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MOVING INTO THE SYSTEM; EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AS A BRIDGE TO SCHOOL FOR ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

BY ANNE GLOVER



This a report on a study of the early childhood service needs of six South Australian Aboriginal communities, commissioned by the South Australian Children's Services Office and funded by the SA Aboriginal Education and Training Advisory Committee.

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of the study was to identify the early childhood service needs of Aboriginal communities in the Children's Services Office Northern Country Region, with a particular focus on ascertaining the need for, and gaps in education and care programs for pre-school aged Aboriginal children. The study involved extensive consultation with individu-

als, groups and organisations representing Aboriginal communities, key agencies, and service providers and users in Ceduna, Koonibba, Yalata, Port Lincoln, Port Augusta and Whyalla.

In each of these communities people were asked to talk about services for young children and how services could best benefit children, families and communities generally. As a result of these discussions the functions of services and the critical issues to be considered in services were identified, so that the needs and gaps in each community could be documented.

THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES GUIDED THE STUDY:

- * Extensive and thorough consultation with service users is critical since it provides the vital link between service users and providers.
- * The consultation process must feature genuine dialogue if it is to ensure that the services provided are actually wanted by the

community and are appropriate to each community's experiences and expectations.

* The process must allow for broad consultation within each community; in any geographically defined community there are individuals and groups with diverse values, beliefs and experiences.

* The process must be inclusive and all interests must be represented.

* The process will result in accurate documentation of patterns and trends and will not in any way suggest that those consulted give assent to plans "made for them" which may arise as a result of the report.

* The consultative process is the beginning of a long-term process which will enable Aboriginal people to negotiate on the services for their children, to ensure that these services effectively meet the particular needs of young Aboriginal children.

THE CONTEXT OF SERVICES

Formalised early childhood services (i.e. services for children aged 0-5 years) are relatively recent additions to the six communities. Most services began in the 1960's and were shaped by the compensatory education approach. While the philosophy of compensatory education is no longer seen as appropriate there is a degree of confusion as to what is appropriate and how it can best be achieved.

There is also uncertainty about the degree of self-management services actually have, or will have, and there are associated difficulties related to:-

- a) funding
- b) staffing, particularly issues relating to qualification
- c) flexibility of programs, both in structure and content
- d) relationships with services previously provided
- e) purposes of services
- f) differences within communities
- g) licensing requirements
- h) relationships with other agencies and services

Despite these difficulties, there is a general feeling of optimism in communities about the role early childhood can play in the lives of young children and their families.

Services are currently perceived as having the potential to strengthen the child and his or her family provided that 'Aboriginal environments' which include the employment of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal resources are developed. In particular, if biculturalism is fostered through programs, many parents believe that these services can assist in the dual socialisation that is required of Aboriginal children. Services are also perceived as playing an important role in preparing children for their formal education. Helping children move into the formal school system is seen as a vital function of early childhood services.

Almost without exception policies produced by federal, state and local authorities, including those produced by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (National Policy Guidelines for Early Childhood Education); Commonwealth Government (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy), Children's Services Office (Services to Aboriginal Children and Their Families), which are relevant to the provision of early childhood services to Aboriginal children, stress the importance of supporting children's Aboriginal identity and the development of skills necessary for future life. How this is done, in practice, is still being explored.

The very real fear of some families and communities is that biculturalism will not be central to programs and the placement of very young children in these programs may lead to assimilation and the associated loss of culture and weakening of Aboriginal identity.

METHODOLOGY

THE PARTICIPANTS

The majority of Aboriginal communities in South Australia embrace diverse groups of people and a multiplicity of organisations. For the communities in the study area, this was certainly true. Preliminary discussions in the area emphasised the need for consultations to be inclusive - the sharing of information and ideas had to involve all those who wished to have their voices heard. We were reminded that in Aboriginal communities information is important to all individuals and families.

In order to inform as many people as possible about the study a number of strategies were used.

