Starting at strengths . . . an Indigenous early years intervention

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> Aboriginal protocol usually links the right to tell a story with a declaration of involvement or connection to the story.[1]

I am Aboriginal . . . I am a woman, daughter, sister, aunty and wife. I am also a mother to three beautiful children aged 6, 4 and 2 years. To my children at this point in their lives, I am their provider, nurturer, teacher, cook, taxi driver, mediator, stylist, Elder, slave, and expert on all there is to know in the world. Being the centre of the universe to three impressionable young minds is a role that I cherish deeply, and I take the responsibilities of it very seriously. I love the job of parenting. As any parent would agree, it is the most challenging and difficult job of all, but the opportunity to bring a life into the world and shape and mould a little person into a big person brings rewards that no career can.

The story I share here is of a professional journey I travelled within my own community in coordinating an Indigenous early years intervention. I simply cannot tell this story without acknowledging and declaring my connections as a mother first. It is through my identities as a mother and an Aboriginal person that this journey was experienced, and therefore it is through these eyes that this story is told.

An Indigenous early years intervention

After the birth of my third child, I returned to the workforce in a part-time capacity with the Inala Indigenous Health Service. Through a partnership with Mission Australia's Communities for Children initiative (funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Stronger Families and Communities Strategy), I was given the brief to develop an intervention that would improve the lives of Indigenous children aged 5 years and under and their families in the Inala to Goodna region.

In recent times, the term "intervention" seems to have become a kind of dirty word within Indigenous communities. Within the context of Indigenous social policy, intervention *seems* to imply swift action and necessary interference. However, for a number of Indigenous communities (and many Indigenous parents) in the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland, the idea of intervention has meant forced, punitive social controls and surveillance over everyday living and family decision making. These interventions are justified through the premise that Indigenous parents in these communities just don't have the capacity or desire to raise their children right. For some people, the policy of intervention in Indigenous communities invokes imagery of incompetent parents; for others, it invokes images of incompetent politicians and policymakers.

I recognise that I have no first-hand involvement with or connection to the intervention experience in the NT or the family income management schemes in Cape York. But the common experience I share with the parents in these places (and all parents, for that matter) is the desire to raise happy, healthy children who will grow to be physically strong, culturally wise and always walk with their heads held high.

The community that my children call home and the site of this intervention is an outer-western suburb of Brisbane called Inala. It is home to one of the largest Indigenous communities in south-eastern Queensland, and has a high density of public housing.[2] Every socioeconomic indicator strongly suggests that Inala is a disadvantaged community, which commonly implies that Inala *must* be a "bad" community. "Bad" communities, of course, are composed of "bad" families, as evidenced by a statement from the Queensland Government Family Responsibilities Commissioner, David Glasgow, in which he suggested extending the Cape York welfare reforms to "places like Inala, Redbank and places of that nature where children are not looked after properly".[3]

As parents (who happen to be Aboriginal), my husband and I know that we are far from perfect. Inasmuch as we love our children, we are just as convinced that we will make mistakes — that is part of life, no doubt. Yet, the challenges of parenthood are made more difficult by the stigmas attached to parents who happen to be Aboriginal or younger than average, or who reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. When my husband and I venture out with our children into the predominantly white spaces of neighbouring suburbs, we cannot help but notice how people are "reading" us. As Aboriginal parents, we are aware that the public gaze is transfixed on the horrors of physical and sexual abuse and neglect of Indigenous children and families, to the extent that it makes it difficult for some people to see us beyond those depictions. I can attest that the stigma of stereotyping is a heavy burden to shoulder, and is one that we are loath for our children to inherit.

Given these experiences, I was determined that this intervention would not be grounded in those kind of assumptions. Of course, there are Aboriginal parents who are abusive and neglectful of their duties. However, it would be unthinkable to allow the worst cases of parental abuse and neglect within the non-Indigenous community to be used as the yardstick for driving family and social policy for the rest of Australian society.

So my starting point for the Indigenous Early Years Intervention in Inala was the premise that all parents love their children and only want what's best for them. Therefore, our intervention would not necessitate forced or punitive controls and surveillance to effect positive social change. I believe it is for precisely this reason that this initiative achieved a wide range of positive outcomes for Indigenous families in our community. Within just 12 months, the Indigenous Early Years Intervention was successful in developing local Indigenous health promotion resources, establishing an Indigenous playgroup within the community, and improved literacy awareness among Indigenous parents and carers, as well as providing opportunities for skill development for local Indigenous parents and workers. The intervention also focused on building the capacity of the Indigenous sector to support Indigenous

Indigenous Early Years Intervention — highlights

- Consultations undertaken with over 100 local Indigenous community members.
- More than 10 local community organisations and government agencies involved in steering the initiative via the Indigenous Early Years Partnership Group (met bimonthly).
- The development of an Indigenous child health promotion resource, in partnership with eight local agencies and 90 community members and children, with a distribution of 16 000 units within our community and across the state.
- The establishment of an Indigenous playgroup in partnership with six local agencies, attracting over 133 children, 75 parents and carers, and 56 volunteers within a 7-month period.
- The delivery of Let's Read resources to more than 70 Indigenous children and their families.
- Support provided to four local Indigenous community festivals to become more child-friendly (involving reviewing site layout, provision of infrastructure and activities for children under 5 years of age).
- Engaged over 80 volunteers.
- Supported 50 people to participate in early years training opportunities within our community.
- Supported over 20 organisations and initiatives with resource support (eg, grant-writing support, health resources and information, health promotion stalls and activities, committee membership, in-service training to early years sector). ◆

children and their families beyond the lifespan of the project. The Box lists some of our major accomplishments.

