and culture to ensure we have a future free of the suffering and pain we experience today on a mental, emotional, spiritual and physical level, come walk with us (Cole 2011).

Balunu has delivered healing programs to more than 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth at risk in the Darwin region. Although the research team could not access reports, Balunu informants described a number of ways in which they are accountable, for example an evaluation of themselves and a number of other youth organizations in the NT by Flinders University. Balunu informants reflected on levels of disempowerment in some research relationships. Others have been more fruitful. In 2006, the CRCAH assisted with evaluating the first series of camps, the success of which led to a year of funding by the Rio Tinto Foundation (CRCAH 2007).

Data collected in a trial of the SEIQoL, a quality-of-life measurement tool that allows individuals to select and rate their own quality-of-life domains, showed that the healing camps had an important and positive impact on the young participants (Chenhall, Senior, Cole, Cunningham & O’Boyle 2010). Program leaders regularly receive inspiring, positive feedback from the Aboriginal community:

When the grandmother says to you, ‘My boy, thank you’. When the mother says, ‘Thank you, you’ve changed his life’. When a kid says, ‘Thank you uncle, you kept me alive’. I know that doesn’t cut it for funding, but we know it works and with little resources.

Process and impacts at the youth – program interface
Over the nine days the program leaders and staff endeavour to promote the development of positive relationships; encourage the youth to ‘slow down’ and reflect on their lives; provide structure, routine, consistency and predictability; identify and focus on each youth’s strengths and positive behaviour; encourage participation in activities that reconnect the youth with their culture; promote healthy lifestyles; facilitate skill/knowledge development; and teach new ways to express needs and cope with emotions and life experiences.

There were early indications the path was working:

... more on the pilot camp, one of the boys cried on my arm and thanked me for saving his life. He said he had actually planned to kill himself that weekend. I went home ... and said forget the 20 year plan, it’s started, it’s right; it’s going to happen. From then we set out to not only save kids lives but to turn their lives around and to rebuild warriors that would break the cycle for their children.
These are lofty goals, but the isolated camp setting and the safe and friendly environment provide a rare opportunity for self-reflection and future planning that can be life-changing. The safety of place and building of trusting peer and mentoring relationships allows normally deeply hidden issues to be brought out into the open and talked through, participants share encouragement and suggestions and begin to realise others are facing and sometimes struggling with similar challenges.

In terms of setting, Balunu has secured a long-term right to use the remote and highly culturally and historically significant site at Talc Head, which has adequate space and facilities sufficient for the current program.

Pre-camp activities include receiving and assessing referrals, medical screening, preparatory work with the young person and their family, a staff meeting to develop the program, clarify roles and responsibilities, and organise camp activities and logistics. The program relies on vital resources such as boats and buses. These ensure attendance and timely commencement of the tightly scheduled camps as well as being essential for ongoing mentoring.

The youth participate in a number of cultural activities such as making their own spears and woomeras, painting their own yidakis (didgeridoos), painting, land management, storytelling and bush tucker preparation. These activities provide a sense of purpose and being productive. Balunu has developed a ten-step methodology, simplified over time, to assist each participant to develop a personal plan to guide them along a path to better choices and more control over their future.

Service providers such as legal aid, sexual health and a sexual assault counseling service, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, both indigenous and non-Indigenous NGO’s and some government departments are invited to deliver presentations and workshops in which the youth actively participate because they’re comfortable; these people have come into their environment. This creates a different dynamic that is seen to be effective for this often hard to reach group:

The kids actively participate in these workshops—because they’re comfortable. These people have come into their environment. They’ve come to spread the goodness and the kids absorb it all; so we do that throughout the week...

Follow-up and maintenance activities post-camp are limited by the available resources. They include time-limited follow-up and mentoring with young people and their families to support the transition of the young person back into their family and community and assist in sustaining gains made during the camp. Linkages and referrals to other government and non-government agencies are an important part of the follow-up. Some participants keep in touch with the program through the program’s Facebook page, which is used actively by Balunu to promote and advocate for its work.

