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FOR OUR CHILDREN Local Strengths, National Challenges AMPE ANWERNEKENHEKE Rlterrke Akwete Aneye

Reflections on Aboriginal children and child protection: lesson learned both personal and professional

By: Professor Dorothy Scott

Keynote presentation by Dorothy Scott to the SNAICC National Conference Wednesday 28 July 2010. Dorothy Scott's speech can be heard online at wwww.snaicc.asn.au/policy/conference

Dorothy Scott is the Foundation Chair in Child Protection of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia. Before taking up this appointment in 2005, she was the Head of the School of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and, prior to that, the Executive Director of The Ian Potter Foundation, one of Australia's largest philanthropic trusts.

Dorothy's career in child welfare began when she was a 17 year old child care worker at the Allambie Reception Centre in Burwood, Victoria. Moved by the suffering of children who were admitted to State care, she studied social work at the University of Melbourne in the early 1970s and then worked for the then Social Welfare Department in the area of foster care and adoption. She then worked in the field of mental health, becoming Senior Social Worker in the Family Psychiatry Department of the Queen Victoria Medical Centre in Melbourne. There, she helped establish specialist services for women experiencing post-partum psychiatric disorders, and services for women and children who had been sexually assaulted. In the 1980s she began an academic career, lecturing social work students at the University of Melbourne and conducting research in areas including maternal depression and child welfare. Since then, she has conducted numerous reviews and inquiries in Australia in the field of child protection, and has served on Ministerial advisory bodies in several States and Territories.

This presentation was Dr Scott's last formal appearance as Foundation Chair of the Australian Centre for Child Protection, as Dorothy is retiring in a few weeks. Dr Scott has been a long standing friend of SNAICC. The SNAICC Executive thanks her for that friendship and hope that it may continue into the future.

I acknowledge the Central Arrernte people, the traditional owners and custodians for Mparntwe, and I acknowledge their elders past and present. Let us honour the land and its spirits. It is a great privilege to be invited to speak to you and it is with deep humility that I do so.

Let us look at these pictures of Indigenous children on the screen – their beauty and their joy, their creativity and their competence. These are in contrast with the appalling fact that Indigenous children are nine times more likely to be in the care of the State as a result of child protection proceedings than other children. Here at this conference we are finding and sharing with one another a different way to protect and nurture children.

Each of these children will ask themselves the questions that all children, and all humans, ask, Who am I? Where am I going? Do I matter? And how they answer these questions will shape how they grow up, or even whether some grow up and reach adulthood. To answer these questions, each of us needs to ask two other questions first, questions that Aboriginal people have understood for longer than any other culture on earth.

Where do I come from? Who do I belong to? I first came across these two questions in a SA Aboriginal organization for people with alcohol problems. These were the questions each person entering that program was asked to answer:

None of us can answer the questions "Who am I, where am I going and do I matter?"until we know where we come from and who we belong to. In modern society we often think that answering who am I depends on what belongs to us but the wisdom of Aboriginal people tells us that it who we belong to which tells us who we are. It is those who love us and those we love.

The answers to the questions where we come from, and who we belong to, are in our stories. We are our stories. Individual lives are created by stories. Families are created by stories. Communities are created by stories. And the life of our nation is created by stories – big stories.

The little stories of each of our lives fit into the big stories of our nation. The big stories of this country go back a long, long way – to the Dreaming. They are Aboriginal stories up until just two centuries ago since when the stories have involved European people and Aboriginal people, and the relationship between them.

The relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples has been a big story, and for many Aboriginal people, a very sad story.

Today I would like to share with you some of my

little local stories, true stories that came into my mind when I thought about why we are gathered here. They are connected to the bigger child welfare story which is part of the big story about the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the history of Australia.

There are some lessons that come from these stories, lessons for us in thinking about how we grow the children up strong so that they can have good stories and can give their stories to their children and their children's children, as Aboriginal people have done in this country for thousands and thousands of years.

As a 14 year old school girl I came to Central Australia with other students from my high school in Melbourne. The colours and the contours of this landscape captivated me and I was in awe of the night sky with its sparkling stars. I could feel the spirits of the land.

I also have memories of my mistakes.

a. I remember climbing Uluru (I did not know this was the wrong thing to do) and taking this stone away with me (I did not know this was the wrong thing to do). Maybe someone here who is going to Uluru and who knows it is wrong to climb Uluru and who knows it is wrong to take the stones away, will be kind enough to take the stone back to where it belongs.

b. I also remember near Alice Springs, at a mission I think, taking a photo of an Aboriginal mother and her little girl with a bright red jumper, and when I later looked at the photo I could tell that this mother did not want to be photographed but that she did not have the power to say no. I wish I could say sorry to her and to her little girl who would now be a woman, may be even a grandmother. It makes me think about what it must be like for a parent not to be able to say no, and for their child to see their mother or their father not able to say no to white people. Might this mean a child answers the question 'who am I, where am I going and do I matter?' in ways that makes them feel that they are not a strong person, that they do not have control of their future, and that they do not matter. Is there a lesson in this for us today I wonder?

