

Submission

‘Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory’

*“Where I come from child neglect and abuse is a community responsibility because dysfunctional children become thieves and steal from the very community they belong.”
African Constituent; Tennant Creek NT*

Gerald Francis McCarthy – Dip.T. B.Ed. M.Ed. MLA – Member for Barkly
Member of the Legislative Assembly – 2008-2012: 2012-2016: 2016 –

Introduction

A defined pathway in the Northern Territory from child protection to youth detention requires a holistic intervention inclusive of family and community as part of the solution not the problem.

‘Disadvantage is not reflective of a postcode,’ however boys tend to be more vulnerable within a spectrum of dysfunction with the Northern Territory reflecting an over representation of Aboriginal youth in child protection and youth detention characterising family breakdown from early childhood through to formative years.

In maximising each stage of optimum childhood growth and development for minimising cognitive deficits and emotional and behavioural high support needs solutions must advocate parental and social responsibility commencing from 0 years through the formative stages of early childhood, primary education and middle years schooling.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory has a unique opportunity for defining and analysing the commonalities of family and community dysfunction relating to remoteness and isolation, community disengagement in relevant decision making, chronic health issues and the scourges of alcohol and other drug abuse.

The important learnings from such research will inform critical recommendations for the Northern Territory Government in addition to providing all Australian jurisdictions with child protection and youth justice solutions albeit requiring significant resources from the Commonwealth for holistically addressing child and community safety.

Early Childhood

32,656 children aged 0-8 years in the Northern Territory (2011 ABS Census) reflect the largest proportion of children aged 0-8 years at 14.1% against a national figure of 11.5%.

42% of Northern Territory children are Indigenous at the 2011 ABS Census compared to 6% nationally with the largest proportion of children aged 0-12 years 48.4% of the NT’s population living in remote areas, compared to 2.6% nationally.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) represents a population measure of how young children in Australia have developed by the time they start their first year of full-time schooling.

The AEDC measures groups of children in the community not individuals reporting developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains:

- Physical Health and Wellbeing
- Social Competence, Emotional Maturity
- Language and Cognitive Skills
- Communication and General Knowledge

AEDC 2015 data documented vulnerability in 42.1% of Australian Indigenous children compared to 20.8% of Australian non-Indigenous on one or more domains of the AEDC continuum.

Alarming AEDC 2015 data reported vulnerability in 63.0% of Northern Territory Indigenous children compared to 22.1% of Northern Territory non-Indigenous children with large cohorts of vulnerable NT children in urban areas – Tennant Creek 60% vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC.

Aligned to such data it is important to note the Northern Territory has the highest rate of births to teenage mothers, reported in 2013 as 7.9% of the population compared to 3.3% nationally.

Acknowledging poverty, abuse and neglect can disrupt brain development and impact on a child's physical and mental health the Northern Territory Labor Government has committed to a comprehensive Early Childhood Development Policy reflecting programs emerging from a universal base focusing on supporting disadvantaged children and families.

The Northern Territory Government has commissioned a Minister for Territory Children with oversight of a Sub-Committee of Cabinet monitoring and developing;

- Programs building the capacity of parents to support their child's learning, health and wellbeing
- Place based programs engaging local decision-making run by qualified and skilled Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators
- Evidenced based programs with improved data collection on children's growth and development

Early Years Recommendations

For addressing early childhood cognitive deficits and emotional and behavioural high support needs while advocating parental and social responsibility commencing from 0 years the Northern Territory welcomes additional Commonwealth investment supporting;

- Early childhood services meeting National Quality Standards in infrastructure, staff training and professional development growing a local Early Childhood workforce
- Expanded Families as First Teachers Program in remote and urban sites
- Expanded Nurse-Family Partnership Program for vulnerable children and families.
- Young Parent Education Programs
- Improved children and families attendance and participation in early childhood services and programs

Innovation Initiative - 'Interactive Arts' in Community Health, Education & Child Protection

Methodology – *'Community Based Research Methodology'*

- Engaging local people conducting research and data collection alongside recognised community based researchers
- Professional artist partnerships processing, enhancing and producing events, visual arts, screen and digital technologies 'telling community stories' for real & meaningful engagement and participation
- Creating career pathways in community based health, education and child protection programs

Proposed - Northern Territory Community Based Regional and Remote Research Projects

1. Early Childhood Development and Education
2. Child Protection & FASD
3. Youth Engagement – Mental Health
4. Indigenous Community Capacity Building – Domestic Violence, Alcohol Abuse, Chronic Disease and Disability Support

Community Based Regional and Remote Research Project Stages;

Stage 1

Health and Wellbeing - Local Researchers trained, accredited and employed to collect data working alongside notable and recognised community based research partners

Stage 2

Effective Communication to Community & Government – Research data enhanced and processed into interactive community engagements and digital formats using professional visual artists, graphic artists, playwrights, actors, musicians and screen industry professionals.