Long term sustainability

Program strengths
As with a number of the case studies, Balunu aims to reduce inequalities in social and emotional wellbeing that underlie disparities in educational attainment, juvenile justice, detention and incarceration rates, mental health and alcohol and substance use. It is founded on the basis of healing through traditional Aboriginal culture including the wisdom
and guidance of traditional Elders. It works on the principle of “going back in order to move forward” (Balunu 2010a), building the individual’s self-belief and confidence through strengthening identity and building pride.

It does this through acknowledging the challenges facing Aboriginal youth and uses many ways and paths to engage them in taking positive steps and to foster self-esteem, voice, choice and empowerment in the process of gradual change. According to key informants, critical success factors are having the right people, the right environment and the right setting.

It is delivered by a strong Aboriginal team who among them have a range of experiences skills and knowledge and a deep commitment to making the program work. The young participants relate well to the Aboriginal staff who have had similar life experiences in the past (e.g., domestic and family violence, struggling to overcome alcohol and drug problems) and who are willing to share their own journey. In doing so the staff become important role models. Mentoring relationships are built up over the eight days through one on one and teamwork activities such as sitting talking, hunting, gathering bush-tucker, and sitting around the fire. The Elders and the cultural consultants connect the youth to their culture. The camp setting at Talc Head, over the bay from Darwin, offers both isolation and proximity:

For eight days the kids are away from the drugs, the alcohol, the violence, the poisons, the hunger, the homelessness, the neglect, you name it. The kids are away from every distraction, be it their friends, family or general community.

Another key feature, and strength, is the program’s emphasis on giving the participants choices. The staff strive to provide multiple opportunities and multiple options so that the boys decide what they want to do.

The importance of listening skills and two-way respect is illustrated in this exchange between one of the program’s mentors and a participant:

We were driving along one day and just out of the blue [the mentor] says to the couple of girls or boys in the back, ‘Kids, let me ask you something.’ And they say, ‘What, uncle?’ And he says, ‘Why do you listen to us? What does it matter what we say? You’ve got other people trying to help or trying to do things or whatever; you just don’t seem to pay attention. You don’t seem to care what other people think or say. What does it matter what we say, why do you listen to us?’ And this young girl goes, ‘Well, one ’cause you’re not stuck-up! And two, we don’t listen to you, you listen to us!’

Overwhelmingly, relationships are considered by program leaders to be central to the program’s effectiveness:

the relationships that we form with the children; the relationships that we build around the children; the relationships that we rebuild within the family; the relationships that we rebuild around the individuals and the support networks.
Program challenges for effectiveness, growth and sustainability

Uncertainty about ongoing funding has been a major challenge for the sustainability of the Balunu Healing Program, contributing to one of its key limitations; i.e., with piecemeal program funding there has been the expectation to meet standards but the lack of resources to actually do it. It has also had implications for staff retention. The Elder has been working with the program for six years, as has one of the mentors, but other staff come and go even though they are passionate about the work.

Passing traditional knowledge down to youth who have grown up in the Darwin urban environment is a particular challenge. For those who have built the program up over the past eight years and still shoulder much of the work (I do about seven or eight jobs to sustain what we do), it can be very tiring. What sustains them is the positive feedback from the youth and their families and others who share the program’s overall vision.

Youth presenting with a wide range of sometimes severe problems is stressful and challenging. Appropriately addressing the needs of youth who may be detoxifying from substances while participating in the program requires both cultural and clinical expertise. Ideally, arrangements are made for them to detoxify before the healing camp.

Service level data collected from 141 program participants over three years indicated that most experienced multiple problems that affected them on every level—spiritual, emotional, mental and physical. Overall, 93% came from broken families, 90% had issues with alcohol and 68% with drugs, 74% reported thinking about or attempting suicide, and 24% had experienced homelessness. In 2009, Balunu reported that 89% of program participants “have or continue to experience violence”; amongst the boys the rate was 87% and the girls 95% (cited in Northern Territory Government 2011, p. 26). As mentioned in interview data, youth are often very transient and their lives chaotic:

Imagine the difficulty in locating a high-risk kid who has been [booked] into the program, but because of their situation they move from their uncle’s place to their aunty’s place to homelessness and to and fro. This is where we need more resources to assist in capturing all participants who need to access the program.