At this same place, as we were leaving and just about to get on the bus, I remember a white man telling us that all the Aboriginal children should be taken from their families and brought up by white people. I was shocked but I did not say anything. I knew what he said was not right but I remained silent. How many of us remain silent when we should speak I wonder?

We must never remain silent again. This week in our national newspaper, The Australian, words have been printed about 'removing all the children' that I never thought I would see or hear again in my lifetime again. These are painful words to read but it is important that we realize these views are now part of the national discourse again. As I flew to Alice Springs on Monday, this was what I read.

" I'm outraged by the articles written by Natash Robinson ("One little boys' anguish as culture put before safety", 24-25/7) and Tony Koch ("Pathetic excuses perpetuate this fraud on vulnerable children", 24-25/7) on the plight of children in Aboriginal communities. How can this possibly be tolerated in prosperous Australia.

Why do our indigenous people care so little for their children that they deny them an education and health care, and allow them to be physically and sexually abused, so continuing the cycle of poverty and neglect for generation after generation? Perhaps the adults are beyond help but if the only way out of this appalling mess is to remove all the children and given them a future in mainstream Australia, the let's do it, and to hell with cultural sensitivities.

If you don't do this, you condemn these children, and eventually they children, to the miserable lives othat their parents lead. What is so special about Aboriginal culture, anyway, that it must be preserved at the expense of its children?"

Mike Phillips, Wollstonecraft, NSW

In this morning's *Australian* newspaper, my reply was published.

"Mike Phillips' answer to the problem of child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities ("remove all the children … and to hell with cultural sensitivities, 26/7) will not work. Indigenous children are already nine times more likely to be in State care than other children.

Some of these children clearly cannot return home because it is unsafe to do so but to remove children on the scale Phillips demands will only compound the problem. Will we remove the traumatized parents' subsequent children, and again and again and again?

And where will they go – on to the revolving door of multiple foster placements in our overloaded child welfare system or shall we reopen the institutions where we warehoused children in the 1960s? These "solutions" have failed.

Some things are working but there is a long way to go. Improved housing and employment, alcohol control measures and rehabilitation services, child and family health nurses and early childhood education require sustained commitment by governments willing to work in partnership with Indigenous organisations and communities.

This was the first recommendation of The Little Children are Sacred Report. It is time we tried it."

Professor Dorothy Scott

In Melbourne when I was 15, I began to help out as a volunteer at an institution for children taken from their parents by the police and child welfare authorities. There were a lot of children and they were sad and frightened. On Sundays sometimes their parents came and the parents also seemed sad and frightened, and sometimes angry. Sometimes children waited up against the fence for the parents who never came. Maybe the parents felt too much shame and too much sadness to come.

I did not notice Aboriginal children there at that time but when I left school at seventeen my first job was as a child care worker at this institution, and I remember two Aboriginal girls and their brother. The boy was about 8 and his older sister was about 10 and his little sister three. They had two surnames – the name of their family and the surname of the foster family they had been with before they came into the institution. I do not remember these children having any visitors. They were very close to one another. The little girl often came up to me and climbed on to my lap for a cuddle. She trusted me. I let her trust me. One day I was asked to go with the children in a van driven by a man and take them far away to a place called Ballarat. There were two children's homes there – one for children of school age, and a babies home for children under five. The little girl clinged to me and screamed as they tried to take her from me, the person she trusted. Her brother and her sister saw all of this. It was terrible. It is the worst experience in my life. How many times worse must be for an Aboriginal mother to have her child taken from her or for an Aboriginal man, whose traditional role is the protector of women and children, to be rendered powerless to prevent such an act .

The lesson is that it is important to talk about the painful things that have been done in the name of child welfare. Back then white people did not hear those stories. Many Aboriginal people have now told those stories. Have they been heard? Have the lessons been learned?ave they

My first job after leaving university was in the Social Welfare Department in Victoria. There I learned what had happened to Aboriginal children who were placed in white foster families and adoptive families. There are lessons in these stories.

There were children in foster care, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who had not been seen by anyone in the Department for years as there were few staff and many children. Among the children I was responsible for there were several Aboriginal children living with white foster parents. Other young social workers and I asked the late Auntie Mollie Dyer to come to a meeting one evening to talk with the foster parents of Aboriginal children. The daughter of Aboriginal leader Mrs Margaret Tucker, Auntie Mollie Dyer set up VACCA, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care and led the changes in

child welfare for Aboriginal children in Victoria. She worked to prevent Aboriginal children coming into care, and she worked to help foster parents and social workers understand what it was like for Aboriginal children already in foster care.