Stage 3

Community Development and Implementation for Change - Community exposed to interactive events and multimedia platform productions including ‘Play-Back Theatre’ enhancing ‘local stories’ based on accepted research & methodology for improving outcomes supporting cognitive processing, education & awareness and data reflection in cross cultural multi lingual contexts.

Interactive Arts Partnerships

- Health - Menzies School of Health Research/ NT Public Health
- NT Department of Education
- NT Department Territory Families
- NT Libraries
- NT Museums & Art Galleries
- NT & Commonwealth Archives

Innovation Initiative - ‘Interactive Arts’ in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning Practice

Effective & Engaging Pedagogies through Arts in Education

- Student-centred & community-oriented ‘authentic’ teaching, learning and assessment Early Childhood Arts in Health & Education curriculum enhancement integrating community context, diversity, culture and languages through interactive school community engagements and digital formats using professional visual artists, graphic artists, playwrights, actors, musicians and screen industry professionals.
- Fostering innovation in curriculum development and sharing of good practice
- Targeted effective learning environments for increasing student – family – community understanding the importance of child protection, education and training for employment

Innovation Initiative - Local Child Protection Teams

Regional and Remote job creation utilising existing Commonwealth School Attendance Strategy and Community Development Project funding for establishing and training local child protection teams working in partnership with early childhood and formal school education programs.

Local Child Protection Teams would be based at the school operating under the Statutory Authority of the Department of Territory Families mobilised into the town and community each day after marking the morning school enrolment.

Local Child Protection Teams would provide regular and daily outreach into families of children not attending school for innovative community liaison determining reportable school absences, necessary health referrals or formal child protection reporting while advocating parental and social responsibility.

Local Child Protection Teams would essentially 'flip' the operational procedures of the current Commonwealth Attendance Strategy 'Yellow Shirts' from 'rounding up' poor attenders, behavioural problems and children with high support needs in the absence of advocating parental and social responsibility to an innovative cross-cultural community liaison model researching, reporting and supporting parental and social responsibility.

Primary Years Schooling

'Disadvantage is not reflective of a postcode,' however boys tend to be more vulnerable within a spectrum of dysfunction with the Northern Territory reflecting an over representation of Aboriginal youth in child protection and youth detention characterising a breakdown from early childhood through to formative years.'

Northern Territory Primary Schools cater for a broad spectrum of diversity including significant numbers of families presenting as low socio-economic standing including an increasing number of Indigenous families from regional and remote towns.

Cross cultural complexities such as the first stage of the Aboriginal male initiation ceremony add a significant layer of sensitivity to the care and protection of children in addition to complex behaviour management and support within the mainstream school environment.

Essentially Aboriginal boys embarking on 'manhood' in an Aboriginal cultural context between 10 and 12 years pose considerable challenges for both the school and community amplified in an urban context in the absence of corresponding traditional ceremonial support structures.

Aboriginal 'young men' returning to school and community in regional centres post initiation into formal school and community health and education service delivery representing a majority of women, face significant cultural contradictions in addition to adjusting to existing peer relationships representing 'un-initiated' youth.

In the mainstream primary school environment this scenario often leads to behavioural and emotional challenges for the student, significant cross cultural complexities for a majority of

female teachers and support staff in classroom management where consequential relationship breakdowns with 'initiated young men' pre-empt potential disengagement of initiated male students from formal school education.

Northern Territory regional and remote primary school communities need to define their priorities for maximising family and student enrolment, attendance, participation and engagement.

In relation to cross cultural sensitivities causing behavioural issues and disengagement from education and extra-curricular programs schools need to develop positive and proactive interventions including alternative pathways programs catering for high support needs students behavioural and emotional including cross cultural sensitivities.

