

NiFTeY Conference
(National Investment for the Early Years)

NiFTeY is an advocacy group established in 1999 which aims to highlight the important of children's early years experiences for their lifecourse

10.30am
8 February 2006
University of New South Wales

2006 Conference Theme
"Prevention: Invest now or Pay Later".

Professor Mick Dodson
Key Note address
"Wise Choices for investing in young Aboriginal Children"

(in response first key note address by Jim Heckman, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in economics)

Wise Choices for Investing in Young Aboriginal Children

Professor Mick Dodson
National Centre for Indigenous Studies
Australian National University

My first duty is to pay my respects to the traditional ancestors of this land.

Thanks to Barbara Wellesley and Graham Vimpani for the invitation to speak here today and my thanks also to James Heckman for posing a challenge to this country to invest in the early years.

Welcome to our international visitors.

I am Mick Dodson, I'm a member of the Yawuru peoples, the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters in the Broome area of the southern Kimberly in Western Australia. I was born however, a long way from this country, in Katherine in the Northern Territory.

As a young child, I grew up on banks of the Katherine River, under the ever watchful eyes of my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. As Aboriginal kids, we grew up under the communal care of extended family. We were encouraged from a very young age to learn by doing, by making mistakes; to understand our relationship obligations within our families and communities; to independently seek out what we need as soon as we were able and to look after our siblings, particularly the younger ones.

The old people taught us how to find food; what we could and couldn't eat, where we could and couldn't go, and what behaviours were appropriate and respectful. They taught us about our place in the world; our spiritual beliefs, and about looking after the country. Community and family life revolved around the young ones and our connections through kinship to each other, the land and to our ancient spirituality. Every child's place in the ebb and flow of life, was already established.

There were other lessons learned on the banks of the Katherine River. These are the lessons Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents across Australia know only too well. These are the lessons that leave scars that dwell deeply within each and every one of us.

Lessons of hunger and poverty, racism and injustice, and experiences of histories so unimaginably terrifying the effects of which continue to brutalise our communities today. These are our collective histories as colonised people in this country. Experiences that are essentially invisible and inconceivable to other Australians.

When our babies were taken away from us, often violently, often implicating the parents in neglectful practices, many of us died broken hearted, and many others were left incapable of looking after the children who were left. And consequently, many of our children were left struggling with their own identities.

These early experiences influence how we react and participate in the world around us today.

Interestingly, those early social architects responsible for designing the assimilationist policies in the early part of last century and who enforced the child removal policies were also proponents of the values of investing in early intervention, despite their misguided

intentions. They thought they knew what was best for Aboriginal children.

Back then, the State took the children away from their mothers and families as early as they could so that their indoctrination into white society could be more easily achieved than it would otherwise be for older children. Back then, it was thought that Aboriginal people would eventually die out and that children of mixed descent would be educated to become white. A century later things haven't exactly worked out that way.

Today ABS estimates that we number some 469,000 people or about 2.4% of the total Australian population.¹

Compared with non-Indigenous Australians, our population is younger, with a high burden of care, fewer employed, more people sick, higher levels of extreme poverty, higher levels of incarceration and of course we are famous for equalling the worlds most impoverished peoples' for dying young.

Our young children

- 'have more than double the rate of hospital admissions for infectious diseases than their non-Indigenous counterparts...
- the death rate from children between 0 and 4 who suffer long-term diseases of the ear and hospital admissions from conditions starting in the perinatal period was three times higher in Indigenous than in the non-Indigenous population'²
- [they] 'suffer higher rates of malnutrition and failure to thrive....
- [and have] suboptimal immunisation coverage'³
- 'Aboriginal children have a lower rate of contact with a doctor...and this rate decreases further with isolation...
- the more isolated, the lower the carer's level of education'.⁴

Unlike governments of the past, current Australian governments invest more resources in young people and adults than young children, with most of this money directed towards remedial programs such as incarcerating youth (some 43% of all Australians in juvenile detention are Indigenous)⁵, imprisoning adults, patching up victims of violence and funding welfare programs.

Very young Aboriginal children in this country don't attract the attentions of government unless they are sick, abused or orphaned through parental incarceration or early death.

In a groundbreaking paper by researchers at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, an analysis of government investment in a remote Aboriginal community revealed, that

'after accounting for all government dollars and transfer payments expended on residents of [this] community, far less is spent on them per head than is spent on the average Territorian.'⁶

This is despite high levels of sickness, high levels of crowding and inadequate housing, poor educational attainments, few employment or job opportunities and high levels of violence and incarceration existing in this community.

