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**Engaging hard-to-reach families through holistic service
provision and mutually beneficial partnerships**

Lisa Coulson

(a) Acknowledgement and Introduction

I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of the lands on which we gather today, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and future.

I wish to thank the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood for the invitation and opportunity to present at this important gathering. I speak from my considerable experience in service provision for Aboriginal families and I will use the opportunity to highlight the situation and the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

I want to bring again to the forefront what many in this room would appreciate and share my passion for: that is, the strong call to promote and uphold the rights of Aboriginal children and families through the development and delivery of services which promote the best possible outcomes for Aboriginal parents and children: services which respond to the realities of poverty and disadvantage experienced by Australia's Aboriginal peoples.

(b) Identifying Significant Issues

It is important first to recognise and acknowledge that many of the issues facing our families will not be overcome in this generation. We must not be short sighted. The socially and culturally destructive forces of colonisation and paternalistic government policies, which have perpetuated a gross lack of respect for our culture and our rights, have left deep scars for our communities.

They continue to impact and to scar. Addressing the injustice and the tragic effects of the Stolen Generations requires a significant commitment to the provision of services that heal, reconnect and preserve families. Healing requires genuine and mutually respectful relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians and a shared commitment to take action to address pressing needs and uphold rights.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be at a high risk of experiencing multiple disadvantages,¹ with significantly poorer health and wellbeing indicators than non-Aboriginal children.² The comprehensive Western Australian Child Health Survey highlighted the multiple, complex and significant challenges facing our children in 2001 when it described that more than one in five Aboriginal children living in Western Australia '*were living in families where 7 to 14 major life stress events, such as death, imprisonment, violence and severe hardship, had occurred in the last 12 months prior to the survey*'.³ This reflects a continuing reality for children living in a society where child mortality rates for Aboriginal children up to 4 years are at two to four times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population and the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia remains around 10 years for females and 11 years for males.⁴

In this environment of widespread disadvantage and multiple family and child stresses, it is no surprise that our children continue to experience poor educational outcomes. In 2008 only 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander year 3 students achieved the national minimum standards for literacy and numeracy compared with 93.5% of non-Aboriginal children.⁵ These

1 Child's Rights Taskforce 2011, *Listen to Children: Child Rights NGO Report Australia*, accessed 21 September 2011, <http://www.childrights.org.au/listen-to-children-reports>

2 Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2009, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, Productivity Commission, Canberra; SNAICC 2010b, *Working and Walking Together: supporting family relationship services to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and organisations*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy

3 *ibid*

4 *ibid*

5 Productivity Commission 2011, *Early Childhood Development Workforce Draft Research Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne. accessed 19 July 2011, <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/study/education-workforce/early-childhood/draft>

disadvantages affect our children early in life and continue throughout life, contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection and juvenile justice systems.⁶

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, I have a positive belief that I no doubt share with many in this room, in the strength and resilience of Aboriginal families. It is an honour and a privilege to have the opportunity to work with families as I do, and I believe that by working with respect and in genuine partnership with Aboriginal families we can build the capacity of families and communities and work to address the multiple disadvantages they experience. If we get this right for our families now, if we get this right for our children, then the outcomes will continue to develop for generations. With a genuine commitment to and support for our families we can emerge from a troubled recent history and begin to build a stronger future for our communities.

(c) Introducing myself, my role and my experience

Before I go further to explain how I believe this is possible, I need to introduce myself. I am Lisa Coulson, a Tasmanian Aboriginal with strong connections to my community and my land. I have been working as the director of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association, TACCA, for 19 years. During my time in this role I have witnessed and participated in the growth of TACCA from a small, struggling, unlicensed child care centre which provided only child care to a large and prosperous centre which provides a wide range of child and family support services.

TACCA is a success story in the development and delivery of an Aboriginal community-controlled service which is appropriate and effective in engaging with and supporting Aboriginal children and families. I am only too happy to share with you some of the stories of what makes that success possible. Though I must note, with some humility, that we still have much to learn and must remain always open and responsive to developing new ways to engage our

⁶ SCRGSP 2009; SNAICC 2010b

families and strengthen our service as the need for support is as strong as ever, with the significant over-representation of our children in the child protection system reflected in Tasmania as in all other States and Territories of Australia.⁷

I also speak to you today in my role as a member of the National Executive of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care or SNAICC. SNAICC was established as a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation in 1981 and is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC aims to provide a strong voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families through a national body that represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services and promotes the rights, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. SNAICC achieves this through contributing to Government policy, advocacy with and on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, the development and promotion of resources and trainings, and support for the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family services sector.