It is kind of ironic that these kinds of outputs could be achieved, given what we supposedly *know* about Indigenous parents and "places like Inala". The critical success factors for this intervention don't lie in romanticised assumptions about families in Inala or Aboriginality. The success achieved is a product of age-old processes that our mob has used in the doing of our everyday business. The failure to recognise the strengths of Indigenous parents in Indigenous social policy is simply reflective of a broader failure to recognise the strengths of Aboriginal culture, processes and protocols. As a health professional working in Indigenous communities, I've always been guided by the principles I've been taught as an Aboriginal person.

Mapping country — seeing strength

For many Aboriginal people, the importance of knowing one's country is inherent to our sense of Aboriginality and sense of wellbeing. This requires an intimate knowledge of traditional lands and the dreaming stories contained within. These lands are identified by geographical boundaries, and landmarks such as lakes, rivers, mountains, trees and rocks. Tom Dystra articulates this distinct relationship:

> We cultivated our land, but in a different way from the white man. We endeavoured to live with the land; they seemed to live off it. I was taught to preserve, never to destroy.[4]

As an Aboriginal person working within my own community, it is imperative that I know my country too. I must know the landmarks and identifiers of the country and community that I live in and call home. However, the landmarks that I'm looking for here are not so much about the physical landscape, but instead are features of the social landscape. Mapping country is about taking the time to explore and identify the existing energies, strengths, and skills of the community, its members and the service sector. Importantly, our attention here is drawn to what is already present in a community and not in what is lacking. White fellas call this process "asset mapping" — we call it mapping country. Recognising a community's strengths or assets sets the platform for possibilities. Charting a community's deficits only seems to deepen the despair. Admittedly, some strengths may be small — they may be only seeds that have just been planted. But that is our role as custodians of our land, community and culture — to nurture and grow, and preserve, not destroy. Perhaps that is what is so offensive about the other intervention experiences inflicted upon Aboriginal people. Before the circus of armies, institutes, researchers and bureaucrats rolled into town, not one person cared to take the time to look and see what was already there.

Yarning up — hearing hope

Our Aboriginal culture is steeped in oral tradition. Consequently, the act of yarning and storytelling is one of utmost importance. As a child, and the youngest of four, the rules of narrating and witnessing stories were impressed upon me from early on. My father always would remind me as a child to "know my place" and the importance of being quiet and listening. Working within a community, the task of respecting the knowledge and wisdom of those who have gone before you is another fundamental. In developing this intervention, the obvious next step was to listen and learn from our community. White fellas call this consultation — we call it yarning.

There are several important points to this yarning process that are integral to its effectiveness in informing community practice within an Indigenous context. Firstly, we yarned with people about what they thought was necessary to make their community better. The question wasn't "what is wrong with your family and community?" Instead we asked, "how can the community better support you and your family?" This is important, because our communities have become so accustomed to recounting stories of dysfunction and horror, it can be far too easy to be drawn back to community weakness and need. The yarning process must be empowering.

When we talked to people, we spoke with both big fellas and little fellas because Eldership and leadership are not determined solely by the number of breaths one has taken. We went to our mob — we didn't expect them to come to us. We went to sporting festivals and community gatherings, and engaged in conversations wherever they could be had. As a result, we yarned with over 100 people. The development of this intervention grew out of the dialogue between the service sector and the community in question, and not external spectators, voyeurs, commentators and public opinion. It seems glaringly obvious that community ownership and control is the perfect antidote to passivity and dependency, but such ownership can only be facilitated by engaging our mob in the yarning process from the very beginning.

Creating new dreaming stories

These processes must culminate in a "joining of the dots", so to speak. Through mapping the landscape and collecting knowledge stories, a new dreaming can be found. For our intervention, this meaning-making occurred through a collaborative process between our community workers and organisations. What

emerged through the efforts of the Indigenous Early Years Partnership Group was a 12-month plan of possibility and opportunity. It was precisely because the initiatives stemmed from community strengths, knowledge and desires that very little investment was required to engage Indigenous parents in the activities and opportunities created. Not one person had to be transported to an activity or initiative; food and gifts were not brandished in the faces of parents to entice their interest; and, most importantly, no one's welfare payments were threatened in order to enlist collaboration or compliance.

We shifted ideologically in our thinking of our community, from negative assumptions to endless opportunities. We refrained from drawing assumptions around notions of "good" and "bad" communities or families — we simply started from strengths. We did not assume that nothing was being done in our community — we simply asked "what can we do better?" Through this process, we uncovered endless examples of Indigenous workers, organisations, parents and children embracing opportunities to grow stronger.

Unless and until current Indigenous social policy and interventions are premised upon the possibility that Indigenous parents, families and communities possess strength and capabilities, there will never be the opportunity for our children, families, community and culture to grow stronger.

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(Received 23 Jan 2009, accepted 26 May 2009) ❑