Primary Years Schooling Recommendations

Innovation Initiative Primary Years

Regional Primary School Alternative Education Pathways including Clontarf Academy staff and support worker outreach into primary schools focussing on disengaging boys.

Clontarf Academy staff and support workers outreach into primary school programs represent a positive orientation and transition of male students from Years 5 & 6 toward Middle Years school education in addition to providing alternative pathways support for students 'at risk' of disengaging.

'Off campus' Alternative Education pathways nurturing high support needs behavioural and emotional students incorporating Re-engagement Centres catering for a high level of school suspensions while advocating parental and social responsibility through family reconnection facilitated through a cross agency supportive environment.

Middle Years Schooling

Northern Territory regional and remote male students represent higher numbers of disengaging students from formal school education at 13-15 years often reflecting Indigenous Cultural issues pertaining to male initiation and conflicting relationships with peers, female teachers and mainstream school authority systems.

Traditional Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs in the Middle Years present an age barrier for formal enrolment of students less than 14 years.

This system wide anomaly reinforces the contradiction where Aboriginal male student's dysfunction and disengagement amplifies in Years 6 & 7 however alternative curriculum enrolment into VET pathways programs is denied until age 14 years.

Middle Years Schooling Recommendations

Innovation Initiatives Middle Years

Establishing policy and procedures for supporting system wide Pre-Vocational Education and Training programs targeting 'at risk' dysfunctional and disengaging students from 12 and 13 years in Grades 6 & 7

Establishing system wide policy and procedures for supporting 'Off-Campus' Alternative pathways programs targeting 'at risk' dysfunctional and disengaging students from years 9 to 12 incorporating VET, formal industry work experience and work placements and school based apprenticeships.

Establishing system wide policy and procedures supporting 'Off-Campus' Alternative Education pathways partnerships with Juvenile Diversion Programs targeting restorative justice, victim conferencing and community service.

Youth Justice

'The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory has a unique opportunity for defining and analysing the commonalities of family and childhood dysfunction relating to remoteness and isolation, community disengagement in relevant decision making, chronic health issues and the scourges of alcohol and other drug abuse.'

Mainstream youth detention practices in the Northern Territory have continued to focus on traditional centralised infrastructure housing multi-classification solutions now significantly isolated from the emerging and complex cross cultural juvenile cohort entering the youth justice system in alarming numbers.

Purpose built maximum security provision is an essential requirement in any youth justice system however when this is dominated by traditional political thinking for delivering construction and service delivery efficiencies through co-locating other multi-classification management systems into a single complex, it negates opportunities for innovative regional youth detention initiatives.

Regional Juvenile Justice Centres interconnected with Northern Territory rural industries represent new opportunities supporting youth bail conditions and low level offenders in addition to advocating parental and social responsibility.

Unlike traditional 'boot-camp' ideology new and innovative Northern Territory Juvenile Justice Centres have the ability for supporting youth bail conditions, Aboriginal cultural emersion, interactive family restorative justice and reconnection and formal therapeutic program interventions.

Youth Justice Recommendations

Urbanised Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth are presenting in the justice system at increasing rates representing complex behavioural and emotional high support needs characteristic of dysfunctional families, poverty, poor role models, disengagement from school education and substance abuse.

Regional Youth Justice Centres located in Central Australia and the Top End represent innovative opportunities for reengaging youth and their families 'on country' supporting both therapeutic family reconnection programs, Traditional Aboriginal cultural healing, alternative education pathways and training to employment in Northern Territory pastoral industries.

Regional Youth Justice Centres have to the potential to utilise existing Aboriginal Homeland infrastructure requiring additional investment into essential services, accommodation and programs however Homeland Centres while providing a supportive cultural environment and therapeutic family environment remain challenged by low numbers and availability of real industry training to employment opportunities and jobs.

'Boot Camps' provide targeted therapeutic program interventions however in isolation from the juvenile's family, culture and community characteristically providing the juvenile expensive short term program interventions with minimal family and community restorative justice only to return the juvenile into the environment that essentially supports their offending behaviour.

Existing 'Youth Bush Camps' generally provide a supportive cultural environment however ad-hoc therapeutic program interventions lacking strong family and community restorative justice opportunities in addition to no real industry links for alternative education and training to employment initiatives.