Under-funding stress has also hampered program efforts to recruit and retain appropriate staff with the passion to work closely and intensely with the young people, critical to a program that hinges on relationships. The husband and wife team has managed the bulk of the work of the program for the past seven years, and a local Elder provides key cultural supervision. Over time, different staff members with backgrounds in youth work, drugs and alcohol support, etc, have made vital contributions, including at least one camp participant who commenced a traineeship with Balunu. Scheduling of the camp program is tight over the dry season—severely limiting the small staff’s ability to follow up with participants and their families—and maintaining a steady stream of volunteers is challenging and they sometimes receive their guidance on the run, as there is no preparation available for the kinds of activities that unfold.

The ongoing influence of established mentoring relationships beyond the camps relies upon adequate resourcing. In linking to services, it can be difficult to prioritise referrals when there is high demand from the Aboriginal community and non-government organisations as well as government services, and so many high-risk persons. It was particularly concerning to the CEO that restricted funding has limited access to the program, yet there were many
youth who would be likely to benefit. Limited funding has also restricted the program’s capacity to extend follow up support to those who had attended the camp. Less obvious but nonetheless challenging is the fact that dealing with government requires translation of terms and explanation of Aboriginal philosophy that may not be readily grasped or appreciated by people more familiar with Western models of psychology and counseling:

Because when we talk about wellbeing, you know, [white Australians] might refer to emotional wellbeing but for us it’s spiritual wellbeing. Different language, same intent. Uniting Indigenous people, creating transgenerational effects … It’s about getting people to understand … we’ve got to provide that healing for our children now, across this whole country … It’s about working together and providing a safe and culturally appropriate environment for Indigenous youth.

**Future vision and potential**

Healing must ultimately allow all individuals, families and communities to reach their highest potential (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team (Development Team) 2009). The Balunu Foundation has plans for a permanent healing place at Talc Head, offering youth long-term healing as well as the eight-day residential program, as well as an urban healing centre in Darwin, involving families and linking to other agencies, employment opportunities and the like. Between the two sites, the Foundation hopes to better address the needs of very high-risk youth who require intensive input and support. The urban healing centre is intended to be a place for families, providing opportunities for early intervention and interaction with younger children as well.

It was explained to the research team that the vision for a family healing area arose in response to community demand:

Because we’re getting a lot of mothers and fathers saying, ‘Brother, this is good, but what about my pain?’ So what we want to do is to grow it, to be able to bring families to a safe space where we can do whole-family healing. If we can alleviate the pain within the family then we can reduce a lot of the challenges that the kids face. And then you don’t need the family children services involved. You get fewer kids on the street committing crime and getting caught up in the justice system. So our other thing is to work back up in the family … create an Indigenous spiritual healing centre … our urban healing centre.

**Discussion**

In considering the findings of the Balunu case study several key themes arise, which warrant further consideration and are also touched on in Haswell et al. (2013).

**Strong choices**

A standout mechanism of the Balunu Program, which aligns closely with the program’s vision of cultural and spiritual reconnection, is making strong choices. For the participants, it is associated with rejecting excuses for being violent, taking responsibility for behaviour and not harming others or the environment. It also means listening and learning from Elders and understanding their responsibilities as custodians for the continuation for cultural knowledge.
In addition to cultural reconnection and identity building, the Balunu camps for girls emphasise the importance of choosing a ‘strong warrior’, protecting themselves from ‘broken men’ and creating a safe place to talk about things that have happened to them as a first step towards healing and prevention.

...actually it was the first night around the fire and we hadn’t even been with them for 24 hours. so through building the trust, the respect, the safety and the comfort, it creates an environment where the kids drop all their guards—and it doesn’t only drop their guards so we can we hear and see their pain, it drops their guards so when you can hear and see their pain, you can apply the solution.

Role modelling
As participant observers at the camp, the case study team was able to witness the immediate visible immersing of participants in the experience of sitting beside a respected traditional Elder, and carrying out activities like making woomeras, catching and spearing fish and gathering bush tucker. Constant encouragement and acknowledgement of achievement in this environment allowed the young people to experience their cultural heritage in ways that they had probably not had the opportunity to experience before. Gentle but firm pointers on ways not to behave were also frequent and appeared effective. Evidence of positive peer pressure in completing chores and engaging in the program was also observed.