At the first Adoption Conference in Sydney in 1976, I remember Auntie Mollie Dyer and Aboriginal people from other States speaking out about what it was like for Aboriginal children to be adopted by white families. It was hard for the children because they could not answer the question 'who am I?'.

Because of what I learned from Auntie Mollie Dyer I got into trouble from the Victorian Ombudsman for what he said was interfering in the privately arranged adoptions of Aboriginal children by white families.

But there is another side to this story. Because of my empathy for Aboriginal families, I sometimes did not want to believe that Aboriginal children could suffer abuse and neglect from their families. I remember one Aboriginal girl in foster care who had been sexually abused by her father when he was drunk, and I denied that this could have happened even though there was strong evidence of this.

My friend Muriel Bamblett, the former Chair of SNAICC and the CEO of VACCA, has often reminded us that white people sometimes do not want to see the suffering of Aboriginal children who are being abused as they were afraid of making the mistakes of the past and afraid of being seen as racist.

The lesson of this story is that we must all face up to the facts of child abuse and neglect no matter whether it is an Aboriginal child or a non-Aboriginal child, for if we don't it is the child who pays the price.

I have some good stories about what I have seen and learned in recent years. I used to work for an organization in Melbourne that gave money to help Aboriginal organizations and this meant I travelled to many places across Australia and saw Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who trusted each other, working together to create make things good for children and families.

Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service, "Mums and Babies" Project

Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service is an Indigenous-managed health service and a team of doctors, nurses and Aboriginal health workers developed the Mums and Babies program. Aboriginal and TSI health workers reached out to pregnant women from Aboriginal and TSI communities and encouraged them to use the service. Transport was provided and access was on a walk-in rather than an appointment basis. People were warmly welcome when they came. Photographs of the babies born were taken and displayed, and there were toys and a weekly playgroup for children. The atmosphere felt right. It was successful. The percentage of eligible women almost trebled from 23.8% to 61.2% in a couple of years. The number of antenatal care visits per pregnancy increased from three to seven and there was a significant reduction in pre-term births.

Pal….Napranum, Far North Queensland

In Napranum near Weipa on the on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, an inspiring outreach program was developed called Parents and Learning (PaL). It is a 2-year home based program, using books and activities to promote parents' confidence in themselves as their children's first teachers. PaL has spread to other Aboriginal communities in Victoria and NSW. The PaL program was the result of a collaborative effort between the Napranum preschool staff and Aboriginal parents. The program involves a parent or extended family member working together with their child during school term. Parents undertake to read the story book and work with the educational activities each week. PaL Tutors deliver kits to the home and pick them up each week. They are local Aboriginal women with their own young children and they are trained and supported to teach other parents how to use the kits. It too has had very good results.

These and many, many other good program operating across Australia, as we have heard about here at the conference, which are showing us the way. They are all different but successful program have important common elements:

- They employ Aboriginal people who receive good training and support
- They have a warm and welcoming atmosphere
- They are high quality services which are well evaluated so we know if they work
- They are based on close and equal relationships between those providing a service and those receiving a service (not fly in and fly out!)
- They focus on families' strengths and aspiration – they are not a shame job
- They bring families together and strengthen community
- Last but not least they were developed in close partnership with communities

Communities know what they want if time is taken to listen to them. Aboriginal men and women in some communities in some places are doing wonderful things such as fighting for alcohol control measures in their communities, for alcohol abuse is the single biggest threat to the wellbeing of children. This is true both of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

In 2006 I had the opportunity to visit the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunyjatjara Lands with a group of Josephite nuns (Mary Mackillop's mob!) and several Aboriginal women, led by Mrs Waniwa Lester or Auntie Lucy Lester, who is with us here today.

Over the next couple of days we listened to the mothers and the grandmothers tell us how they were very concerned about the 'skinny children', especially the very young children who were not getting enough food to eat and were seriously underweight. This concerned us too as malnutrition or 'failure to thrive' is one of the main reasons that Aboriginal children in remote communities are removed by child protection services. It is one of the reasons that young children die and if they don't die, they become sick and later they struggle to learn at school.

But it is heart breaking when these children are taken away. This had happened to some of the grandchildren of the women with whom we spoke. They said that children cannot grow up strong if they are taken away from their family and country. One grandmother spoke with deep sorrow and distress when recounting how her young grandchild, who had been taken far away, had asked her on the telephone "Grandmother, where are you?".

The women said that Anangu children who are taken away "feel like strangers in own country when they return … children taken away call other people 'mum' – wrong way - not true – names of some people who were taken away not true now… we all want to stay in land to learn culture, not learn other people's culture…learn from own people".

Anangu women spoke a lot about hunger. Families cannot afford to buy food due to the very high prices in the stores. Much of the food was unhealthy. "Take away food not good. Take away food killing Anangu ...Need enough food for children to stay on lands."