I have served on the SNAICC National Executive for 10 years. This role has developed my understanding of the many challenges that face Aboriginal families and the services which support them, and provided opportunities to advocate for our families on many levels, including in the development of government policy and in a variety of professional and academic forums. My time as part of the SNAICC executive has reinforced my understanding of the strong connections Aboriginal people have with their culture, land and community, and their resilience. A highlight of my time on the SNAICC National Executive was convening the 2010 SNAICC National Conference in Alice Springs, which was one of the largest ever gatherings of Aboriginals, service providers and government representatives in Australia. This gathering highlighted the strength of our

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010), *Child Protection Australia 2008-09*, Child Welfare Series No. 47, Canberra, p46

organisations which continue, despite the challenges, to develop innovative, appropriate and effective ways of supporting our children and families.

In 2008 I completed an Aboriginal Early Years consultancy for Anglicare Tasmania which included interviewing Aboriginal parents in relation to their access to mainstream services and the barriers they faced. This consultancy has provided me with significant insight into the service barriers that exist for Aboriginal families.

(d) Overcoming Barriers to Service Access

I wish to acknowledge that there are many obstacles to overcome in developing effective service provision for our families across Australia, but I believe that with commitment and over time they can be overcome. Despite the significant level of disadvantage experienced by our families, statistics continue to indicate low national levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to family support services.⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are under-represented in Early Childhood Education and Care services and more likely to be absent than other children.⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children have been regularly identified as 'hard to reach' when it comes to support services and program engagement¹⁰ and although the very title of my address today describes our families as hard to reach, it is vitally important that we do not place the blame on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families for being hard to reach. We must not blame the victims of social injustice for the failings of our services to respond to their realities of disadvantage. Perhaps at this point, I should really correct myself and describe instead that it is the early childhood and family support

8 SNAICC 2011d, *Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services*, FaHCSIA Paper 3: May 2011, SNAICC, North Fitzroy, accessed 14 September 2011, http://www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/02743.pdf, p4

9 Productivity Commission 2011, p266

10 see for example: Flaxman, S, Muir, K, & Oprea, I 2009, *Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services*, FaHCSIA Occasional Paper 23, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, accessed 21 September 2011, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/publicationsarticles/research/occasional/Pages/ops-ops23.aspx> and Cortis, N, Katz, I and Patulny R 2009, *Engaging hard-to-reach families and children*, Occasional Paper No 26, National Evaluation Consortium, Canberra, p13

services which are hard to reach, hard to find, often inadequate or inappropriate to meet the needs of our families.

Let us talk instead of the barriers which prevent our families and children from accessing support services. The presence of multiple barriers to accessing support services has, in and of itself, been identified as one of the disadvantages currently facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, families and children.¹¹

The barriers are historical, cultural, social and practical. They include: a lack of cultural awareness in the provision of services and as a result, services that are not culturally appropriate; the history of mainstream services in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and resulting distrust of the service provider; a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by the service provider and; language and communication barriers.¹²

Significant practical barriers include low income; remote or regional location and lack of transport.¹³ These barriers may present as an unwillingness to engage with the service, but should rather be recognised as barriers that services must address in order to respond appropriately to the needs of our communities.

Today I will highlight two key approaches that have proven to be effective in overcoming many of the service access and engagement barriers I have described. These key approaches are: firstly, culturally appropriate engagement; and secondly, a holistic approach to the needs of the community.¹⁴ I believe that these approaches to service provision are critical and, when pursued in a genuine way, can strongly advance the wellbeing of our children and families and

11 Child Rights Taskforce 2011

12 SNAICC 2010a, *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*, June, SNAICC, Fitzroy North, accessed 15 September 2011, http://www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/02744.pdf; SNAICC 2011d