Relationships
Relationships anchored in the importance of place and country are key mechanism for the Balunu Program (Kingsley et al. 2009, p. 296), e.g., extremely troubled youth form their initial relationship with the sea (through catching fish) and then the program leader, the Elder present, their peers at the camp and the other young adult volunteers.

It’s about relationships. This is what Balunu’s about. The relationships that we form with the children; the relationships that we build around the children; the relationships we rebuild within the family; the relationships that we rebuild around the individuals and the support networks.

Participants are instilled with a respect for the land and for the protocols that go with that, such as the formal Welcome to Country, which occurs when they arrive.

So it starts from a very early beginning, that respect, and then teamwork, getting the food up ... setting up bedding, camp, going through the ground rules, everyone having an understanding from the outset ... And then we allow the participants—and this is about building their self-worth and giving them a voice—we say, ‘Now you give us your ground rules’. And so, the kids go through their ground rules and tell us, ‘We expect this, and this and this …’ And, so, straight away we have a sense of ... respect is both ways ...

... a lot of that coaching and mentoring comes from our staff’s personal experiences and own journeys ... encourages, supports Indigenous youth to choose positive pathways for their life. So, that’s giving them tools to make those choices ... able to reflect on choices now, and where that choice is going to lead in the future, and giving them the courage to make those stronger choices.

Teamwork begins from the start ... the kids, from the very beginning understand that ... we’ve got to work together.
As Haswell et al. (2013, pp. 47-49) report in their cross-case analysis, the common element in program success in assisting Indigenous youth to overcome challenges was their process of using relationships to:

- Engage youth in a journey to discovery of their own personal strengths and potential;
- Model positive pathways and impart skills to promote personal growth, maturation and the ability to apply these strengths to deal with problems in their current life; and
- Open doors and inspire youth to continue this process with a future orientation to achieve their full potential.

**Accountability**

Formal reporting requirements to major funders were recognized as necessary but nonetheless onerous and to some extent out of sync with program priorities, given the limited resources of the core team at the time. In terms of formal accountability Balunu has struggled with its level of resources, e.g., reports to government tripping up over process. This suggests that both program managers and bureaucrats could be better empowered to adjust the scale of such demands. This in turn could help to foster such healing initiatives sector wide. Our informant’s account of the request for family healing is clearly a measure of such unmet need. The individual and collective empowerment of Balunu’s ‘families’ requires services and program funding to be innovative and flexible.

Just as the program operates on multiple levels, so it is accountable at many levels, as were all cases investigated by Haswell et al. (2013); i.e., Balunu is accountable to:

- the young people participating in the program and their families;
- the program team, especially those in direct contact with the youth, and the other organisational stakeholders who are also working with the youth and their families;
- the funder and, if relevant, the agency within which the program is situated (usually the government); and
- the wider Aboriginal community that includes both the local community, Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people generally.

There are not yet appropriate mechanisms for measuring program outcomes and recognising the unique ways that the program was being delivered, such as the autonomy of the young people in the ongoing and organic choice of mentors through the camps; or to account for the passing on of insights into the strength and ways of Aboriginal culture from an Elder and how this alters the trajectory of a participant’s life. The challenges in documenting the work of the program were well recognized by Balunu, who at times have struggled to convey to government the significance of their healing work and who have argued for a paradigm shift in government’s understanding and recognition of the process of healing.

**Resource opportunities and constraints**

Unique amongst many of the programs reviewed by Blignault et al. (2010) and Haswell et al. (2013), since its first pilot Balunu has received a variety of academic and financial supports. This has allowed the program to build a level of autonomy and freedom to follow its own path and grow. Early on the advantages of philanthropic funding were recognised and Balunu was set up as a charitable foundation and public benevolent institution. Rather than setting up a team and gathering resources, the Foundation has stayed small in size, focused
on the basics, working with what you’ve already got, and remained consistently focused on keeping the camps running.

