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2010

# Aboriginal Practitioners Speak Out: Contextualising Child Protection Interventions

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## Citation of this paper:

Bessarab, Dawn and Crawford, Frances, "Aboriginal Practitioners Speak Out: Contextualising Child Protection Interventions" (2010). *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)*. 428.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/428>

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Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Australian Social Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rasw20>

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Version of record first published: 27 May 2010.

To cite this article: Dawn Bessarab & Frances Crawford (2010): Aboriginal Practitioners Speak Out: Contextualising Child Protection Interventions, *Australian Social Work*, 63:2, 179-193

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03124071003717663>

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## Aboriginal Practitioners Speak Out: Contextualising Child Protection Interventions

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### Abstract

*One month before the June 2007 Federal Government Emergency Intervention in the Northern Territory some 55 West Australian Aboriginal child protection workers attended a 3-day summit in Fremantle. Their purpose as front-line practitioners from across the State was to identify how more nurturing and healing communities could be developed and supported in a climate of despair. This paper reports on how the summit was designed and on some of the ideas and concerns that emerged within this dialogical space of cooperative inquiry. The project was a partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal representatives of university, government, and community-service bodies. Aboriginal practitioners identified the complexity of what was happening in their experience and where changes were needed. Integral to this participation and coproduction of knowledge by Aboriginal child protection workers was the provision of a safe space for the articulation of reflected experience. Implications for policy, practice, and curriculum of both process and outcome dimensions to considering Aboriginal views on this contentious issue are discussed.*

*Keywords:* Aboriginal; Child Protection; Community Practice; Practitioner Voice; Partnerships; Curriculum and Policy

Recent publications on social work with Aboriginal people have highlighted both the complexity of the territory to be navigated (Hunter, 2008) and the importance of non-Indigenous and Indigenous practitioners working in partnership (Baldry & Green, 2008). Numerous committed practitioners have engaged with this complexity over many years. Too often the work is such that while it might make differences in people's lives it does not always leave a trace in the published research literature of our discipline. In an era of evidence-based practice across human services and health professions, it is important to argue for the evidence that in social work the process of how we intervene and the nature of relationships involved are integral to outcomes achieved (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). This paper documents both the

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Accepted 3 October 2009

process and outcomes of a cross-disciplinary and social work led collaborative inquiry project culminating in a 3-day summit in May, 2007. It is drawn from Crawford, Dudgeon, and Briskman's (2007) detailed report of the summit describing the design, process, and outcomes of this cooperative inquiry between diversely located Aboriginal child protection practitioners. Participants in the inquiry shared the experience of actively addressing the protection and healing of Aboriginal children and their families.

The death of a teenage Aboriginal girl at a Swan Valley Community outside Perth can be identified as a key point in the chain of events culminating in the summit. The Office of the State Coroner's report (2001) on this young woman's tragic life involving sexual abuse, violence, and alcohol and substance abuse prompted the Government to establish a formal inquiry into sexual abuse and violence across Western Australia's Aboriginal communities.

This commissioned inquiry, known as the Gordon Inquiry (Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002), identified child abuse and intergenerational family violence as endemic in Aboriginal communities across regional, rural, remote, and urban areas. In response to these identified concerns (Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002) the Western Australian Ministerial Advisory Council on Child Protection (MACCP) and a research team from Curtin University of Technology (CUT) in collaboration with the Kulunga Research Network (KRN) of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research held a 3-day child protection summit. The goal of the summit was to explore with Aboriginal practitioners the dynamics involved in addressing the effective care of children and their families in Aboriginal communities and to dialogue as to how more nurturing and healing communities could be developed within the current climate of despair. In keeping with the design of the summit, the Curtin research team documented and recorded discussions across the three days and subsequently organised this material around key emerging themes, supported by extensive direct quotes from participants. After consultation with organisers and participants, the lead investigators published a final report on the summit in December 2007.

### **The Present Research**

This paper will discuss both what was involved in enabling participants to effectively engage with the summit process and the range of issues identified by practitioners together with the key recommendations generated.