13 see SNAICC 2010a; SNAICC 2011d

14 SNAICC 2008, *SNAICC Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy; SNAICC 2010a; SNAICC 2011; Bamblett, M. and Lewis, P. (2007) 'Detoxifying the Child and Family Welfare Systems for Australian Indigenous Peoples: Self-determination, Rights and Culture as the Critical Tools', *First Peoples Child and Family Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 43; Higgins, J R and Butler, N 2007, *Characteristics of promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services (Promising Practices in Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Carers, Children and Young People, Booklet 1)*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne

demonstrate a real commitment to upholding the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

(f) Adequate and Effective Service Provision is a Human Right

The provision of holistic services which are culturally appropriate for our families is not only a need to be addressed, it is an essential element of Australia's international legal obligations to uphold the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

As a Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) Australia has an obligation to provide services which advance the dignity of all people living in this country and ensure that each person's rights are protected. This includes rights to adequate food and housing, to continuous improvement of living conditions, to the highest attainable standards of health and, to education which is 'directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity.'¹⁵ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which was endorsed by Australia in 2009 further declares that 'indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training, housing, health and social security.'¹⁶

Our peoples have witnessed the failure of successive Australian governments to translate these rights into realities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966) requires that the Australian Government 'take steps...by all appropriate means' and to 'the maximum of its available resources' to ensure the realisation of these rights.¹⁷ The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has described that these steps must be 'deliberate, concrete and targeted as clearly as possible towards meeting the obligations recognised in the

¹⁵ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, opened for signature 9 December 1966, 999 UNTS 3, (entered into force 3 January 1976)

¹⁶ *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, GA Res 61/295, UN Doc A/RES/61/295 (2007)

¹⁷ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, opened for signature 9 December 1966, 999 UNTS 3, (entered into force 3 January 1976), Article 2

Covenant.¹⁸ The Committee emphasises that the obligation to progressively realise these rights requires Australia 'to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards' their full realisation.¹⁹

The Committee states strongly that 'a State party in which any significant number of individuals is deprived of essential foodstuffs, of essential primary health care, of basic shelter and housing, or of the most basic forms of education is, prima facie, failing to discharge its obligations under the Covenant.'²⁰ The only acceptable excuse for this situation is a lack of available resources, but in a wealthy country like Australia, this excuse is not available. The daily reality for many of our families is testament to the failure of Australia to meet these legal obligations and secure our rights. Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma has described this failure in terms of a political apathy in Australia characterised by an absence of timeframes, targets and benchmarks, effectively rendering government unaccountable for progressive realisation of these human rights.²¹

When we look specifically to the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, we must remember that their rights do not exist in isolation from their families, their community and their culture. Indeed, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) asserts that an indigenous child 'shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture...or to use his or her own language.'²² Many current models of mainstream service delivery are lacking in rights-based approaches which ensure that connection to family, community and culture are integrated and supported throughout service delivery. There is a strong need to develop policies and practices that are embedded in a holistic approach to

18 *The Nature of States Parties Obligations*, Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No 3, 5th Session, UN Doc E/1991/23 (1990), 2

19 *ibid*, 9

20 *ibid*, 10

21 Calma, T (2008) 'Indigenous Health and Human Rights' 14(1) *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 21, 22

22 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, opened for signature 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 3 (entered into force 2 September 1990), article 30

service delivery.²³

(e) Holistic Approaches to Community Needs

Holistic service provision is grounded in the strengths of Aboriginal people and culture. The holistic community development model originated in the Aboriginal community sector during the 1970s.²⁴ A holistic approach to service delivery means that services incorporate a comprehensive evaluation of client need, with an awareness of social, cultural and economic factors. Programs and services for the client are then coordinated around identified needs with an emphasis placed on holistic wellbeing.²⁵

Holistic service provision models have been a strength of our community-controlled services and are reflected in the design and approach of the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, or MACS, and other Aboriginal community-controlled children and family services including TACCA. Holistic service principles place an emphasis on the whole child, the whole family, the whole community and the relationships between them.

The development of MACS services is an important chapter in the history of culturally appropriate service development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and I would like to briefly bring your attention to that history. The story is not all positive, but let me come to that later, for there is much to commend in the MACS service model and success stories to be told.