‘What emerges is a structural imbalance in funding [in this community], with lower than average expenditure on positive aspects of public policy designed to build capacity and increase output, such as education and employment creation, and higher than average spending on negative areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefits. This begs a very important question as to whether this situation serves to perpetuate the very socioeconomic conditions observed in the first place.’⁷

This finding contrasts significantly with international comparisons of government spending on Indigenous programs. In Canada for instance,

‘Canadian governments spent more per head on the Indigenous population than they did on the population overall. This excess is incurred to assist Aboriginal people to overcome their socioeconomic disadvantage and is the sort of result one would expect in a modern democratic welfare state that has obligations to assist its disadvantaged members.’⁸

In this Australian study

‘the total remedial cost was substantially negative (instead of positive) to the tune of \$4million dollars, or \$1944 dollars per Aboriginal resident. . . . a key factor in this deficit is apparent gross underspending on education [in this community] of some \$3.2 million largely reflecting low levels of school attendance. While funding for those attending school is marginally higher than the territory average, the low attendance rate means that every education dollar spent by governments on the average child of compulsory school age in the Northern Territory, at present \$0.47 is spent on the [community] equivalent.’⁹

I am convinced that if further studies of this nature were conducted that the findings would be similar. However Australian governments are reluctant to fund further revealing studies that may implicate them further in under investing in Aboriginal children.

I am enthusiastically supportive of Dr Heckman’s proposal¹⁰ to present the business case for wiser public investments in programs designed to build capacity, to promote and support resilience in young children and to identify existing strengths in communities to help them grow their children strong.

There is simply too much evidence demonstrating that poor beginnings lead to poorer pathways, and often, ultimately the expensive options for governments, of additions, violence and incarceration, repeating the cycles of child neglect.

In the 1990s in this country, two important royal commissions into Indigenous circumstances documented extensively evidence that brutal histories play a significant role in brutal and tragic early deaths of many Indigenous people.

The Bringing them home report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families in 1997) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody reveal the shocking rates of childhood removals from families and institutionalisation that continue to dominate the experiences of Aboriginal families.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found disturbingly similar patterns of childhood experiences in the life stories of those Aboriginal people who died in custody.

‘Through the files, the Commissioner could trace the familiar pattern of State intervention into and control of Aboriginal lives. The files start from birth; perhaps forcibly removed from parents after having been categorised as having mixed racial origins and therefore denied a loving upbringing

by parents and family; through encounters at school, probably described as truant, intractable and unteachable; to juvenile courts, magistrates courts, possible Supreme Court; through the dismissive entries in medical records ('drunk again'), and in the standard entries in the note books of police investigating death in a cell ('no suspicious circumstances').¹¹

Tragically young Indigenous children's exposure to violence has become a normal part of life for many. Our violent experiences are perpetuated down the generations. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence found that

'Violence at its most blatant has become a part of everyday life. Horrifying crimes are occurring regularly and have instilled in the minds of the elderly, the young and others a level of fear previously unknown to the Australian population. Murder and other violent crimes are destroying what has traditionally been the Australian way of life. . . . Although there has been much speculation about the causes of the violence being witnessed, the impact of history cannot be isolated in any discussion on the origins and consequences of violence in the lives of Indigenous peoples in the contemporary context.'¹²

'While some Indigenous peoples were able to escape the past, whole families and Communities are now fighting to address the consequences. . . . Sadly, many of the victims are women and children, young and older people now living in a constant state of desperation and despair.'¹³Xii'

'The harsh reality is that many families are now trapped in environments where deviance and atrocities have become accepted as normal behaviour and as such, form an integral part of the children's socialisation.'

The way forward

Despite this bleak picture, there are things that can be done to bring about change. In the past, the lack of collaboration has hindered progress for Indigenous people, and unfortunately the new directions in government administration of Indigenous Affairs is actually making collaboration more difficult. On the other hand there have been significant gains made by Indigenous people in the design and implementation of innovative and responsive programs to address dysfunction and build capacity in our communities.

Indigenous people in this country are building an evidence base of successful community initiatives focusing around early interventions, that are making communities safer places for children.

There are also other Indigenous initiatives, that have been resourced through partnerships with industry in particular, that give me cause to be hopeful. Unfortunately, lack of government collaboration and coordination of programs and funding continue to be major inhibitors for community initiative success.

I am also enormously positive about a number of Indigenous community initiatives that are emerging around the country.

The Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre, an Indigenous initiative, funded through industry partnerships offers leadership training and capacity development opportunities for men and women across Australia demonstrating leadership qualities.

There has also been significant progress in building Indigenous governance capacity around the country. Research collaborations with Reconciliation Australia and the ANU and Aboriginal organisations are gathering an evidence base of success in governance and innovative organisational design and service delivery. This research is teasing out the good governance qualities and practices in a number of organisations in order to develop governance models for successful organisation and community decision making.