### **Process**

The MACCP partnered with a team from Curtin University interested in exploring how largely non-Indigenous practitioners working in Aboriginal communities could be better prepared for their part in the broad field of protecting children. The Curtin team included representatives from social work, psychology, and nursing brought together at the initiative of the former Head of the Curtin Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Associate Professor Pat Dudgeon. Together, the MACCP and Curtin team

designed a research summit at which “more than 50 Aboriginal practitioners from across the State were invited to pool their knowing from diverse settings”. Planning for the summit was considerable involving a series of meetings between all partners from October until the summit in May 2007.

In organising the summit, the collaborative partnership adopted the methodology of a cooperative inquiry to ensure that accounts from the diversity of Aboriginal experiences could be heard across the three days. “The value of a cooperative inquiry is in allowing for the naming of the diverse experiences of participants around a particular shared topic” (Crawford et al., 2007, p. 23). In this instance, the shared topic for the summit was being an Aboriginal practitioner engaged at the front line of child protection work in Western Australia.

The main question driving the inquiry was “how can therapeutic communities for abused Aboriginal children and their families be developed in a climate of despair” (Crawford et al., 2007, p. 11)? Out of this main question, the inquiry was organised around four open-ended questions that explored participant’s reflection on their child protection experiences. The four subsidiary questions were:

1. what is happening in the field;
2. what supports effective practice;
3. what hinders this; and
4. what can be identified as missing in achieving good outcomes for children, their families and communities?

Ethical considerations and practice principles shaping the summit were guided by the National Health Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and were based on: justice, beneficence, and respect. Applying for ethics clearance from Curtin University was a chance to map out how the partners would interact in respectful and mindful ways with Aboriginal participants. In planning the summit, the collaborative partners undertook to ensure that the voices and experiences of Indigenous people participating took priority and that the benefits of the research summit transferred to building the capacity of Aboriginal participants, facilitators, organisers, and guest speakers. As well, the production of a report and advocacy of the findings across government was an undertaking of the summit partnership.

Indigenous participants were purposively chosen based on their reputation among partners as committed and effective front-line child protection practitioners. Prioritising the value of Aboriginal practitioners’ involvement in the summit was affirmed and respected throughout the process by:

- creating spaces throughout the summit for all participants to voice their experiences and concerns;
- using small group processes to facilitate and encourage active participation;
- assigning Aboriginal facilitators to each group to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to speak;

- appointing scribes (non-Indigenous student volunteers and non-Indigenous research team members) to enable all Aboriginal participants to focus fully on dialogue and discussion. Fourteen students from the disciplines of nursing, psychology, and social work volunteered across the 3 days;
- minimising input from guest speakers. These were all Indigenous except for Lieutenant General John Sanderson, then the Special Advisor on Indigenous Affairs to the West Australian Government;
- setting ground rules to ensure that people felt safe to talk, raise issues and challenges;
- organising “break out” spaces to facilitate people following up and discussing in more detail additional issues that participants identified as important to them;
- signalling the availability of counsellors to debrief with any participants upset by addressing this complex and potentially traumatising issue.

Attention to detail given to the front end of the planning process successfully created spaces conducive to active participation and in-depth discussion of the issue resulting in a wealth of information and concerns emerging over the 3 days.

On the final day of the summit, the dynamics of the forum changed with the added involvement of policy makers from both government and non-government services and universities. The rationale for inviting these new participants to join the discussion was to provide an opportunity for practitioners and policy makers to meet and speak with each other. Recognising that too often players in the field of protecting children speak in vacuums and hierarchical silos, this strategy was designed to break down barriers between policy and practice and to facilitate a shared understanding of the issues.

### **Themes Emerging From the Summit**

Information from the 3-day discussions was recorded on butcher’s paper, notes taken by the scribes, and audio recordings of the guest speakers. This material was then transcribed into notes that were checked by several researchers and cross-referenced for themes. Where personal quotes have been used, the identity of the participants has been protected by referring to the person as a male or female practitioner from urban, rural, or regional context.

In pulling together what Aboriginal practitioners had to say over the 3 days, five key themes were identified as emerging from the discussions. Not surprisingly, the themes resonate with much of the literature on addressing issues of Indigenous child abuse (see Blagg, 2000; Robertson, 1999; Wild & Anderson, 2007). All quotes used have been taken from Crawford et al. (2007).

Specifically, themes identified were on the need for:

1. Living partnerships between Aboriginal people and all levels of governance.
2. Balancing approaches, such as between bottom-up and top-down approaches and between forensic, healing, and community-building services.
3. Engaging cultural literacy on the part of all involved in protecting children.
4. Increasing Aboriginal employment within child protection and more broadly.