The MACS were established in 1987, based on a shared understanding that our children have a right to culturally appropriate services that reinforce a positive cultural identity. Past practices had shown that mainstream services had failed to meet these needs and MACS were established to fill the gap in service provision. They were widely supported by our communities and by the Australian Government, with the number of services expanding throughout the 1990s.²⁶ There are currently 33 MACS services operating in all Australian states

23 Behrendt, L (2002) 'Self-determination and Indigenous policy: the rights framework and practical outcomes, *Journal of Indigenous Policy*, no.1, 43

24 Briskman, L 2003, *The Black Grapevine*, Federation Press, Annandale.

25 SNAICC 2010b

26 Auditor-General 2010, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and Creches,

and territories.²⁷

The main function of MACS centres is child care, but MACS are not simply child care organisations. They are far more than this. MACS centres provide a variety of services, and have been described as a 'one-stop-shop' support service.²⁸

While providing child care, from long day care to outside school hours care to playgroups, MACS also provide mobile outreach programs, alongside wellbeing programs for families and children, cultural awareness programs, and other support service such as parenting programs.

Where possible MACS centres are staffed and managed by Aboriginal people. MACS deliver culturally appropriate services in a culturally safe environment, so that our children will develop a positive sense of self and feel a strong pride in their Aboriginality.

The holistic model employed by MACS services is: child centred; family-centred; collaborative; culturally inclusive; focussed on the needs of whole community and; strong in partnerships.

The holistic model works within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural context because it places the child within the wider context, acknowledging the importance of family and community well-being in achieving positive outcomes for children. It places culture at the forefront of developing a strong sense of identity, and allows children to be supported in achieving emotional, social, educational and spiritual well-being.

I would like to take the opportunity now to share with you some of the approaches and successes of TACCA, the service which I direct, in providing holistic support to Aboriginal children and families.

An independent review of the TACCA FaHCSIA funded Indigenous Parenting Support Service at the end of last year described that TACCA has had 'a high level of success in engaging families that other providers have, to date, not been able

Audit Report no 8. 2010-11, Australian National Audit Office, viewed 21 September 2011, www.anao.gov.au/uploads/documents/2010-11_Audit_Report_No_8.pdf, p32

27 ibid

28 SNAICC 2011d, p2

to engage.' It noted that the programme had 'demonstrated that it is possible to work in a long term, consistent and outcome focussed model with hard to reach families.'²⁹ The programme works because it responds in a flexible way to the specific needs of the families themselves. It works in engaging families because staff develop long-term, consistent relationships of trust with families.

The program is strengths based and solutions driven. It values already existing strengths of family, community and culture, and works to enhance skills and family functioning. The program is genuinely holistic addressing all aspects of child development, child safety and parenting skills. Parents and children are supported to increase their knowledge and skills of early literacy and numeracy, develop connections to community, and gain access to regular quality support and educational services. Through these interventions our staff are confident that they are enabling life-changing outcomes that will impact not only on this generation, but on the next.

These outcomes were described by our clients during the recent evaluation of the parenting support service. One mother caring for four children under the age of 7, including a 4 year old with autism, spoke about the relationship of herself and her partner with the TACCA worker who had been coming once a week and working with the family for one year. When asked if they work with other agencies, she responded:³⁰

'We do now, we were very isolated and didn't like to go to many places, but the worker has introduced us to a lot of places and services that can help... She also understands how difficult it is for us to go out to places with four small children with car seats and so she also organises for some people to come to our home and do assessments here because we can't go to them... Also we have been able to look after our own and the children's health. She has helped with doctors and dentist appointments...It's been really helpful to see how she organises all these things because I can start to organise some things myself.'

29 3p Consulting 2010, *Review of Indigenous Parenting Support Service: For the Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association*, Launceston, p28

30 *ibid*

When asked what was the biggest difference the program had made, the same mother responded:³¹

The biggest difference is for our children. They are not as shy and much more active because we now know how to get out and do things with them and we know where to go to get some help if we need it. They can see that we aren't as worried so they are more confident and happier.'

Another single mother with three children described the support she was receiving from the service:³²

'There are a range of areas where the worker supports me. Most importantly, she listens and gives me the opportunity to talk through what is happening and helps me understand why. She also gives me the confidence to make informed decisions with some of the specialists that are working with my son. She gives me advice and support with my other two children and helps me understand what 'normal' behaviour is for them at their different ages. She has also helped me to have fun with my kids and realise you don't necessarily need money to have good fun playing with your kids.'

