

Chapter 1:

Contexts

The following two sections relating to cultural competence and the historical and current situation of Aboriginal people has been largely taken with adaptations from the report called *Building Respectful Partnerships: The Commitment to Aboriginal Cultural Competence in Child and Family Services* (VACCA, 2010).

Cultural Competence

Culture is akin to being the person observed through a one-way mirror. Everything we see is from our own perspective. It is only when we join the observed on the other side that we see ourselves and others clearly – but getting to the other side of the glass presents many challenges (Lynch & Hanson, 1992).

Cultural competence involves understanding differences among cultural groups accompanied by the knowledge, skills and abilities to translate these differences into informed and respectful attitudes and behaviours. Cultural competence enables us to work effectively with people from a culture different from our own—to work cross-culturally, as the following comment illustrates in relation to culture and school readiness.

“When the impact of a family’s race, ethnicity, language, and culture is not recognized and understood there is a risk of isolation and alienation. When the community does not offer competent services and supports..., families may be less likely to participate in the community, and access needed services...” (Hepburn, 2004, p. 7)

To be effective in what we do, cultural competence must be built at organisational, program and practice levels. It is not something we achieve and demonstrate through a certificate on the wall, but is an ongoing dynamic and collaborative process.

Sometimes people ask why they should build Aboriginal cultural competence specifically; and whether they should know and understand all cultures. Although the answer is that of course we should aim to work in a culturally informed and respectful manner with people from any culture, there are specific reasons why we focus on trying to get it right with Aboriginal people and communities.

Firstly, Aboriginal cultural competence is specifically mandated through legislation and regulations, such as the One DHS Standards (DHS, 2011). In Victoria, Section 10 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* identifies “the need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development.”

Secondly, the ongoing and serious disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children, youth and families indicates that services have not been effective. Mainstream organisations providing services for Aboriginal children, young people and families should build cultural competence to deliver services so that they are more accessible and effective. The aim is to ‘close the gap’ of health and wellbeing indicators between Aboriginal people and other populations within Australia.

Thirdly, there is documented evidence that mainstream government and non-government organisations have

historically caused harm to Aboriginal peoples and communities, such as through the Stolen Generation policies and practices. There are clear lessons to be learnt from history and a commensurate ethical responsibility to not repeat such harms.

Fourthly, Aboriginal children, youth and families will continue to use mainstream services for a variety of reasons. Economic constraints, economies of scale, access to some specialist skills and services and geographic factors mean that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations cannot always provide the range of services that Aboriginal children, youth and families need. Aboriginal families may also sometimes prefer to seek services from a mainstream organisation. This is also in the context that Aboriginal children and young people are disproportionately represented in the protection and care system and so they are a relatively large proportion of many organisations’ caseloads. As such, mainstream services need to be equipped to respond in a culturally informed way to Aboriginal people in order to be effective.

Fifthly, the national consistent planning approach to supporting young people transitioning from care emphasises the need for a specific focus for Aboriginal young people.

“Family, community and cultural connections are vital for the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.”

The cultural sensitivity of child protection workers during what can be an intense, emotional and difficult process is important in ensuring a smooth transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.” (Department of FaHCSIA & NFIWG, 2011, p. 6)

Finally, understanding Australian history and its impact on Aboriginal people, their culture, their experiences and their ways is a mark of respect towards the First People of Australia.

Historical and Current Situation of Aboriginal people

Aboriginal people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children, although how these occurred varied from one area to another.

To be culturally competent, we must acknowledge and tell the truth about our history and its ongoing impact for Aboriginal people. We should understand how the past shapes lives today.

Aboriginal history is Australian history.

Before colonisation Aboriginal people lived in small family groups linked into larger language groups with distinct territorial boundaries. These groups had complex kinship systems and rules for social interaction. There were different roles relating to law, education, spiritual development and resource management, and these differed from one group to another. They had different language, ceremonies, customs and traditions with extensive knowledge of their environment. In other words, Aboriginal cultures were strong and well developed, their communities were self-determining and their children were looked after and protected.

It is well documented that European colonisation had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities and cultures, such as is shown through this following quote from the United Nations.