5. Valuing learning and enabling access to relevant education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this task of child protection.

### **1. Living Partnerships between Aboriginal People and All Levels of Governance**

Aboriginal participants at the summit were distressed by the issues of child protection yet felt their everyday commitment to and knowledge in addressing the issue was missing from much of the media and governmental discourse. As one participant noted, “There needs to be an honouring of those, who in spite of all that craziness, get up and do (the work of child protection) every day”. Participants agreed on an urgent need for action that focused on government commitment to engaging and supporting community participation and partnership. Many spoke of how their communities’ attempts to address the complexity of issues at the local level were constrained by a lack of resources and governance capacity. The point was made that without an enforceable rule of law straddling the territory between grass-roots community members and the highest decision makers any community would struggle to ensure order.

Aboriginal participants felt that it was time that the mainstream community stopped seeing the issue of child protection in Aboriginal communities as a “black” problem. They felt that non-Aboriginal practitioners and government had to move beyond the binaries of them and us, black and white, and engage with the complexities in doing Aboriginal child protection and commit to multi-perspectival, multidimensional approaches:

Partnerships are not just about throwing models at the problem. With the child at the centre, we need to be talking with government and non-government and everyone with a vested interest in making things better for children. For instance, the mining companies have been providing leverage in putting pressure on government for proper health services in the Pilbara. (Male urban practitioner)

Participants felt that protecting children and keeping them safe did not just involve removing them. As well as an emphasis on the provision of basic services like shelter and health, there was an obligation on all parties for safe spaces for cultural healing to occur and for this to be resourced within communities.

People need to understand that people trying to protect the next generation by disclosing are pulling the community back together not ripping them apart. (Male regional practitioner)

Participants called for more government support and commitment in the development of healing models based on the highly successful Canadian Hollow Water Program (HWP) (Couture, Parker, Couture, & Laboucane, 2001). The HWP was developed in 1984 in Manitoba across four Native American communities that came together with political leaders, service providers, and community volunteers to address the issue of child sexual abuse in their communities. Prior to the HWP talking about sexual abuse it had been a taboo subject and drug and alcohol abuse was chronic with dysfunctional behaviours becoming a norm. The communities were

seen to need a lot of healing if the situation was to change. The HWP set up local training for community members that enabled them to take control of their alcohol and drug problems and address their issues of anger, hurt, and dysfunction. Additionally, community members structured themselves to work closely with the justice and child protection systems to re-negotiate the way in which child abuse cases were handled. They developed a model called Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH), which not only supports the victim and their family but also includes the perpetrator and their family. The CHCH intervention includes the perpetrator once they have admitted the offence and been charged. Through a process of four community healing circles, the perpetrator is encouraged to talk about what has happened to break through denial, admit and understand how their actions have hurt the victim and their family. The second circle is an opportunity for the perpetrator to tell his or her family what they have done and to deal with their responses. The third circle repeats the second circle with the family of origin and the fourth circle requires the perpetrator to face the whole community and tell them what they have done (see Bushie, 2009). This program assisted the communities to develop an intervention that not only addressed the trauma, alcohol abuse, anger, and dysfunction in their communities to enable healing to occur but also supported community members, families, and children to come forward and disclose.

There was support for a model suggested by Darrell Henry<sup>1</sup> that outlined a human-rights approach to healing in Aboriginal communities. Henry's model involved a multilayered approach that involved community in the healing process with the assistance of women and men strong in their law and culture. The community process would be supported by paraprofessional community counsellors who would mediate between the community and mainstream professional services. Aboriginal practitioners present strongly advocated that it was time that communities were supported in the development of community healing centres to address the issues of abuse and violence occurring in their communities. A group of women from Balgo and Yagga Yagga in the Kimberley presented their Circle of Healing Action Plan and several other participants similarly shared locally generated models of intervention – few of which were resourced for delivery (Crawford et al., 2007, pp. 85–94):

There is a cultural framework for how we deal with social issues but funding providers won't change their funding guidelines to be responsive at the local level. We went without funding for six months in order to get agency understanding that they needed to do it our way. Because some of the stuff that you are putting in place are cultural measures and government doesn't have a clue as to how to put that in place. (Female regional practitioner)

In speaking of a holistic model of intervention with a Perth family, another practitioner noted that further to successfully locating a service to address a grandfather's family violence:

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<sup>1</sup> Psychologist and co-researcher on the Gordon Inquiry.