The biggest difference that this mother describes as a result of the program was:³³

'I have a lot more confidence in my parenting and also how to access and deal with others who are also working with my children. I am much more confident in how to work through with medical specialists particularly what I do or don't think is best for my children.'

The TACCA locational supported playgroup is another aspect of TACCA's holistic

31 ibid

32 ibid, p30

33 ibid

service provision as well as a holistic service model in its own right. The playgroup program targets families in the TACCA long-day-care program and families supported by the parenting support service. It is also more broadly available to the Aboriginal community through word-of-mouth and referrals from other agencies. The program delivers parenting and early years development support through a range of methodologies. It is focussed strongly on the specific needs of the client group, and is based on structure and routine. TACCA's experience is that routine and structure in daily parenting is often lacking for our client group, and that integrating these can make a significant positive contribution to the behavioural, pro-social and developmental needs of children.

Play sessions enable ongoing and diverse modelling of play, communication, and formal and informal interaction. This is focussed between parent and child but also allows opportunities for parents to interact, build self-confidence, and share successes and challenges with peers. Literacy sessions focus on reading together and letters of the day to promote the importance of reading with and to children from an early age. Many parents have low literacy levels and are not comfortable reading with their children. Staff members identify parents who have their own literacy needs and support them in accessing literacy tutors. Through the provision of this range of developmental and relational supports we witness many stories of success for our parents and children.

Holistic models, such as these, work well for our families because people can access a range of services in one place and do not have to tell their story again for each new service. They respond specifically to identified community need, are culturally appropriate and based on respectful and trusting relationships between staff and families.

You may ask, if holistic community-controlled models are so strong in culture and strong in meeting community needs, how have we, as a society, failed to adequately address the support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in any comprehensive or nearly adequate way? One very clear reason has been a lack of support, a lack of funding, and inadequate resourcing and

workforce development that has meant that all too often our services have not reached their potential. There has been a failure to build sufficient capacity in our organisations and in our communities to adequately address the multiple disadvantages that our families experience.

MACS and other Aboriginal focussed early childhood services are funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) through the Budget Based Funding sub-program. Budget-based funding for non-mainstream services is currently limited by an insecure single year funding model.³⁴ Despite increases in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child population and increasing demand for services, funding levels have remained more or less the same from year to year. A study of MACS in 2000 revealed the failure to adequately fund MACS to provide services beyond child care and achieve their aims of holistic service provision.³⁵ The 2010 Australian National Audit Office report on MACS recognises that inadequate funding has been an ongoing problem and continues to hinder the development of MACS services. This report recommends a multiple-year funding model that would support the capacity of services to plan for the future and respond to community needs.³⁶

(f) Culturally Appropriate Service Provision

I have identified cultural appropriateness as a feature of Aboriginal holistic service models, but it is important to address more fully what culturally appropriate service provision is and present some ideas around how it can be developed and improve access to services for all our children and families.

The need for culturally appropriate design, development and delivery of services as a way to overcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage is evident. It is more than a need, it is, as I described earlier, a human right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a necessary pre-requisite to the

34 Auditor-General 2010, p16

35 Bond, D 2000, *Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services National Report*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy

36 Auditor-General 2010, p16

realisation of basic economic, social and cultural rights.

In my view, and the view of SNAICC, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community controlled services provide the strongest examples and opportunities for culturally appropriate service delivery. They are the most effective and appropriate means for supporting our children, families and communities.³⁷ Appropriately resourced and supported community controlled services, such as TACCA and the MACS, with local Aboriginal staff, can culturally engage with their community and respond holistically to their needs.³⁸

‘Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services developed from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ struggle for, and right to, self determination...These services are important because they are managed and driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for their children and families. Generally these services have a culture that supports and brings pride to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and they feel safe when an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander person looks after their children’.³⁹

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) proposes that Aboriginal services, as opposed to mainstream, ‘express the voice of an Aboriginal community.’⁴⁰ They have broader objectives which go beyond child and family support to include cultural advancement, community development and local employment.⁴¹ By placing families and communities at the centre of decision-making about support for their children, they empower and build capacity in communities from a human rights-based perspective, firmly grounded in the right to self-determination and the powerful idea that Aboriginal people know well what is best for their children: we have held and passed on this knowledge

37 SNAICC 2011d, p1

38 ibid

39 SNAICC 2011b (forthcoming), *Cultural Proficiency and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Service Delivery: SNAICC paper no.1 (literature review)*, SNAICC, North Fitzroy, p5

40 Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) 2010, *Building respectful partnerships: the commitment to Aboriginal cultural competence in child and family services*, Arena, Fitzroy, pp33-34

41 ibid

for thousands of years.