1. Contact facilitators were engaged in each community.

2. ATSIC Regional Councils and Community Councils were advised of the study.

3. Advertisements outlining the study and inviting participation in the project were placed in regional newspapers.

4. Key agencies were notified and asked to nominate a contact person, who could publicise the study as necessary. Agencies included the following:-

- Education Department of South Australia
- Child and Family Health Service
- SA Health Commission
- Family and Community Services
- State Aboriginal Affairs
- Department of Health, Housing and Community Services
- Department of Technical & Further Education

5. Relevant Aboriginal agencies such as the Aboriginal Education Foundation (AEF) and the Aboriginal Child Care Agency (ACCA) were contacted individually.

6. A reference group was formed and members were asked to identify possible participants and contributors.

CONSULTATION MECHANISM

After careful deliberation it was determined that guided discussions, often referred to in the literature as conversational interviews, were the most appropriate methodology to employ. These discussions allow parents and other family members to emphasise that which is most important to them. They provide opportunities for families to talk of their aspirations for their children and themselves, of what they believe is important in an early childhood service, and how services can best support families and communities. Once started, the type and amount of guidance is determined by the participants.

With service *users* the focus of the discussions was:

which services are used and why;
which services are not used and why;
particular early childhood needs which are being met;
particular early childhood services which are not being met.

With service *providers* the focus of the discussions was:

description of service;
the perceived place of service within the Aboriginal community;
particular needs of service and perceived needs of service users.

(Participants were given the understanding that information shared in discussions would be documented for agencies but there was no guarantee that this would lead directly to agencies funding the desired services.)

RESULTS

Discussions highlighted an optimism in communities and among families about the possible futures for their children and a determination to participate in the decision making for this future. Services for young children are seen as playing an important role in children's lives.

Differences in emphasis occurred between and within communities. Each community has its own issues and expectations (reflecting past and current service delivery) and within communities, individuals and family groups hold diverse views regarding early childhood services. These reflect people's own experiences, their familiarity with, and commitment to the range of services available and, most importantly, different choices being made regarding the balance between maintaining an Aboriginal identity and participating in the broader nonAboriginal society.

In the six communities, Early Childhood Services are seen to fulfil a range of functions. The three most commonly talked about functions are:

- 1) supplementing family care
- 2) providing opportunities for children's socialisation; and
- 3) preparing children for their future education.

The critical issues related to these functions, as expressed by community members, are;

1) the need for young children to be in Aboriginal environments

2) the need for Aboriginal staff

3) the option to enrol in mainstream services at age three

4) the provision of transport

5) the co-location of services

FUNCTIONS

SUPPLEMENTING FAMILY CARE

Parents and other family members see the 'growing up' of children as a family responsibility which, at times, can be extended to the wider Aboriginal community. This responsibility is not seen as belonging to people from outside the community, especially people with whom a relationship has not been established. In particular there is concern when care is provided by non-Aboriginal carers. As one parent said, "**How can whitefellas teach Nunga ways? We've got our own special way of looking after kids.**".

Almost all mothers said that, for occasional supplementary care, they would use a family member. If a family member was not available a known and trusted member of the community would be the next choice.

This preference for care provided by family members does not prevent some families from using centre-based child care. Nor does it prevent requests for the establishment of culturally appropriate, inexpensive and conveniently located centres. The changing nature of committees deem these necessary.

However, 'outside care' is seen as potentially supplementing family care, not replacing it.

SOCIALISATION

Many parents and family members spoke of the need for children to become bicultural and discussed at length the role early childhood services could play in this process. Becoming bicultural is generally seen as "**learning to live in two worlds**" and involves the dual process of retaining the values and beliefs of Aboriginal culture while acquiring the skills and knowledge of the dominant non-Aboriginal culture.

Parents believe strongly that centres designed specifically for Aboriginal children play an important role in this process. In these centres children can be with other Aboriginal children. Here they are not 'the other', not different, not the minority. They are surrounded mostly by people who know and understand them, who recognise the individual gifts they bring and their Aboriginal identity is reinforced rather than suppressed or negated.