The grandmother stopped her drinking; the granddaughter was linked into mental health services and is becoming a lot more stable. It was a success story that could be replicated if enough Indigenous workers with enough time were available. I, in fact, got rapped over the knuckles for “wasting time” with this family. I went with what the family wanted and the outcome for this family was positive over time. The Noongar way takes time; you need to prove yourself to people. (Female urban practitioner)

Aboriginal participants said that they were tired of receiving a second-rate approach to services in their communities and felt that as citizens of Australia they were “entitled to and responsible for the same level of services, support, and protection as other Australians” (Crawford et al., 2007). Because of the diversity in Aboriginal communities, they also stressed that different approaches and paths would have to be taken to meet the needs of different group. Approaches taken would need to be responsive to the context of the local community.

The issue of identity and governance was succinctly put by one participant who voiced his confusion at being required to relate to different levels and political shades of government:

I am looking at myself and saying, “Am I a federal Aboriginal or state Aboriginal?” We just don’t know where to go? I know it is a political thing but when are they going to grow up because it is a brick wall? We are in a Catch 22. (Male remote practitioner)

Another participant supporting this sentiment of being the puppets of political parties and federal/state divides felt that a bipartisan approach was the best way to tackle child protection so that it didn’t matter who was in power. She felt that having all parties on board was essential to saving children and without that happening the present chaos would continue with changes to government and the continuing introduction of different policies.

A female regional practitioner commented on service provision and how this was still decided by people in power, who could put the policy outcome on Aboriginal doorsteps without any consultation, engagement of Aboriginal ownership, or seeking of Aboriginal input:

Service providers “groom” Aboriginal communities. They then “take control” of the community and impose their program, “tick the box”, and then leave.

Summit participants agreed on the need for more clarity and transparency in policy guidelines and service delivery. Communities and practitioners needed more information on what resources were available and how to access them without feeling like they had to “suck up to workers” to get them. Participants said that trying to access resources was made more difficult by government and non-government workers acting as though the resources belonged to them.

Aboriginal participants strongly agreed that more needed to be done in establishing real and dynamic partnerships between Aboriginal communities and service providers if there was going to be any real progress made in addressing child abuse.

## **2. Balancing Approaches (such as between bottom-up and top-down approaches and between forensic, healing, and community building services)**

This theme arose out of a concern for the need to balance forensic approaches with therapeutic approaches in addressing issues of child protection. Many had experienced firsthand in community the harmful effects of legal action being taken without attention being paid to the impact on those involved as victims, perpetrators, and community. During the life of the summit, this concern expanded to include a range of issues. In particular, participants challenged the *either/or* approach to child protection, emphasising that there needed to be a shift in thinking to include *both/and* models, which they felt opened up possibilities and opportunities in helping children and families.

The *both/and* model, according to participants, was to include Aboriginal worldviews in looking at child protection and not restrict approaches to a total western approach. One of the male participants explained it in this way:

When you're growing up in Aboriginal families you are governed by two systems – the physical and spiritual. The physical is sometimes what we see most of us, but the spiritual is the one that puts everything in place . . . We have to understand that the two go together and they don't go without one another. You have to find a balance and that's the hardest part. (Ross Councillor)

Participants pointed out the importance of children learning to understand western law as well as cultural law and that workers and counsellors needed to be culturally aware. The lack of trained counsellors able to work in the local context was identified as a key issue.

In relation to the forensic issue, concerns were raised by Aboriginal women at the mistakes that were sometimes made in collecting evidence and the ramifications particularly for children and female victims. Participants identified the need for additional services to be provided to support victims both before and after forensic interventions.