Basically ... all you need to do is just have a plan. Know your limitations through your resources and just work from that. It’s not what you have it’s what you do.

This slow-but-steady process has enabled Balunu to run approximately six camps a year with seven or eight young people per camp over a seven-year period. However, Haswell et al. (2013) found that of the six programs studied, Balunu was then probably the most under-funding stressed relative to need. Not only did under-funding seriously stress program leaders by requiring enormous multi-tasking and relentless problem-solving to keep things afloat, it also restricted opportunities for growth, early intervention and follow-up. This was felt excruciatingly between rounds of funding.

Here we are saving kids lives and doing something on that scale and not getting federal funding and being drip fed ...

The stress of ‘making do with not enough’ allows such programs to get off the ground, but in the longer term takes its toll. This toll comes not only on the intensity of work, it also stems from not being able to reach out to whole families having trouble to assist them in fundamental issues. Once a family breaks down, children are removed or sometimes incarcerated leading to even more serious issues and a lack of family structure to rely on. Strong advocates, Balunu has been pushing its case with government saying give us the ability to run the camps properly, the healing program, but outside the healing program, give us the ability to have the resources and the human resources and physical resources where the higher risk kids, which is about where 30% are, so we can do intense work with the whole family. That’s stopping them from waiting until they’re in the family children service system; from waiting until the kids are in the lock-up. It’s let us do that hard work earlier and that intense work ... That’s ultimately the charter of the welfare for us, Family and Children’s Services, is to keep families together.

Reflection on the deeper impacts of resource uncertainty provoked this response:

Intense follow up. I mean we get the kids to a level where they’re so strong and so focused and then they don’t hear from us because we can’t. Sorry my brother we’ve got this next group we’re on to. But we need that person to walk with them to go, come on man remember what we talked about on camp, hang in there ... that’s the thing you need that person to walk beside them to keep that motivation there. Once they’re motivated for a period of time it just becomes automatic, second nature, and then you just let them run down that pathway ... New confidence, new self-belief, the pain’s been worked on long enough that it’s gone, so the substances aren’t required to numb the pain. That’s what we’d do better.

Nevertheless, regardless of the severity of circumstances and challenges, the Balunu Program shares a common unity of perspective and understanding among Aboriginal people, youth participants and non-Indigenous people working respectfully alongside each other on the ground. These are people with eyes open, not only to the challenges and sometimes horrors, but also to the small changes, profound turning points and shared joys of connection and positive change. This duality reminds workers, families and youth themselves of the purpose, privilege and importance of what they are doing and drives them to seek more.
For policy makers

Whilst the research team were dedicated to focusing on the strengths of Aboriginal youth, these must be understood in the wider context of what can be at times extremely challenging situations, which many young people encounter and may experience from a young age. These include underlying grief and loss, long-term disempowerment, racism and poor self-esteem, and, as a consequence, the adoption of apparently recalcitrant behavior. Youth who continue to struggle without support and skills to deal with these challenges can become disengaged, make poor choices and fall progressively into situations that further complicate their difficulties, such as being expelled from school, having contact with police and the juvenile justice system, early pregnancy and parenthood, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol issues. These situations can have a lifelong impact, pushing youth into the least desirable positions in society.

Balunu emerged from people becoming aware and making an unwavering commitment to respond to an acute need for support for children and adolescents in legal trouble and as young parents, respectively. The program was met with many groups who sought out relationships to work with them. This was followed by processes to gain philanthropic funding to kick start action. The subsequent effectiveness and success of programs such as Balunu suggests that a lack of dependence on outside resources in their initial formulation can enhance autonomy and enable the creation of a program wholly embedded in a healing process that extends from young person to their family and community.

As the program grows, this strength can be fostered through responsive needs-focused funding. The 2011 Review of the Northern Territory Youth Justice System recommended both an increase in the number of—and additional resources to—youth camps. As one young informant stated: “There needs to be more programs like Balanu (sic) and Brahminy. Real strict, taking kids out bush, camping” (p. 82).