There are, however, situations in which Aboriginal families will prefer and choose to access mainstream services. The under-resourcing and lack of capacity of our services has meant that in many cases our families have no choice but to access mainstream services. This is a situation which needs to be addressed. Our children and families 'must be provided with an appropriate and real choice of services, both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and universal, and these services must be equipped to provide culturally proficient, quality programs that meet the holistic needs of their clients.'⁴² Programs for Aboriginal children and families, mainstream or otherwise, should be underpinned by the promotion and encouragement of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child rearing values and practice'.⁴³

Recent, albeit limited data, reveals that approximately 9,587 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-12 years attended 269 non-mainstream or Indigenous-focussed services, such as MACS and crèches, while approximately 19,156 attended mainstream child care services.⁴⁴ Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families 'access both mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, it follows that there is need for a proportionate focus on cultural competency in mainstream services'.⁴⁵

However, culturally safe environments for our families have been recognised as being 'rare' in all areas of service delivery.⁴⁶ Services with limited cultural competency have correspondingly limited success in communicating and engaging with their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander clients.⁴⁷ Services which do not meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and

42 SNAICC 2011d, p10

43 ibid

44 Productivity Commission 2011

45 SNAICC 2010a, p9

46 Williams 1999 in Higgins, D 2010, *Community development approaches to safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children, (Resource Sheet no.1)*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 5. Accessed 20 Sept 2011, http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/documents/resource_sheets/ctgc-rs01.pdf

47 SNAICC 2011d, p11; see also VACCA 2010, p5

communities may also 'exacerbate the continuing trauma and grief suffered' by them.⁴⁸

'In essence, cultural competency and being culturally proficient is required in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector to ensure a supportive and culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. A culturally safe service can potentially increase attendance or access to services that support and nurture their cultural identities and language leading to improved education, health and well-being outcomes'.⁴⁹

The Early Years Learning Framework has been correct in identifying what Aboriginal families and communities have long known, that 'culture is the fundamental building block of identity and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong'.⁵⁰ To ensure that our children grow up strong in their culture and identity, we need to create early childhood education environments which celebrate, nurture and affirm their cultural identity. Developing cultural proficiency in any Early Childhood service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children begins with this important focus on the development of a child's cultural identity.⁵¹ As VACCA has recognised, 'Children who are strong in their culture and see others value their culture are more likely to develop confidence, resilience, and positive identity'.⁵²

There is much to commend in the Early Years Learning Framework especially in its recognition of the importance of culture to children's development and its well articulated understanding that cultural competence 'is much more than

48 SNAICC 2010b, p84

49 SNAICC 2011b, p2

50 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for the Council of Australian Governments 2010, *Educator's belonging, being and becoming: educator's guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Barton, pp21-22, Accessed 14 Sept 2011, http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/EYLF_Ed_Guide.pdf

51 SNAICC 2011b, p9

52 VACCA 2010, p14

awareness of cultural difference. It is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.⁵³ Cultural competence is about attitudes, beliefs, values, and especially the ability to challenge ones own values and beliefs and begin to understand the world from the perspective of others.

The term 'cultural competency' which has become so commonly used, is, however, quite problematic. It suggests some kind of endpoint, that an individual or organisation may become competent or skilled in a culture. Yet true competence, in the understanding of a culture not one's own, can never be truly realised. Just as culture is a living and ongoing process so too is the journey towards cultural competence.

The EYLF's Learning Journey of Cultural Competence also depicts cultural competence as a 'journey, not an end point', which 'occurs when ongoing reflection and environmental feedback involves and supports educators to move up and down the journey from unwilling and unable to willing and able' to engage with diverse cultures.⁵⁴ Too often mainstream services have failed to appreciate the complexity of cultural competence development and the level of commitment it requires and at its worst the term has been used as a 'tick-box' exercise in which an organisation describes a finite set of organisational practices as representing cultural competency, or views cultural competency training for staff as an end in itself.