Gender issues were highlighted in the summit with participants arguing that there had to be services provided for both women and men. Because men were seen to be the prime perpetrators of abuse, both male and female participants were resolute that services had to be inclusive of men. Taking this step was seen as integral to rebuilding communities and strong families:

In a focus on healing what we need to do is work with the men as well. We need to heal the men. If we only look at the one (women) that holds it together it doesn't work. (Female regional practitioner)

Young men's voices need a place to be heard if they are to have the healing that they need. The impact of western style patriarchal culture on young men has meant a lack of connecting and close relationships with other young men and a loss of spiritual, emotional, and connections like knowing that it is OK to love and recognise male pain. Talking and sharing is healing and everyone needs to heal to protect the children. (Female urban practitioner)

I want to acknowledge all the men who are here. Our sisters cannot do it alone – they need us! We need to work together. (Male regional practitioner)

Views by both male and female participants on the central importance of including men in holistic healing programs resonated with the design of the Indigenous healing model developed by the Canadian HWP (Couture et al., 2001).

### **3. Engaging Cultural Literacy on the Part of All Involved in Protecting Children**

Cultural literacy was raised as an important issue especially for non-Aboriginal practitioners working with Aboriginal children and families in child protection. The lack of cultural literacy or awareness often contributed to a lack of cultural safety and security for children and families entering the child protection system.

Aboriginal practitioners present acknowledged that it could be difficult and complex to negotiate the Aboriginal terrain. At the same time, they found that often their expertise and knowledge was not sought or included in the decision making and negotiations taking place around “protection services” for children and families. Practitioners pointed out that in many cases the diversity of Aboriginal society was not recognised and that interventions often took on the “one size fits all” approach to families living in completely different geographical and socioeconomic circumstances.

Recognising and acknowledging the cultural competencies that Aboriginal workers brought with them to the work place and seeking their expertise could result in better outcomes for an Aboriginal child and their family. Johnstone and Kanitsaki (2008) referred to cultural competency as going beyond mere “cultural awareness and sensitivity” (as commonly posited in the health professional literature) to include:

Not only possession of cultural knowledge and respect for different cultural perspectives but also having skills and being able to use them effectively in cross-cultural situations. (pp. 135–136)

Aboriginal practitioners expressed their frustration at the continued lack of awareness of their ignorance by many non-Aboriginal workers. This ignorance was repeatedly displayed by non-Indigenous practitioners in working with Aboriginal families and overtly identified by Aboriginal practitioners. The lack of systemic response to these failures of cultural knowing was interpreted by Aboriginal practitioners to relate to a lack of commitment by decision makers to meaningfully address this issue. While there is strong evidence for this interpretation, comments from an Aboriginal and from a non-Aboriginal participant suggest spontaneous room for learning and change can emerge through interaction. So:

There needs to be a strengthening of the recognition of traditional religion as living belief systems for many Aboriginal people. I call it religion quite intentionally because it is a religion to us. (Male regional practitioner)

The man who said it was Aboriginal religion. It was the first time I ever thought of it like that. I guess I missed a lot of the talk after that because I was trying to put it in context. I suppose it was when white man came, he didn't see Aboriginal culture as having a religion. And that's how we have thought about it ever since. So for me that was a big bolt! (Female non-Indigenous facilitator at subsequent debrief)

#### **4. Valuing Learning and Enabling Access to Relevant Education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal People in Child Protection**

This theme highlights the issue of training and education for all practitioners in this field of practice. Aboriginal participants strongly advocated the need for the child protection sector to learn, reflect upon, and to evaluate what works in practice. They pointed to the value of supporting local community initiatives developed and owned by local people. Their experience suggested that such services were much more sustainable than introduced programs.

The supervision and training of Aboriginal staff was discussed. The need was identified for not only Western-style supervision but cultural supervision that assisted Aboriginal workers to manage and address cultural dilemmas arising in practice. There was also widespread satisfaction expressed at the chance to dialogue and debrief with peers across the 3 days of the summit. Participants identified that in the everyday worlds of work they moved in there were few spaces for collaboration and reflective sharing that was not already structured by agency agendas and hierarchies.

Training of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners in the area of child protection was seen as essential to nurturing and producing good effective workers. A lack of adequate training was seen as a precursor to burnout and high staff turnover. Aboriginal workers who were not professionally trained felt that they were disadvantaged in that:

We don't get recognised and paid for what we do because we're not considered qualified. How do we get qualified when we are busy doing what we have to do to care for our community. Give us access to training in skills including counselling. (Female regional practitioner)

Some suggestions from the group focused on block release tertiary training through partnerships between the major child protection agencies and universities. Others requested training to be provided locally with trainers visiting regional areas on a regular basis.