I have also had the honour of judging the Inaugural RA/ BHP Billiton Indigenous governance awards which have clearly demonstrated to me that there are many talented, and dedicated Indigenous professionals working in organisations to ensure that good governance leads to good service delivery and better opportunities for our children.

Shortly I will be attending the second National Indigenous Men's Forum, organised by the Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination. In March last year about 200(?) Indigenous men from across the country descended on the Nation's capital to share stories and support each other to make commitments about our own behaviours towards each other, and in particular our women and children. This national forum will again look for ways to reaffirm Indigenous men's participation in family life as nurturers and contributors to the wellbeing of our children. We are aiming to influence national policy to support local initiatives in this area.

There have also been some successes in community initiatives to combat violence, which focus on safety for women and children and programs which build confidence and parenting skills among our young parents.

And other programs that focus on reducing child sexual abuse by empowering younger children to know what behaviours are acceptable and where to go if they are frightened.

There are many stories of incredible successes despite the odds that never get a mention in the media which is determined to paint us as miserable, violent and hopeless.

We are thankfully, a resilient people, and one of the many very positive parts of my work at the moment is to be Chair of the National Steering Committee for the Family and Community Services Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. This study aims to identify the nature and inspiration of this resilience, particularly in early childhood.

The Study will look into what makes children resilient and how we can support children to grow up strong.

As part of this study Professor Robyn Penman was contracted to review the current literature on what makes a difference for Indigenous children.

She refers to a review by the Centre for Community Child Health in 2000 that found

'a number of protective factors were identified as being associated with the prevention of adverse outcomes. These factors included positive attention from parents, supportive relationships with other adults and extended family, family harmony, and religious faith. From the brief stories of Indigenous cultural childrearing practices, there is no doubt that these factors can be and are, present within Indigenous families.

Particular sources of resilience can also be found within more traditional practices. The emphasis on children, from a very early age, being self-reliant is a valuable strength that children can draw on as they grow up, as is the close bonding and attachment that is possible in traditional communities where the baby goes everywhere with the family (Waltja, 2001). The availability of a large kinship support system is a further resource for resilience. ...¹⁴

Other studies have shown that community preschools and early childhood centres that focus on families, and where Indigenous parents and Indigenous staff work together promoting Indigenous cultural strength and identity have also had some successes in improving school readiness and identifying health and wellbeing problems early.¹⁵

Concluding remarks

Ladies and Gentleman, I have tried to demonstrate to you that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country are making progress in a number of areas that impact on early childhood development. I have also attempted to show how brutal beginnings lead to violent and turbulent experiences and tragic early deaths. This can be understood in broader terms as the colonising historical experiences of generations of Indigenous people, as well as being replicated in the individual life pathways of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders today.

The messages here are simple, invest in young children and those who support young children, support Indigenous initiatives, build on Indigenous strengths, work with us for a better future together.

Thank you

(Footnotes)

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004 Year Book Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, p. 5 Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra Compact Disk file://E:\publication\content\wcd00000\wcd00090.htm

² Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services Provision 2003 Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage; Key Indicators 2003. Canberra: Productivity Commission cited in Penman Robyn 2004 The 'growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, FaCS, Australian Government Canberra, p.59

³ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2003 What's needed to improve child health in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Canberra cited in Penman Robyn 2004 The 'growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, FaCS, Australian Government Canberra, p.59

⁴ Zubrick, S.R., et al 2004 The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey; The health of Aboriginal children and young people. Perth, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research cited in Penman Robyn 2004 The 'growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, FaCS, Australian Government Canberra, p.59

⁵ See Cahill, L. and Marshall, P. 2002 Statistics on juvenile detention in Australia; 1981-2001 Technical and Background Paper Series No.1. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. Cited in Penman Robyn 2004 The 'growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, FaCS, Australian Government Canberra, p.85

⁶ Taylor, J. and Stanley, O. 2005 The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region, Working Paper No. 28/2005, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, p.vii

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid:xii

⁹ Ibid:xii

¹⁰ Invest in the Very Young, James J. Heckman p.2 published by Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies.

¹¹ Johnston, E. 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. National report Canberra AGPS para 1.2.12) cited in Penman, R. 2004 The growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, FaCS, Canberra, AGPS, p 41

¹² The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report 1999, p.ix

¹³ Ibid:xii

¹⁴ Centre for Community Child Health 2000 A review of the early childhood literature, FaCS Canberra cited in Penman, R. 2005 The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, FaCS, Canberra, AGPS p. 52

¹⁵ Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, McRae et al, 2000 Learning Less; An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory cited in Penman, R. 2005 The 'Growing up' of Indigenous children, FaCS, AGPS, Canberra p64