At an organisational level the movement towards cultural competency 'requires the presence of enabling factors, including dedicated resources, a strong policy environment and committed organisational support.'⁵⁵ 'The comprehensive nature of cultural competence may often require a considerable shift for an

53 DEEWR for COAG 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Barton, p16, accessed 24 Aug 2011, http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/Final%20EYLF%20Framework%20Report%20-%20WEB.pdf

54 DEEWR 2010, pp26-27

55 AIDR 2009 in SNAICC 2011d, p13

organisation's practice if it is to be more than a 'tokenistic effort.'⁵⁶ In my view, cultural competence can only be genuinely developed in a mainstream organisation that is committed to the principle of self-determination for Aboriginal people, that engages respectfully with Aboriginal families, communities and organisations ensuring that their views are central to service development and delivery and that their capacity is built.

SNAICC has developed three core principles that reflect cultural proficiency in a service:⁵⁷

- Principle 1: We support, respect and incorporate cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including language and traditions, in ECEC delivery;
- Principle 2: We understand that culture is embedded in all that we do and don't do, and acknowledge the privilege granted to the dominant culture;
- Principle 3: We engage in positive, mutually supportive and equal partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations

A significant commitment to change in the delivery of child and family services is required if these principles are to be respected and realised. Recent SNAICC consultations with Early Childhood Education and Care services considered these core principles and revealed that: cultural proficiency training and policies were few; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander images, resources and materials were sourced and used by most, despite difficulties in accessing them; most services expressed barriers to Aboriginal knowledge and protocols and were afraid of doing the wrong thing; most were developing relationships with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families and local Elders; all expressed a willingness and need for further guidance towards cultural proficiency and; most advocated for a stand-alone cultural proficiency framework.⁵⁸ These

56 VACCA 2010, p23

57 SNAICC 2011a (forthcoming), *Cultural Proficiency and Early Childhood Education and Care Service Delivery*, SNAICC Paper No. 4 (Final Paper), SNAICC, North Fitzroy, pp4-5

58 See SNAICC 2011a

consultations indicated positively the readiness and willingness of services to engage with cultural proficiency development, and the strong need for a supportive policy and resource environment.

Effective resourcing and support for cultural proficiency development in the implementation of the National Quality Standard will be critical. Though, I would like to note that the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused budget-based services from accreditation under the National Quality Framework, even those services, like TACCA, which have the capacity to meet the requirements of the National Quality Standard, raises some significant concerns.

The recent Productivity Commission draft research report on Early Childhood Workforce Development has recognised the priority that needs to be placed on the provision of quality early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and recommended that indigenous focussed services ‘should be brought into the scope of the National Quality Standard.’⁵⁹ The current lack of timelines and clear processes for including budget-based services within the National Framework raises significant concerns about the way these services will be valued, respected and supported in their important ongoing role in culturally appropriate service provision. This situation must be addressed and the outcome will be critical to effective service delivery for our children and families.

(g) The Potential of Partnerships for Building Capacity and Cultural Competence

Lastly today, I would like to bring to your attention to and describe the important opportunities that exist for improving the quality and choice of services for our families through the development of partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and mainstream organisations. I have highlighted already the integral nature of respectful partnerships with Aboriginal families, communities and organisations to the development of

⁵⁹ Productivity Commission 2011, *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Draft Report, Melbourne, p276

genuine cultural competence for services in our sector. Partnerships, to be successful, must be characterised by respectful relationships which develop the capacity and role of Aboriginal organisations and communities in making decisions about and responding to the needs of our children and families.