It also suggested that new camps be regulated (p. 168). It did not propose changes to the existing camps. Evidence provided to the review included:

We are mindful of the perspectives of prisoners from Darwin Correctional Centre interviewed in the preparation of this submission who consistently spoke of the importance of investing in youth camps. There is significant benefit in removing young people from their peers and environment, and engaging them in constructive, culturally relevant and pro-social activities (Northern Australia Aboriginal Justice Association cited in Northern Territory Government 2011, p. 79).

Another concern is the many administrative difficulties and police checks ruling out potential workers who have made remarkable transformation in their own lives and have skills and knowledge to share. There are also limited, appropriate training programs for such workers and Balunu, like others, is very stretched meeting immediate needs, again calling for flexibility.

Statistics collected from within the Balunu Program, as well as from the region, attest to the knife-edge children and youth are growing up on, in terms of substance misuse, self-harm and suicide, homelessness and hunger, and propensity towards activities that lead to incarceration and often recidivism, with their high associated costs. This suggests that programs like Balunu, which appear to have the qualities it takes to help turn around the lives of youths in these circumstances and settings, are yet to receive sufficient examination as to their current and potential benefits, should they receive funding appropriate to their capacity.
Conclusion

The Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program based in Darwin provides severely challenged young people, including some viewed by authorities as ‘lost causes’, with the opportunity to rest and reflect and begin their recovery, whilst immersed in Aboriginal culture and spirituality at a remote area youth healing and leadership camp in a pristine natural environment.

Balunu’s participants are not unusual amongst Indigenous youth around the country, many of whom share:

- Indicators of health, education and social status that provide an insight into the considerable challenges that many young Indigenous people face;
- Ongoing family and community experiences of colonialism, impacts of past and current policies, racism and widespread socio-economic disadvantage, with an increasing number being removed in infancy to teenage years; and
- Potentially becoming a young parent that can add further pressure to someone already struggling as a result of isolation.

The independence established from the beginning by the Balunu Program underlies much of its strength and intensity of focus. With support from both government and non-government funding streams, it has assisted many troubled and highly disadvantaged youth to realize, often for the first time, that they can choose and partake in other possibilities for themselves besides the ones with which they have been engaged. Core to this achievement is the program’s investment in and respect for meaningful peer and mentoring relationships anchored in Aboriginal worldviews of country, identity and belonging. The following attributes of the Balunu Indigenous Youth Healing Program help to account for its success and, in the view of the researchers, could inform other cultural healing programs (Haswell et al. 2013):

- Ownership, development and delivery by Aboriginal people, with strong, stable leadership and a core team of workers with appropriate knowledge, skills and experience who share a common vision;
- Incorporation of simple and culturally appropriate tools in program implementation and evaluation;
- A full program of activities that allows participants to exercise choice; and
- Careful preparation and follow-up and maintenance activities whenever possible, including linkages to other services and programs.

In order to reap the full potential benefits of such Indigenous youth healing camps, this case study supports the following recommendations:

- Recognise that, while the general model may be transferable, its successful implementation depends upon bringing together the right combination of people with local cultural knowledge and skills in an appropriate setting;
- Support holistic models of healing that may not fit neatly into a single agency or department’s funding guidelines;
- Support initiatives that strengthen families, assisting them to create a strong, nurturing environment for children;
• Explore further the value of connection to country and cultural healing and renewal for building the wellbeing and capacity of Indigenous youth, families and communities in remote, regional and urban Australia.

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Appendix

The call for healing

Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices have been calling for healing for many decades, the concept has recently received considerable acceptance by the national government. In 2004, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner wrote:

Indigenous concepts of healing are based on addressing the relationship between the spiritual, emotional and physical in a holistic manner. An essential element of Indigenous healing is recognising the interconnections between, and effects of, violence, social and economic disadvantage, racism and dispossession from land and culture on Indigenous peoples, families and communities (cited in Social Justice Commissioner 2009, p. 152).

