



Murraylands Gathering – themes from the conversation

On 24 July 2015 the Guardian for Children and Young People convened a gathering of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from organisations in the Murraylands region of South Australia. The invitation to the gathering asked them to share views and ideas to bring children who are separated from family and culture back to a healthy connection with their identity as Aboriginal people.

Almost one in three of the children who are subjects of care and protection orders in SA are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children. A declining proportion of them are placed with Aboriginal carers. A growing proportion are in residential care, often at some distance from their communities.

There are obvious questions to be answered about how better to support families to care for their children. The questions though that the Guardian sought views on, in addition to family support, were what can be done when children have been removed from their immediate family to build and strengthen their belonging to their clan and family. The views and experience was vast.

The gathering started with a [12 minute film](#) of five young people who lived in out of home care talking about their experiences with connection to family and their Aboriginal culture.

Loss

There was a pervading sense of loss in the video and in discussion. Elders lamented the loss of the new generations. Young Aboriginal people, and some older people, were observed to have no sense of place or purpose. The loss of cultural knowledge, loss of language, loss of connection to family and to land were all highlighted among the young people (in the video), voiced by Elders and other Aboriginal people present and noted by others.

Interconnectedness of family, language and culture

Cultural connection was felt to be multi-dimensional. Connection included connection to other Aboriginal people with whom they felt more comfortable, birth families, extended families, to local clan groups, languages and culture and to Aboriginal peoples as a whole.

Others spoke of finding connection through arts (visual arts, dance, music) with a peer group and with elements of their own culture and its respected place in the broader community.

The role of extended family (aunties, uncles, grandparents, birth parents and other relatives)

Where birth parents had not provided a safe and nurturing environment, extended families often picked up the parenting role. This was seen as very valuable in preserving important cultural and family connections but also faced some obstacles. Extended family sometimes lacked the physical resources to look after more children without practical support. Sometimes they themselves had not had the parenting to learn from and lacked the skills to parent without additional support.

Maintaining connection with birth parents could be difficult over large geographical distances and foster parents were sometimes unlikely to promote the connection unless supported and encouraged.

The role of schools

Many people thought that schools were pivotal. “Just one good teacher” could make a great difference. However, the opportunity was mostly wasted with only occasional involvement of the school community in one-off cultural events like NAIDOC Week but little incorporation of Aboriginal history, language and culture into mainstream education.

Most teachers, it was commented, lacked a deep understanding of Aboriginal history, language and culture and so were unable to incorporate it even if they wanted to. (See *Need for knowledge* below)

The historical exclusion of Aboriginal history, language and culture from the curriculum was thought by some to be a part of a deliberate policy to allow Aboriginal people to be assimilated into European culture and to, effectively, disappear.

Opportunities lost in contacts with workers and carers

It was reported that many social workers failed to do even basic cultural work with Aboriginal children. Suggested reasons included lack of personal knowledge and comfort with Aboriginal matters and for lack of time and external training and support.

The often short-term nature of the associations between workers and young people was seen as not conducive to supporting cultural connection and identity.

Need for knowledge in workers, carers, teachers

A generally accepted observation was that Aboriginal children, in general, related better to Aboriginal workers, teachers and carers. Aboriginal adults should be present in the environment where Aboriginal children were cared for and taught.

Knowledge of Aboriginal language, culture, arts and history among non-Aboriginal workers, teachers and carers was thought to be very limited and would be one explanation of the unwillingness of non-Aboriginal people to engage in a meaningful way in the Aboriginal aspect of children’s lives.

Training in Aboriginal culture for professionals and carers was seen to be cursory and sometimes waived when it was not convenient to deliver it. It was felt to be generic and tokenistic.

Local solutions

Some local solutions were described which were reported to be meeting the needs of local Aboriginal young people. The Piti Menarki project had the following characteristics:

- locally generated in response to identified needs
- joint venture by a range of interested parties with appropriate skills and experience
- active support by local Aboriginal leaders
- strong cultural themes in the activities
- siting of activities in significant Aboriginal areas
- financial support from, but not control by, State government

Action

The discussion itself did not identify any additional specific actions. The meeting was positive about the potential for improvement in the situation for Aboriginal children in care.

Participants reported as valuable the information exchange about programs and experiences

The discussion led to some opportunities, such as:

- Increasing and improving the quality of Aboriginal cultural programs and environment in Murraylands schools
- Appropriate support for Aboriginal families and extended families that are providing care for Aboriginal children
- Networking and development of training and resources suitable for adults who are working with Aboriginal children in the Murraylands
- Training programs, traineeships, placements to assist young Aboriginal people to work with Elders to undertake cultural work
- Redefine, expand the scale and, finally, transfer ownership of the 'Murraylands children in care' Facebook page to local ownership
- Bring people together around those opportunities at a series of meetings.