The value of learning also extended beyond just child protection work to include specific discussion about the need for better systems of learning for Aboriginal people in two institutions having major influence on their lives: schools and prisons. It was recognised that early on Aboriginal children needed to be infused

with a love of learning, particularly children who are already experiencing problems of abuse and neglect.

Support for Aboriginal workers was seen as an imperative particularly because of their relationship to their communities and the problematics in “being the messenger between the bureaucracy and the grass roots community” (Male urban practitioner). The axiom about the dangers of messengers being vulnerable to being attacked from both sides was too often experienced in practice by Aboriginal child protection workers.

At the same time, Aboriginal participants strongly emphasised the learning needs of non-Aboriginal people involved in the tasks of protecting children. While Aboriginal workers were often employed because of their Aboriginal knowledge, too often this was assumed by employers to be valuable in getting the mainstream message out to the Aboriginal community. There was not openness in hearing back from the community via Aboriginal workers.

Within the research process how this learning might take place was enacted with the student volunteers, all of whom were likely to be working with Aboriginal people on graduation. A male regional participant said he valued the involvement of the non-Indigenous student volunteers who had been positioned as learners and that over the three days of interaction the relationship between his group and the volunteer scribes had become a positive, respectful, and personal one. Comments recorded in the daily debrief session with student volunteers gives some indication of the nature of learning through interaction for them:

The outstanding thing for me today was the sense of the community wanting to take control of their own problems in a holistic way. (Female social work student)

I was reminded how important a grass-roots approach to development is. What really struck me also was the importance placed on gender. All the women at my table said we have got to include the men. If focus is just on women and children it will probably fail. (Female psychology student)

I come from a third-world country but it is supposed to be a third-world country. This is a first-world country and it's not supposed to be like that. It's supposed to be equal. (International female nursing student)

The contained yet open-ended interactional learning space of the Summit was identified by all parties during and after as key to its success. Interactions flowed in multiple and open ways throughout the 3 days. Aboriginal participants particularly valued the chance to discuss in detail what it was to be a front-line practitioner and share what supports and leverages had been used in overcoming barriers and making a difference in the lives of children and their families.

Quotes from the student notes illuminate some of the processes involved in the cooperative inquiry: “Having the chance to hear the words, hear the language people used was so powerful”. “Enormous insights gained through being actively involved in the project”. “Learning to sit with uncertainty, confusion, and let trust in the process

carry us through". "I learned from participating that what was involved was actually far bigger than child protection". A male regional participant gave feedback that for him the opportunity to learn and interact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was a rare experience.

### **5. Employing Aboriginal People**

Employment of more Aboriginal people in the area of child protection was seen as both a "matter of social justice and of being effective in protecting children" (Crawford et al., 2007, p. 73). Participants suggested that the employment of Aboriginal people locally could help to not only address the issue of employment in regional, remote, and rural areas but was one way of ensuring that child protection services were more culturally safe and secure and thereby effective in protecting Aboriginal children.

Employment of Aboriginal people was seen as a long-term strategy that could contribute to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities at a number of different levels. The high numbers of Aboriginal people in rural, remote, and urban areas not in the labour force or not employed were seen as contributory to building communities where children were in increased danger of being abused and neglected. Recruitment of Aboriginal people was seen as an effective way of generating community approaches that were grounded in the local context. At the same time, participants felt there was little effort being made by government and non-government employers to move in this direction. There was considerable scepticism expressed as to the inflexibility of government recruitment approaches that often saw the recruitment of extra-local non-Aboriginal workers in areas of high Aboriginal population. It was pointed out that as the turnover rates of such workers were often high it would be more productive and strategic to train and employ local Aboriginal people likely to remain living in the area over the long term.

### **Discussion**

The landscape of child protection in the mainstream community is a difficult terrain to navigate. This difficulty is compounded in the Aboriginal community where issues of negotiating cultural difference and a lack of local level governance and resources predominate. Combined with social and geographic isolation, distance, fear of violence, and retribution from powerful community members, such factors position many Aboriginal families and especially women and children as vulnerable and exposed to a high risk of abuse.