Innovation Initiative - Regional Youth Justice Centres

'Seven Emu Station 100km east of Borroloola offering real Territory industry opportunities in pastoral, tourism and fishing, where getting up in the morning does not involve a conversation about the days planned activities, but instead contextualising and participating in an industry program!'

Regional Youth Justice Centres require;

- Northern Territory Industry Partnerships
- Defined alternative pathways education linking training to employment
- Targeted 'on site' family integration and reconnection programs
- Integrated employment pathways linked to Northern Territory industry opportunities

Regional Youth Justice Centres, preferably one in each major geographic region of the Northern Territory representing Central Australia, Barkly and Top End must reflect;

- Aboriginal cultural environments inclusive of Visiting Elders Program
- Therapeutic program interventions targeting offending behaviour
- Strong family and community restorative justice practices
- Alternative Vocational Education and Training to employment pathways.
- Integrated Northern Territory industry links to work experience, work placements and employment

'The program interventions representative of Regional Youth Justice Centres linked to Northern Territory industry are not designed to exclusively produce 'Ringers' but attuned to participation and engagement in real industry and work among supportive adults and peers in a real world environment where family can celebrate and contextualise significant rehabilitative achievements.'

*Gerry McCarthy – Founding Senior Teacher Tennant Creek Alternative Education Program
2003-2007*

Conclusion

Delivering government in a complex and rapidly changing world is a challenge requiring new ideas and alternative pathways with Health and Education underpinning realistic generational change requiring a significant shift in Government resources toward early intervention and justice reinvestment.

The Northern Territory Government relies on targeted Commonwealth support underpinning new innovative policy for investing in alternative health and education service delivery removed from past policy 'short-falls' where significant capital investment was siphoned off creating significant urban bureaucracy's at the expense of sustainable program delivery.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory brings a 'spot light' onto the diversity of disadvantage underpinning family dysfunction, child neglect and abuse, youth disengagement and offending in the Northern Territory characteristic of unacceptable rates of Indigenous youth entering the criminal justice system.

Recommendations from the Royal Commission must remain cognisant of systemic past and existing failures for addressing early childhood cognitive deficits and emotional and behavioural high support needs of Northern Territory children from 0 years through the formative years of early childhood and primary school education in addition to the alarming numbers of Territory children including Indigenous children presenting below Australian Early Development Census benchmarks.

Recommendations from the Royal Commission must remain cognisant of Northern Territory youth particularly boys disengaging from school education programs from 12 years due to complex cross cultural sensitivities in addition to family dysfunction and inappropriate curriculum pathways failing to address behavioural and emotional high support needs and relevant pre-vocational training to employment opportunities.

Recommendations from the Royal Commission must remain cognisant of sustained traditional youth justice initiatives requiring significant government investment negating advocating parental and social responsibility commencing from 0 years through early childhood and primary years underpinning complex adolescent youth offending behaviours.

In partnership with the Commonwealth the Northern Territory has the opportunity for 'breaking the mould' supporting traditional systemic approaches in child protection and youth justice representing the creation of new innovative models for informing other Australian jurisdictions confronted with similar challenges of highly complex and challenging juvenile behaviours.

Innovation for protecting children and maintaining family and community engagement must encompass all stages of childhood growth and development from the early years through formative adolescent socialisation while advocating parental and social responsibility.

Positive generational change presents as the 'change agent' however jurisdictions like the Northern Territory struggle to deal with predicted future disadvantaged generations representing a critical mass of the population reflecting significant social, emotional and

cognitive deficits directly impacting on the health and wellbeing of subsequent new generations!

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory has engaged with the community representing multi-faceted sectors of disadvantage and service delivery for narrating themes without judgment.

Real and meaningful systemic change must reflect the diversity and depth of the social, emotional and cultural challenges underpinning disadvantage commencing with new pathways for engaging improved community health, education and wellbeing.

Traditional Government's averse to taking risks for the exploration of new policy innovation remain 'part of the problem' subsequently perpetuating further intergenerational dysfunction and consequently widening of the gap between those advantaged and those disadvantaged within our society.

Positive generational change is widely predicted to require a minimum three generations for producing the necessary critical mass of citizens experiencing improved outcomes, therefore the change process must commence immediately.