In these centres "**kids can grow strong in Nunga ways**" while also beginning to learn the rules and routines necessary for functioning in the larger society. Being with other Aboriginal children and adults means that they are not invisible, ie. not forgotten or ignored.

In these environments children can develop a range of appropriate and necessary social skills.

Parents suggested that children enter these services aged between 2 & 3 years, and

spend a year or two in them before transition to 'main-stream' kindergartens and pre-schools.

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Parents recognise that when their children enter the more formal learning environment of school, the transition is potentially full of conflict. This has been their own experience and the experience of almost everyone, young and old, in the community.

Parents know that the autonomy they have been encouraging, the communication patterns children are using and the reciprocity they have been fostering will, in reality, work against the child. They know too, that, in most cases, teachers will allocate the children less resources - children will generally receive less teacher time and less of the teacher's trust.

Despite this, parents place a high priority on formal education and spoke about the need for children to have success at school. They saw the children's preparation for, and transition into, the schooling system as critical to this success.

Kindergartens and pre-schools are viewed as being important vehicles in the transition process. In these less formal settings children can prepare to "move slowly into the white school system". In practice this means that children

become familiar with the range of resources and equipment used in formal education settings. Many parents talked about children playing with toys such as jigsaws and Lego which they may not have at home, learning about books and the process of reading, and

engaging in unfamiliar, though seemingly worthwhile, activities such as fingerpainting and collage.

have their literacy and numeracy skills fostered

slowly learn new routines

develop verbal communication skills

gain confidence with non-Aboriginal children and adults

develop an understanding of teaching/learning styles which are alien to those generally used in the community.

Given their belief in the importance of this transition it is not surprising that many parents encourage children to attend centres, even though they have little authority and control in these services. One mother spoke openly of the dilemma created by knowing that her child must be prepared "for the big wide world" whilst also knowing that in these services, cultural values, beliefs and identity are often contradicted and undermined.

CRITICAL ISSUES

ABORIGINAL ENVIRONMENTS

That young children spend their time in environments which utilise familiar child raising and child care practices is seen as critical by most families. In these environments children can grow strong in their Aboriginal identity.

for their world is represented in the language used, style of discipline employed and the resources and equipment to which they have access. Children do not have to park their Aboriginality at the door -rather, their Aboriginality is fostered. Children are not 'expected to change' only grow and develop. Relationships are emphasised and the concept of the extended family nurtured in harmony with practices encouraged at home, eg. older children are encouraged to help look after younger children. Language differences are accommodated and a range of experiences can be provided to enable children's language skills to be further developed and transferred to new settings.

Elements of an 'Aboriginal Environment' include

- * **a more homely feel** - centres are perceived as being less institutionalised than other centres and more similar to the children's home environment. An example of this is children calling staff Nanna or Aunty.

- * children are not separated by age - there is acknowledgment of the importance of the extended family and older children are actively encouraged to look after younger children.

- * Aboriginal words are used for common items and routines eg clothing toileting and sleeping.

ABORIGINAL STAFF

Aboriginal staff are seen as essential in the creation of Aboriginal environments. Parents talked at length about the need for staff who know the "Nunga way" people who share the child's everyday environment. Non-Aboriginal early childhood personnel are employed in most of the early childhood services in the study area. While some parents expressed dissatisfaction when this occurred in settings for the over 4s, for younger children it is of particular concern.

The vulnerability of very young children when exposed to non-Aboriginal staff, ie. people who do not know or share the child's way, is a critical issue. "**How can a little voice say, We don't do it this way, its not our way**" a mother asked.

Adults talked also of feeling more welcome in centres where there are Aboriginal people working, and about feeling more confident knowing that with Aboriginal staff their children would not be ignored and left-out. With this confidence comes more commitment.

Concern was expressed at the lack of Aboriginal staff in administration and management positions and the number of what was described as "**token training positions**".

The emphasis on the training and employment of Aboriginal staff is not to suggest that non-Aboriginal early childhood personnel do not have a role in services - their role is recognised and respected by many parents; it rather suggests the importance of having

Aboriginal people involved in the delivery of services to young people.