As I have noted, the funding models that have not supported the growth and development of community-controlled services have created an increasing need for families to seek support from mainstream services. Many of our services would benefit from the respectful support of mainstream services which have significant skills and resources that could be shared, especially in building the governance and service delivery capacity of our organisations. Genuine partnership relationships have the potential to provide a forum where our organisations and our communities may be consensual parties in the development and delivery of services, rather than the subjects of imposed administrative solutions.⁶⁰

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* recognises the importance of working in partnership to achieving the goal that 'Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities.'⁶¹ It describes that strategies need to be based on 'partnerships between Indigenous families and communities, and between Indigenous agencies, mainstream service providers and governments. Strategies should build on existing strengths, match expectations with appropriate supports, and recognise the importance of Indigenous-led and managed solutions.'⁶² The models of holistic service provision that I have described are strengthened by the effective linking and integration of services through partnerships. It is not possible for a single service, even a service employing a strong holistic service model, to meet all of a client's needs. Where services work together, often families can be connected to

60 Langton, M and Palmer, L 2004, 'Treaties, agreement making and the recognition of Indigenous customary polities', in M Langton, M Tehan, L Palmer & K Shain (eds), *Honour Among Nations? Treaties and Agreements with Indigenous People*, Melbourne University Press, p2

61 Council of Australian Governments 2009, *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p28

62 *ibid*

multiple supports through a single access point. Using a single, culturally appropriate access point can greatly improve the likelihood that our families will access services and increase the range of services that they use.

Frameworks for engaging in successful and respectful partnerships are needed if we are to encourage and develop this approach and take advantage of the opportunities that exist. Attention is needed to the principles that underpin effective collaboration between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations. SNAICC has identified that some of the common features of successful partnerships include: 'negotiation in good faith; Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander interests are seen as parties to an agreement, and not merely as consultants; investment in developing relationships of trust; mutual goal setting; sustainable funding support; initiatives that are supported with timelines and benchmarks; supportive leadership from stakeholders and; regular and open communication that is respectful and culturally appropriate.'⁶³

Reflecting upon my own experience with TACCA, I would note that our achievements in working with mainstream services have been important but limited. TACCA has taken a proactive role as a support and advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their interactions with mainstream services, playing a significant linking role. TACCA provides a range of assistance to our families in accessing mainstream services including: encouraging attendance at appointments and accompanying families to appointments on request; assisting with transport; speaking with the mainstream service before the client attends to facilitate a softer initial meeting and; assisting with paperwork. TACCA role models effective communication with service providers for its clients and often takes a role in communicating and advocating on behalf of a client with the mainstream service. TACCA will also take a role in hand-picking services that can provide the most appropriate support for particular families.

You may rightly get the impression from this list of activities that many of these

63 SNAICC 2011d

interactions are one-way. They are about TACCA supporting our families rather than genuine partnership which impacts on the practice of the mainstream service. Many of these interactions stretch our capacity rather than building it, and the burden is on us and our families to bridge the gap and address the barriers to accessing mainstream services.

There are other examples that I know of where partnerships have worked well and made a significant contribution to increasing service access and quality in communities, but these examples are too few. The enabling environment for successful partnerships needs to be strengthened. The supports that are needed range from policy development and resource provision for building partnerships to the development of genuine cultural competency in mainstream services which would manifest in a genuine commitment to building respectful partnerships. From my perspective, one key limitation remains the lack of value and respect for our community-controlled services, for the strengths of our culture, and the potential of our community-led and managed solutions to address the needs of our children and families. This base level of respect for our right to self-determination and this recognition of our strengths is required to enable partnerships which can improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

(h) Conclusion

Though my address has highlighted many challenges, it has also suggested ways forward. I believe it is important to conclude today in a way that captures the optimism and hope that I share with many for a future where our families are supported and strong and our children are cared for, strong in their culture and identity; a future where the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are respected and upheld.

To achieve this hope will require commitment from all: commitment from Aboriginal organisations and communities to address the significant needs and disadvantage experienced by our families; commitment from mainstream

services to walk alongside us and work with us to increase access for our families to quality and culturally appropriate services; commitment from all Australians to value and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity and; commitment from government to develop and resource quality, culturally appropriate, holistic and adequate service provision for all our children and families. This is a significant commitment, yes, but I believe that our families, communities and organisations have the strength and the resilience to meet the challenge and I believe the vast majority of Australians share a desire to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

If all of us who share this passion for supporting our children and families can walk and work together in the development and delivery of services, we have the opportunity to increase our engagement with families who have been labelled as 'hard-to-reach'. We can work with them to build stronger families now and create stronger communities that care for our children for generations to come.

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