In 2008, the Australian Parliament had passed a motion apologising to Australia’s Indigenous peoples. Following this, the Commissioner conducted consultations with individual and organisational stakeholders regarding “the development of a national healing body in Australia” (p. 187). These consultations drew out the following themes (p. 188):

- Indigenous healing is a long term response to address the trauma resulting from colonisation and forced removal of children from their families.
- While Indigenous healing overlaps with other areas including social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and medical based therapeutic models, it is also distinct from these. Elements of these other areas contribute to healing, but healing is not limited to any of these.
- Cultural identity and cultural renewal are central features of Indigenous healing processes.
- Healing is a very personal process, and necessarily requires different approaches and processes for different people.
- Healing is not limited to the individual. It extends to healing of the family, the community and of the nation.

In reporting his findings, the Commissioner noted that “Indigenous communities are stridently calling for healing” (p. 150), and that it is urgently needed as a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to move forward and for the country to reconcile. The Apology itself referred to “the healing of the nation” (Rudd 2008, p. 167), and it is explicit in acknowledging the significant intergenerational legacy of policies and practices such as the forced removal of children (Augoustinos, Hastie & Wright 2009). The Prime Minister, in referring to the righting of an historical wrong and to “a new beginning” (Rudd 2008), appealed to a collective identification of our common humanity and a brighter future (Augoustinos, Hastie & Wright 2009, pp. 523, 527). Such approaches accord with the three pillars of the Canadian healing model: reclaiming history; cultural interventions; and therapeutic healing (Archibald 2006, p. 16), which distinguishes healing from other social and emotional and therapeutic2 models (Social Justice Commissioner 2009, p. 29).

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2 “‘Therapeutic’ refers to an express targeted needs-based intervention, as underpinned by best practice criteria, and acknowledging that different programs will apply different therapeutic processes to achieve their outcomes” (Raymond & Lapin cited in Northern Territory Government 2011, p. xvi).
Acknowledging survivors’ experience of ‘raw memories’ and the acting out of personal and collective trauma, Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski (2004, p. 78) write:

The goal of any healing process is a recovery of awareness, a reawakening to the senses, a re-owning of one’s life experience and a recovery of people’s enhanced abilities to trust this experience. In a successful healing process, this will be coupled with the recovery of a social ability to create a new cultural paradigm, to bring order out of what has been chaos. The aim of a healing process is to recover a full person (culture) and to develop anew lost capacities for feeling and expression. The goal is to recover and reintegrate the past into the present.

The Healing Foundation frames healing as a spiritual process that strengthens individuals, families, communities and whole nations to be restored to wellbeing and wholeness. It is a personal journey that can involve recovery from trauma, addiction and other types of adversity, as well as strengthening and reconnecting with cultural identity. At the same time, healing is a collective journey that involves the restoration of human rights, the process of recognition, and the building of strong community and cultural connections (2010, pp. 6-7; 2012; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team 2009).

According to Australia’s Lost Generation (2013), cultural reconnection that involves building self-esteem through identity and culture is core to healing. “Maintaining cultural identity was a part of maintaining mental health and is what this kind of healing is all about” (cited in Northern Territory Government 2011, p. 77).

**Connection to Country**

“Like a human mother the land gives us protection, enjoyment, and provides for our needs—economic, social and religious. We have a human relationship with the land: mother-daughter, son” (Djiniyini Gondarra cited in Warrki Jarrinjaku ACRS Project Team 2002, p. 69).

Connection to traditional land or ‘Country’ in Aboriginal worldviews implies connection to “a place that gives and receives life” (NCCMA cited in Kingsley et al. 2009, p. 291). Reid, Taylor-Moore & Varona (2013) suggest that persisting disadvantage is primarily rooted in the loss of land. For Aboriginal people, connection to country, community and family is crucial to wellbeing and has emotional and spiritual dimensions (Swan & Raphael, 1995; Tse et al. 2005; Kingsley et al. 2009). For Aboriginal Traditional Owners, such a spiritual connection implies, reconnecting to an individual’s ancestry, meaning they were pulled to land and this gave them a sense of belonging. This relates back to humans’ innate connection back to nature that gives a sense of identity and pride which empowers and promotes individuals’ health (Kingsley et al. 2009, p. 295).

Interaction with the natural environment is also recognised as significant in Western models of wellbeing (ABS cited in Kingsley, et al. 2009).

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1 A Balunu representative was on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team in 2009.