EARLY ENTRY

The optional entry of Aboriginal three year olds into services designed primarily for four year olds (i.e. kindergartens and child parent centres) is an accepted practice in the communities in this study. Some parents spoke of children needing extra time "**to learn whitefella ways**". At no time did parents employ arguments based on children's supposed inadequacies, or deficits.

What parents know, and what they have been trying to tell agencies and service providers for many years, is that their children know **different** ways - they have different communication styles, different motivations, different attitudes to authority and have differing views on social relationships from those of the larger society.

Early entry into early childhood services allows children time to learn two ways of being, two (or more) language codes and that they can function equally well using either. Learning "**the rules**" was spoken of frequently. Parents know that this doesn't happen overnight, that it is an understanding that gradually develops along with the development of each child.

TRANSPORT

Almost without exception, service users and providers emphasised the importance of services providing transport for children and families. There is a definite connection between children's (and to some extent, families)

participation in services and the provision of transport. Lack of transport is a crucial factor in determining Aboriginal access to services. Consequently, the funding of a vehicle should be considered when establishing program budgets.

CO-LOCATION OF SERVICES

Many parents spoke of the need for a range of connected services eg. health, education and care, and welfare services to be located together. Centres need to be connected to all the other happenings in children's lives. The concept of 'suspending' young children in isolated centres, whether they are child care centres, creches or whatever, which are not part of the children's everyday life and which remove children from their families, is not a concept which sits happily with families and communities generally.

The separation of the child and family causes some mothers a good deal of anxiety, particularly when their children are under 3 or 4 years of age. For others the inconvenience caused through having to be in 3 or 4 or 5 locations in a single day is a significant factor. Both of the above result in a lack of commitment to particular early childhood services by parents, while the isolating of education and care services from those involving other human services results in a general lack of effectiveness of the services delivered.

CONCLUSION

In general, the consultations highlighted an optimism in communities about the role of early childhood services. Almost without ex-

ception, families spoke of the important role early childhood services play in acting as a bridge between home and school

The planning, implementing and evaluation of any service needs to acknowledge and provide for this and for the other functions identified, while also ensuring that the identified critical elements become integral parts of programs. Central to the successful planning and delivery of early childhood services for Aboriginal children is a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and self-management. Whilst this is a more complex issue when it applies to the mainstream centres which families use, it is critical to the development of relevant, acceptable and effective services which are Aboriginal-specific.

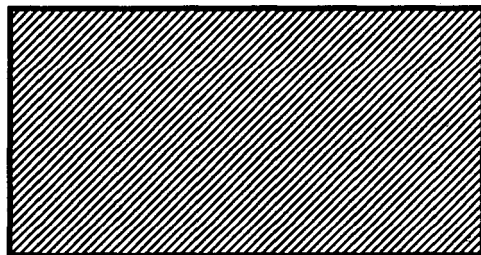
Services currently embrace a range of models, the diversity arising from varying functions, goals and setting. Communities are, to some degree, limited in their suggestions for programs and services by lack of information about what is possible in early childhood services. Information about alternative models, particularly those which have been initiated in Australia by other Aboriginal groups or overseas by indigenous groups, would provide valuable information for the communities in the study.

Throughout the world indigenous minority groups are exploring possible new models. These include the Kohanga Reo (language nests) in New Zealand, family systems in Fiji and the Black Visions Program in the USA. Goals for these programs range from teaching children English (as in many Native American programs) to ensuring that children remain strong in their home language (the

Kohanga Reo); from enhancement of the child's identity and home culture to 'transitioning' to the dominant culture and language.

Differences in expectations of and commitment to services exist between and within communities. These reflect the diversity of Aboriginal people and the different choices being made regarding the balance between maintaining a strong Aboriginal identity and participation in the broader non-Aboriginal society.

Finally the consultations demonstrated that the relationship between models and goals needs careful examination. Communities must be encouraged to explore this relationship, for programs for children, ***"whatever their structure, must enable the maintenance and development of their cultural heritage, language and identity."*** (NAEC, 1989:6)



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