Many of the issues raised by the Aboriginal practitioners attending the three-day summit were not new. What was new was the valuing of hearing and documenting Aboriginal practitioner voices on the issue of addressing child protection. As history has subsequently unfolded, this documentation has become a valuable record of Aboriginal involvement and agency in working for the wellbeing of children and families prior to the centrally decided Northern Territory intervention of June 2007.

Aboriginal people present at the summit were not saying that there should be no intervention into child abuse in Aboriginal communities; rather, they were concerned about the types of interventions that were occurring and questioned their impact on the children and families who were affected. Specifically, many interventions lacked the involvement in professional practice of a context-specific and culturally-informed knowledge of child protection. There are many ethical, practical, and political dimensions to the failure of extra-local and top-down services to achieve wellbeing in Aboriginal family life and participants gave many accounts of Aboriginal involvement in this work as being crucial to shifting outcomes.

Participants argued that the lack of cultural healing programs and blindness by decision-makers to the importance and significance of cultural identity in child protection interventions could be just as harmful and traumatising to Aboriginal children as the experience of child abuse. *The Bringing Them Home Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997) is full of traumatic stories of people who were removed without access to their culture or their homelands.

Healing programs similar to the HWP in Canada were considered as integral to communities being able to address these issues. Training of community members to work in child protection, counselling, and community development was also seen as vital in equipping people at the local level but many participants explained they had no access to such training.

Enabling the summit report (2007) to be taken up by government has been difficult; the complexity of negotiating the political terrain of child protection and government requires considerable energy and lobbying. In the meantime, participants continue to get up every day and do this work and several have been involved in community action in regional Western Australia to bring about government control of the alcohol supply at the local level (Nijman, 2009; Weber, 2008). Their work goes on – hopefully in living partnerships with a wider world to the ends of protecting our children and supporting their families to build better communities.

Presenting the findings of the summit at a national social work conference was a deliberate strategy to enable the voices and concerns of the Aboriginal practitioners to be heard and actioned (Bessarab & Crawford, 2007). This paper is written in the knowledge that spaces for such interaction between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous practitioners happen far more frequently than is known about beyond those directly involved. Too often, such interactions are not documented in the form recognised by evidence-based approaches. The summit was purposively designed to begin to record such work and to reinscribe the basic axiom of social work that understanding for change starts with listening to what is happening. If this account of the summit report *Developing therapeutic communities for abused Aboriginal children and their families: An Indigenous practitioners' cooperative inquiry* (2007) resonates with other's experiences of Aboriginal knowledge in interaction with Australian social work and wider, this transferable process can teach us how to engage more effectively with Aboriginal people.

## Conclusion

This successful cooperative inquiry brought together a diverse group of Aboriginal practitioners, guest speakers, policy writers, and government agencies working in the area of child protection. The summit was a planned opportunity to hear from front-line workers as to what is working, what needs to be improved, and where to go from here. Despite the current crisis of child protection in Aboriginal communities, the majority of people present were positive and optimistic that things would change for the better if government was prepared to listen to Aboriginal people about what is needed in their communities.

Reflecting on the summit, the collaborative partnership identified key factors in success as being the detailed preparation and inclusivity of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous partners that went into the planning process while consciously prioritising Aboriginal viewpoints in decision-making. This prioritising commitment carried over to the conduct of the summit in ensuring that the diverse voices of Aboriginal people were heard. This paper concludes with the following practitioner voices highlighting their concerns about the system and what is and is not working for them:

It is the hardest day of my life when I make a recommendation to remove a child. But I have accountability not just to kids but to the community and to society as a whole. I have to shout really loud! The laws of evidence don't work in child protection. There is criminal law but it is too hard for the cops. They try but they say it is too hard, we can't do anything. (Female regional practitioner)

I come from a family where I don't know who my father is. I was physically abused when I was young, pretty badly by my uncles. But what I did find was that there were no services, there's nothing for Aboriginal males . . . The thing that spun me around was that I went through ceremony, which made me a man. And that's when I realised there was something else out there. (Male regional practitioner)

We've got an asset full of children and every child, I believe, has potential to do so much. I know there is a lot of bad out there but we also need to look at the good things and what families and kids are doing well. What enables them to be the way they are and we can learn from them instead of always looking at the deficits. As a people we need that positive vibe. We've got fantastic role models in this room. It's been wonderful to be here. (Female urban practitioner)

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge the participants in and sponsoring partners of the summit.

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