When asked what should happen when parents cannot care for their children properly and the babies are underweight, for example when parents might be sniffing petrol, the women said that the 'Anangu way' was for grandmothers or aunties to look after the child but many grandparents are raising children without financial support. They said that "Grandmothers need help to buy food".

One very senior woman who has since passed away said she had been "thinking safe place, feeding place…". The women were very positive

about 'homemaker services' that were just being developed in some communities on the Lands such as the one in Amata by Brenda Stubbs. She employed the young mothers of 'the skinny children' for a few hours in the morning to make the meals for elderly Anangu and then they fed their children in the centre and enjoyed a lovely meal together.

Services which are based on 'case management' and which single out parents who are not looking after their children properly are a shame job. Services which have an open door and an open heart and which invite parents to be contributors, not clients, are not a shame job. When I listened to Brenda talk about what she did, it was like she was a grandmother to all of the children and a mother to their young mothers. I said this to her and she said "Of course, they are all like my own grandchildren'. She said "In everything I do I am saying 'it does not have to be like this' ". She was sowing the seeds of hope in her community.

Brenda Stubbs and countless other Aboriginal people who work in this way are nurturing hope and putting Kanyini at the heart of what they do. I understand that in the Pitjantjatjara language (and no doubt its equivalent in other Aboriginal languages), the word 'kanyini' has very deep meaning for Indigenous people and is about how relationships within Indigenous society are held and how older people nurture and protect younger people within culture. The concept of 'holding' children within the context of your waltja (family) and ngura (homeland) are concepts based on tjukurrpa. These are concepts that Pitjantjatjara and other desert cultures know can protect children and make families and communities strong.

The mothers and the grandmothers said to us that programs had come and gone and failed due to short-term funding, poor co-ordination and loss of key people. They expressed confusion about the many different projects delivered from a great distance."To tell the truth I don't know what they are doing". Services were not seen as accountable to the community. "Need to sit in front of Anangu and say 'this is what I have done'- do proper report … start to work with communities. Work out what they want. Work it out."

Anangu women could see how things could work – for example how a program for young people had combined food and making music and reduced petrol sniffing and violence. But there had been many broken promises. "Government need to talk proper story."

Yet there was still some hope. They said "Today we are talking for first time…we all know what is happening…We like to see these things in place…to be true story…make this a true story…don't know if there are any true stories yet…"

Those words "don't know if there are any true stories yet" ring in my ears and echo in my heart. I believe there are good stories and true stories, and at this conference many of these stories are being shared. But we have to realise that promises have been broken before, over and over again. We must stop breaking promises or we will crush the hope that is still there, in some place, perhaps just still there. Hope is like water in the desert – it is the most precious resource we have as human beings.

That there was still hope in the hearts of these women after so many stories that have not been true stories, moves me very deeply. We all need to nurture hope in the heart of one another, in each family, and in each community, and for then and only then will we have hope in the heart of our nation.

And the source of hope? These pictures you see are the source of our hope – the beauty and the joy, the creativity and the competence, and the courage and the wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Let me finish with a story, not my story, but the story of Stephen Nona, a Torres Strait Islander boy who, along with his two sisters, was commended for brave conduct in a ceremony at Government House in Queensland some years ago. You may remember hearing about him. Let me read the official citation for this.

"Master Nona, then aged eleven, assisted two members of his family to swim to seek help and survive being stranded for six days after his family's boat capsized in Torres Strait, Queensland on the afternoon of 6 July 2004…Master Nona encouraged his sisters to swim with him to seek help and managed to reach a small rocky outcrop approximately 400 metres away. The children survived there for three days by eating oysters. At this stage they made a decision to again swim for help in the hope that they and their family would be rescued. They then swam six kilometres to Matu Island. When the girls were tired, Master Nona told them to hang on to him so that he could tow them on his back, or he pushed them along. The children survived on Matu Island by eating native fruits and drinking coconut milk, and Master Nona continued to reassure his sisters that they would be saved. After three more days the children were rescued by their uncle. Tragically the other occupants of the dingy (his mother father and younger brother) were never found."

This is a story about how these children used the ancient knowledge passed on to them about tides and food to survive. The words Stephen Nona said, presumably in the language of his people, to urge his sisters, who were poor swimmers, to leave the rocky outcrop and go back into the sea, were these:

"We swim with one heart and one mind."

This is the courage and the wisdom of a child.

The lesson of this story for us is that we too need to work together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We must swim with one heart and one mind if we are to grow up the children so they are strong, so they can know where they come from, so they can know who they belong to, so they can know who they are, and where they are going and that they matter. And so they can have lives full of good stories and true stories which they can tell their children and their children's children, and that these can become part of the big story of our nation.