"In 1788, when the European settlers arrived, up to one million Aboriginals lived peacefully in Australia and were composed of some 300 clans speaking 250 languages and dialects. Displaced by European settlement, the Aborigines suffered dispossession of land and illness and death from diseases carried by the new inhabitants, which disrupted their primitive traditional lifestyles and practices. This led to mass depopulation and the extinction of some tribes." (Ranasinghe, United Nations Chronicle, 2010)

Aboriginal people were rounded up and slaughtered or placed together on missions and reserves in the name of protection. Cultural practices were denied, and subsequently many were lost. For Aboriginal people, colonisation meant massacre, violence, disease and loss.

For over 100 years, between 1869 and 1971, Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and community groups *"...because being Aboriginal was in itself reason to regard children as 'neglected'."* Between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children were removed (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 1997, p. 218). These Aboriginal people are the 'Stolen Generations.'

"The complete separation of Aboriginal children from any connection, communication or knowledge about their Indigenous heritage has had profound effects on their experience of Aboriginals and their participation in the Aboriginal community as adults." (HREOC, 1997, p. 173)

"One principal effect of the forcible removal policies was the destruction of cultural links. This was of course their declared aim... Culture, language, land and identity were to be stripped from the children in the hope that the traditional law and culture would die by losing their claim on them and sustenance on them." (HREOC, 1997, p. 175)

The ongoing and intergenerational impact of policies and practices regarding forced removal of Aboriginal children has been well documented. The *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC, 1997) found that Aboriginal children who were removed from their families were more likely to come to the attention of the police, more likely to suffer low self-esteem, depression and mental illness and more vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* (Zubrick, et al., 2005) found that Aboriginal parents or carers who were removed as children had an increased risk of alcoholism, problem gambling, criminal behaviour and contact with mental health services. In turn, their children were found to be more likely to suffer from significant emotional and behavioural problems.

Today, Aboriginal people continue to experience the impact of the Stolen Generations on an individual, family and community scale. On any measure — socio-economic status, education or health — they continue to face significant disadvantage. Social services intervention in the lives of Aboriginal children and families remains disproportionately high (DHS, 2003). At the same time, Aboriginal people have reasons from history not to trust mainstream organisations, particularly those who had been involved in the removal of Aboriginal children in the past. Aboriginal young people and families who need services may be reluctant to ask for help because of your organisation's history, and may wait until

they are in crisis. Once a family is in crisis, there are often fewer options available to provide assistance. Mainstream organisations may not be aware of the oral history known to the local Aboriginal communities about their involvement in Stolen Generations and other policies and practices.

Questions to consider as an organisation and an individual worker:

1. What does your organisation know about its history in terms of involvement in past Stolen Generations practices?
2. What else does your organisation know about its history with the local and broader Aboriginal community, such as through reviewing archived files and speaking with local Elders?
3. Has your organisation made or supported an apology to the Aboriginal community for past child welfare practices?
4. What is the name of the Aboriginal community and land upon which your organisation is located? Is this acknowledged anywhere in your buildings or in other ways?
5. How would you describe the day-to-day interactions with local and statewide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other organisations within the Aboriginal community? How would the Aboriginal organisations and community describe them?
6. How does your organisation know if 'good intentions' with Aboriginal children, youth and families are achieving good outcomes or may in fact have some unintended negative consequences?
7. Does your organisation have a plan to strengthen its relationships with Aboriginal organisations and the broader Aboriginal community?

The policy of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families was developed under the guise that they would be 'better off'. Today, understandings regarding best interests are still influenced by the culture of those making the decisions. For example, attachment theory emphasises assessing a child's attachment "in the context of the relationship with the carer" (Miller, 2007, p. 23). Aboriginal children can form strong healthy attachments to several adults in their community. In the past this was viewed as a problem when seen through the lens of the dominant culture, with its emphasis on the nuclear family. Only recently has recognition of the strength of these connections been explored. For example, Dr Bruce D. Perry states:

"We humans have not always lived the way we do now... We lived in a far richer relational environment in the natural world. For each child under the age of 6, there were four developmentally more mature persons who could protect, educate, enrich and nurture the developing child... The relationally enriched, developmentally heterogeneous environment of our past is what the human brain 'prefers'" (Perry, 2006, pp. 44-45)

Despite enormous challenges and barriers presented by colonisation, forced removal from family and land, discrimination and injustice, Aboriginal communities